



# Narrative Lab

A capacity-building gateway empowering civil society organisations  
to activate **narrative change**, **conversation change** and **structural change**

## A battle to crowd out fear and anger with hope and opportunity

Authoritarian and populist-leaning governments have been installed globally at an alarming pace in recent years. Divisive narratives and threats to the free flow of information and freedom of press have followed, destabilising fundamental cornerstones of democracy: rich debate, independent media scrutiny, transparency, and accountability.

Consequently, demagogues and populist groups have been increasingly able to steer public conversation on local and world events, framing these events through lenses of threat, risk, and crisis; stirring fear, anger, and bitterness within populations towards vulnerable and underrepresented groups. This has led to rising xenophobia and human rights abuses and thus a tremendous need has arisen to counter these negative messages with stories of hope, opportunity and empathy which can also be found within those same world events.

A red curved line starting from the left and ending in a solid red circle.

**Civil society organisations and activist journalists have answered this call. Activism in journalism and in communications from civil society organisations has similarly expanded rapidly in this existential moment for democracy worldwide.**



**Make no mistake** – civil society is in a battle to win back hearts and minds. And it can only win by giving a voice back to those who are going unheard and presenting their stories in a unique and compelling way.





## We want to empower you to change the tone of public discourse

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have the ability to elevate social consciousness. They can encourage a heightened social conscience by sharing information and stories regarding key social, human/civil rights, and ethical issues within their broader communities. Engaging wider audiences regarding these issues lays the groundwork facilitating political and structural change.

Capturing the hearts and minds of an increasingly fearful public through storytelling is the key to spreading hope and changing fear-based narratives. This will encourage and enable positive policy and societal change. We want to help CSOs to build effective, positive and hopeful communications, including inclusive and compelling stories, which will engage key audiences, change conversations around key social issues, compel incremental social and, ultimately, structural change.



# What is the Narrative Lab?

The Narrative Lab is a resource, connection and collaboration hub, geared towards expertly assisting civil society organisations to:

1

**Create, Promote**, and **Push** stories of humanity, hope and opportunity across key areas of public discourse where fear and anger-fuelled rhetoric currently dominates

2

**Confront** and **Counteract** negative narratives which aim to undermine social cohesion

3

**Communicate** more persuasively and comprehensively across diverse stakeholders groups

4

**Centre Inclusion** and **Representation** at the heart of the creation of persuasive communications

5

**Expand** and **Enrich** discourse by uplifting the voices of those who go unheard



We create connections between people and organisations, including 1-to-1 mentoring, and a Community of Practice, and we provide training and resources around strategic communication and related methodologies.



## Why a Narrative Lab? Our Approach:



The Narrative Lab was an idea born as a result of the successful 19 Million Project, an international initiative (held in November 2015) where 148 journalists, academics, entrepreneurs, human rights organizations, coders, designers and politicians from the United States, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East and Africa looked at how media and activism could work together to create a new narrative about migrants and refugees in Europe and worked on new ideas to shape a new narrative around this humanitarian crisis.



### **Why a Narrative Lab? Our Approach:**

In recent years the EU, and particularly Italy, has seen an unprecedented attack on civil society organisations and those who are assisted by them, including migrants, with such intensity that the basic values and principles upon which Italy and the EU claim to be built upon have been called into question: the rule of law, inclusion, solidarity, fairness and equal opportunity.

This attack was largely conducted through public debate overly focused on negative and xenophobic narratives. Mainstream media has often amplified only extremely polarised views meaning public debate is often easily dominated by populist and anti-liberal voices, stifling more balanced views and fairer narratives.

Fact-checking and in-depth analysis, while fundamental, have proven limited in counterbalancing traditional negative narratives, which are capable of spreading more widely and quickly. We have come to the conclusion that fact-checking is still part of a counter-narrative, but it does not create a compelling alternative narrative underpinning strategic communication.

**In this context, those who do not share strong views on public issues are often left “unserved”, despite likely being a “silent majority” whose voting choices and decisions matter.**





## The **silent majority** the sector needs to speak to

The More in Common research study, carried out by Ipsos in 2017 and published in 2018, offered a picture of the attitudes and values of Italians in relation to migration and identity.

Almost half of the population is part of a segment called “the uncertain middle” which does not have any particular feelings of openness or closure towards migrants; people who may be so affected by narratives served to them via media that they move to one side of the spectrum or the other.

This segment remains the most key target audience at present, followed by the youth segment, policymakers and civil society groups.





## Stories and Narratives are the **key** to social and structural change

Stories are a powerful way to convey key messages and to shape and reinforce a broader, larger narrative. Stories bring narratives to life by making them relatable and accessible, while narratives infuse stories with deeper meaning. Policy change, and structural/societal change, will not be possible without narrative change.

