



# Narrative Lab

Change the Narrative, Change the World

A capacity-building gateway empowering progressive civil society organisations and leaders to activate narrative change towards structural change

## What do we mean by narrative change?



*A narrative consists of a collection of stories which together convey a common worldview or meaning – it is a shared interpretation of the world and how it works.*

(McBeth et al., 2015; Fisher, 1984)

As the Social Change Initiative (2020) notes, human beings are “natural storytellers and narratives have been central to life for thousands of years – stories and narratives help us to make sense of the world around us, allow us to communicate with others and build long lasting relationships”. Therefore, narrative change work relies on the idea that our collective reality is constructed through narrative which we believe, and that in order to bring about change to issues and the the world, we need to change the underlying beliefs, or narratives, which are collectively believed.



Picture: Oliver Cole / Unsplash



## What do we mean by structural or systemic change?

When an issue exists because the structure of a system – the entrenched processes, policies and behaviours within an institution, for example – is set-up to create or exacerbate that issue, any action taken which fails to reach and change the elements of that system, will be ineffective at truly resolving the issue. Take, for example, the arrest of individual police officers in response to outcry over deaths of black peoples in custody. The arrest of an individual will address a symptom of the problem, but not resolve the broader issue, as the entire enforcement system contains processes and practices which ensure that black persons remain overrepresented in arrests and are treated more harshly.

It is at these times that structural change is the only real solution – getting to the root of the issue within systems and overhauling defective elements.

In systemic change we aim to create sustainable and scalable impacts where governments, enterprises and civil society must own the implementation of the change, and sustain it. We also aim to replace defective processes and practices with enabling and positive ones.



***To create systemic change, a sustained campaign to increase the capacity and coordination of an entire field, together with greater public awareness and ... stronger government policies***

(“Catalytic Philanthropy”, Kramer, 2009)



## Crowd out fear and anger with hope, togetherness, 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. Stories which can also be found within those same world events.



**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 for 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 and 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 and leaders to:

**1** **Create** 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** **Seek strategic alignment** to communicate more persuasively across diverse stakeholders groups

**4** **Center Inclusion** and **Representation** at the heart of the creation of persuasive communications

**5** **Expand** and **Enrich** discourse by uplifting emerging voices and those that go unheard



**We create connections between people and organisations**, including strategic advice, as well as a community of practice, and we provide training and resources around strategic communication and related methodologies.

**We facilitate collaboration** and alignment of both purpose and strategy amongst civil society organisations, citizens and institutions.



## Why a Narrative Lab?



The initial idea for a Narrative Lab was born from the success of the 19 Million Project, an international initiative co-organised by CILD and held in November 2015. In Rome 148 journalists, academics, entrepreneurs, human rights activists, coders, designers and politicians convened from all around the world to look at how media and activism could work together to shape a new narrative about migrants and refugees, whose humanitarian crisis was tragically unfolding at the gates of Europe and in the Mediterranean Sea.



In recent years the EU, and particularly Italy, has seen an unprecedented attack on CSOs 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.

Our experience with Open Migration – our flagship public interest journalism project – has taught us that 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, “*Attitudes towards National Identity, Immigration and Refugees in Italy*”, funded by Social Change Initiative, 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. This is a segment which 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.

## La segmentazione della popolazione italiana



Fonte: More in Common, Ipsos Italia





## 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, as well as structural as societal change, will not be possible without narrative change.





## The impact of storytelling 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 synchronise 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 public to learn about the S.42 Background Check Expansion Act, a proposal that aims to limit the sales of guns.

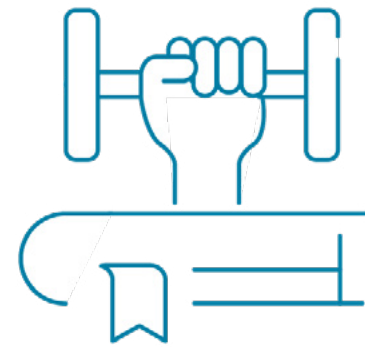


**The award-winning campaign was tremendously successful:**

Earning  
**22**  
million views  
in one week

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

# What we offer?



Resources  
& Training



Community of practice  
& Strategic support



## 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:

- How to Talk About Human Rights During COVID-19
- Your introduction to hope-based communication
- An EPIM Guide to Migration Narratives: How to Reframe the Debate
- More in Common: Ipsos research on “Attitudes towards National Identity, Immigration and Refugees in Italy” and the Migration Narrative



## Training

Together with our partners and advisors, 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 times of Crisis
- Strategic Communications for the Social Sector
- Narrative-based Communications and Migration





## Community of practice & Strategic support

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 [narrativelab@cild.eu](mailto:narrativelab@cild.eu). Email-based assistance, or a online 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**

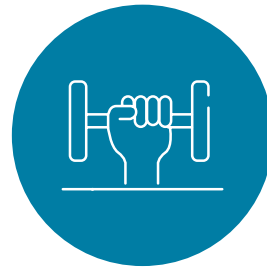
In 2021 the Narrative Lab will also offer a mentoring component, with a particular focus **on migrants and new italian generations** and other unrepresented or misrepresented groups.

Ph: Dylan Ferreira / Unsplash

# What now?



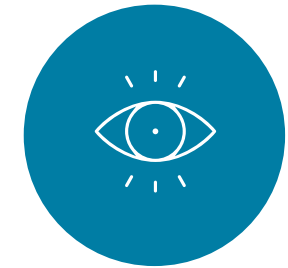
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our newsletter!



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





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Thank you!

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