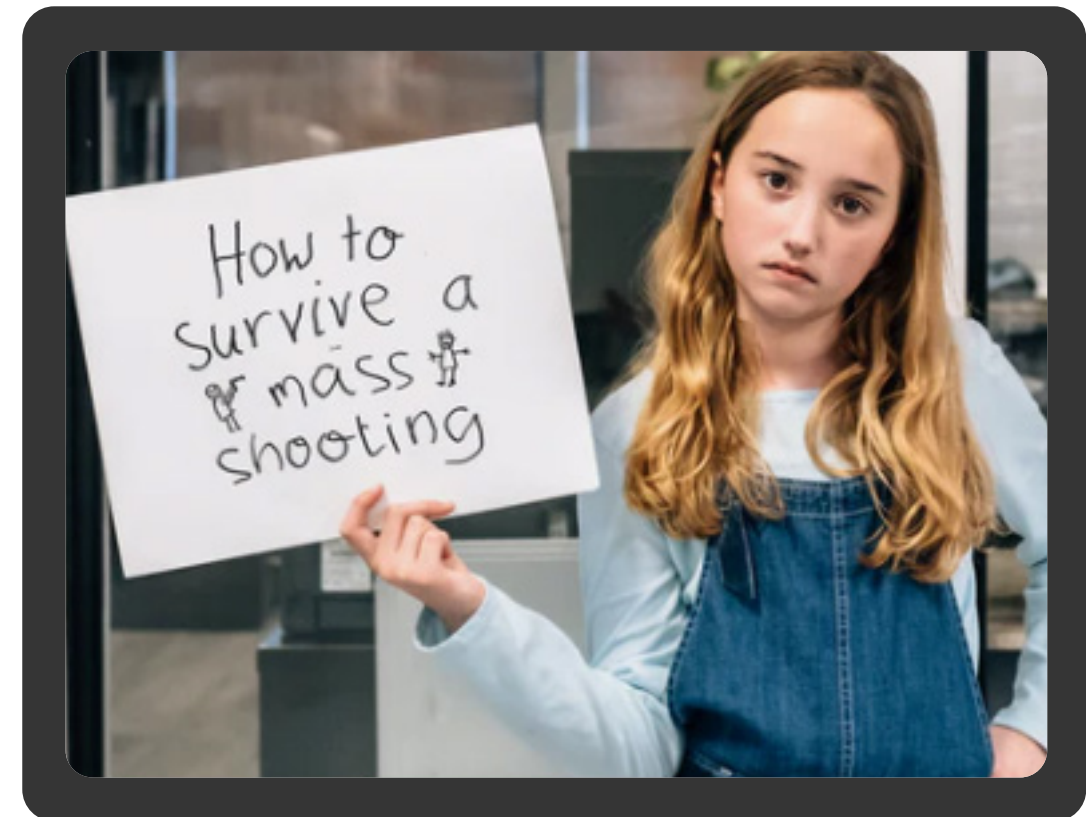




## The Impact of Story-telling in Turbulent Times

Uri Hasson, a Princeton University Professor of psychology and neuroscience notes that as an audience hears a story their brain waves start to synchronize with those of the storyteller – the storyteller quite literally starts to connect with their audience. This can be powerful, particularly when one of the goals in storytelling is establishing empathy within the audience.

Take, for example, the ‘Generation Lockdown’ campaign, by March for Our Lives, an American CSO aiming to increase background checks for the purchase of weapons, against the backdrop of a terrifying amount of school shootings. Their campaign video reminds the audience of how dangerous merely going to school is in America today and features a young girl, Kayleigh, instructing adults in a workplace on how to survive an active shooter event. She informs the workers on how to recognise gunfire, how to hide, and how to protect doorways. As she describes how gunfire sounds, an image of people mourning victims of school shootings is shown. The video ends by encouraging the audience to learn about the S.42 Background Check Expansion Act that hopes to prevent dangerous people from getting guns.



**The award-winning campaign was tremendously successful.**

Earning  
**22**  
million views  
in one week

Generating  
**\$15 million**  
worth of  
earned media.

We offer:

## Resources

We offer how-tos, useful research, frameworks, articles, and toolkits which will empower you to build powerful narratives, hope-based communications, and powerful calls to action, step-by-step.

Some examples include:

- Strategic crisis communications for civil society organisations
- Crafting the Human Rights Narrative in the COVID-19 context
- Your introduction to hope-based communication
- The ICPA Toolkit: reformulating the narrative on migration
- More in Common: Ipsos research on the “Undecided Middle” and the Migration Narrative





We offer:

## Training

We want to provide resources but also help you to master using the tools of mobilisation, civic monitoring and relations with political decision-makers. With this in mind, alongside The Good Lobby, we have developed training workshops, which bring content, best practice, case studies and experiences aimed at increasing the capacity of civil society to life. This will allow even the smallest organisations to work strategically to generate measurable and tangible social impacts for their target communities.

- Our workshops will help you to put our resources into practice and will cover topics including:
- Communication, Human Rights, and COVID-19
- Communications in the times of Crisis
- Strategic Communications for the Social Sector
- Narrative-based Communications and Migration



We offer:

## **One-to-One Help** and a **Community of Practice**

We want civil society organisations to be able to seek support and advice in implementing strategic communications within their organisations. To that end we offer one-to-one assistance which can be organised by emailing [narrativelabassistance@cild.eu](mailto:narrativelabassistance@cild.eu). Email-based assistance, or a zoom session, can be organised as needed with a communications expert. We also want to connect civil society organisations with each other, establishing a Community of Practice which will encourage connection, networking, and collaboration amongst professionals interested in applying a strategic communication approach in their organisations, who are working on similar goals. Those interested in joining our Community of Practice can sign up for the Narrative Lab newsletter for more information.



And in 2021... we'll offer

### **Mentoring**

In 2021 the Narrative Lab will also offer a mentoring component, with a particular focus on migrants and second-generation immigrants and other unrepresented or misrepresented groups.



# What now?

A red circular icon containing a white document symbol with a downward-pointing arrow, indicating a download action.

**Download our  
resources!**

**Register your interest  
for our upcoming  
training workshops!**

A dark blue circular icon containing a white envelope symbol with a document inside, representing a newsletter or email subscription.

**Sign up for our  
newsletter!**

**Keep an eye out for  
our mentoring service  
commencing in 2021.**

