

# REANIMATING CIVIL SOCIETY: A LIFELINE GUIDE FOR NARRATIVE CHANGE



*PERSIST*

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FOR EMBATTLED CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

# Introduction

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Across the world, authoritarian governments and non-state actors are restricting civic space and trying to silence critical voices or those that challenge the status quo. In some contexts, governments are launching smear campaigns to taint the work of civil society organizations (CSOs) and human rights defenders (HRDs). These campaigns put individual HRDs or CSO staff members at risk and undercut the ability of civil society organizations to operate safely and effectively by eroding their reputation in the eyes of the public.

The [Lifeline Fund for Embattled CSOs](#) was established in 2011 to support groups—including NGOs, informal associations, unregistered groups, student groups, labor unions and others—that are targeted due to their human rights work. Since that time, the degree and severity of restrictions on civil society have been exacerbated in many countries. Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2022 report has documented a fifteen-year decline in democracy and fundamental freedoms globally. Governments, local officials, corrupt business interests, and others benefiting from the status quo are increasingly targeting CSOs and defenders that advocate for social justice and universal human rights. Lifeline has seen an increase in the use of smear campaigns against civil society in recent years – often accompanied by registration regulations, the misuse of terrorism laws, travel bans, and foreign funding restrictions. This context is the impetus for this guide: to help defenders and CSOs of all backgrounds challenge the false narratives that put them at risk and assert a more positive and future-oriented narrative that demonstrates the value of civil society.



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Government and non-state actors use various negative narrative tactics to malign civil society, alienate them from the broader citizenry, and impede their work. These narratives include that civil society is a “foreign agent”, “anti-family”, or “anti-country”. These campaigns are difficult to respond to because multiple stakeholders often deploy them. Further, they have an emotional impact and can leave activists alienated from their families and communities. However, responding to these attacks is crucial for the protection of activists and civic space.

This guide is meant to support activists, CSOs, and social movements who want to explore tactics and strategies to respond to smear campaigns or negative stereotypes by creating new, positive narratives to counter them. It provides a framework for thinking about narrative change, with examples and resources. Of course, each context and smear campaign against civil society is different, so the content below will need amending for each context. We encourage you to use this guide as a stepping stone for crafting your own campaign. We hope this guide fuels the ability to take control and tell the story you aim to share.

# Key Guidance for Narrative Change

## POSITIVE NARRATIVES: LANGUAGE MATTERS

Two of the leading narrative change experts, Thomas Coombes (of [Hope Based Communications](#)) and [Krizna Gomez](#), developed helpful frameworks for crafting a more positive and future-oriented narrative for civil society and the human rights community. They note that what makes us human is our stories – and that at its core, social change work is about telling stories. Recognizing that the policies and rules around us are not entrenched or embedded in our societies, we can see a path to change them by telling compelling stories.

Coombes outlines several major shifts we can employ in how we talk about civil society work to use language that goes from:

**Fear → hope:** We trigger a flight or fight response when we use narratives centered around fear and anxiety. This puts us in survival mode, making empathy and understanding challenging to achieve, especially for other groups. However, if we trigger ideas of abundance, confidence, hope, and joy, we wake up the more evolved part of the brain that can generate empathy and openness.

**Against → for:** Similarly, when we say that "activists are not terrorists," the brain doesn't necessarily retain the "not"; people will only remember the words activists = terrorist. Even when we try to assert what we aren't, this often backfires because of how the brain works.

Orgs often use images of injustice, but what are our images of justice? Emphasizing human rights abuses may perpetuate them because mere exposure normalizes them in the human brain.

**Problem → solution:** We need to make people aware of the problem, but the focus should be on framing our values and emotions since people do not make decisions with the rational part of their brain. Often, we spend 70% of the time talking about problems and only 30% on solutions – it should be the opposite. Tapping into emotion is essential - for instance, in Florida, a campaign that enfranchised convicted felons used the line: "Floridians believe in second chances, the law should, too."

**Victim → hero:** It is essential to show activists' courage and humanity. We must show that defenders are just like you and me: mothers, grandparents, neighbors, etc. You can normalize your work so that it doesn't seem "other," "distant," or "different."



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There are many different ways to approach narrative change, but some **key components** include:

1. **Know your story:** Before research, release, launch event, briefings, and tweets, identify the story you want to tell
2. **Engage in audience exploration:** You need to know your audience and ask the right questions to see your targets as they see themselves.
3. **Employ audience testing:** Test specific narrative messaging – can you collect feedback?
4. **Experiment:** Take risks! For instance, in Venezuela, community lawyers ran an arepa coffee truck in Caracas to open up communication channels with community members – they didn't know if it would be popular or not, but it worked.
5. **Find allies:** Narratives are only as powerful as they are repeated by different actors over a sustained period, so engage with other organizations and find allies in and outside of civil society. Draw in a range of actors and build broad coalitions or networks that can feed into repeating the narrative.

Repetition is key – stay on message and repeat, repeat, repeat. Ideas start as seeming radical, but they become less unthinkable with repetition.



*Engage the "moveable middle" or those not already on your side, but that are not so entrenched in their opposition to you.*

## Case Study: Humanizing Human Rights Defenders in Bulgaria

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Lifeline [resiliency grants](#) can provide at-risk CSOs an opportunity to design and launch a short-term initiative (3 to 6 months) to begin the process of narrative change. Given that narrative change often takes a very long time, a Lifeline resiliency grant can provide initial seed funding to test out a new approach, conduct message testing with key audiences, or design social media materials for campaigns. One such project is highlighted below, and other narrative change projects can be found in the [Lifeline Toolkit on Advocacy in Restrictive Spaces](#) (pages 24-27).

The Lifeline Fund provided a six-month grant to the Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law (BCNL) to launch an initiative to repair the negative image that the Bulgarian government had constructed of CSOs and human rights defenders over the past ten years. BCNL launched a social media campaign that highlighted over a dozen activists and their successes across the human rights sector to humanize activists.

**Context:** For more than ten years, civil society organizations (CSOs) in Bulgaria have faced disinformation and smear campaigns by groups seeking to discredit them as "foreign agents" and alienate them from the Bulgarian public. In October 2019, these campaigns escalated; perpetrators of this anti-CSO movement began to include nationalist political parties and religious groups that criticized CSOs for advancing non-Bulgarian values and receiving funds from foreign donors. These political groups leveraged their power to halt CSOs' policy initiatives, including ratification of the Istanbul Convention, adoption of the National Child Strategy, and enactment of the new Social Services Act. Certain religious groups also argued that foreign-funded CSOs would bring in undesirable, liberal European values such as "LGBTQ+ influences" that would purportedly harm Bulgarian children. These disinformation campaigns were engineered to turn the public against CSOs by publishing articles in traditional news outlets denigrating CSOs and launching social media blitzes appealing to 'traditional Bulgarian family values.'

**Approach:** BCNL knew simply arguing that CSOs were not foreign agents seeking to destroy traditional Bulgarian values would not be an adequate response. They also felt they could not ignore these attacks: it would not be sufficient to negotiate with the government behind closed doors to get the policy changes they needed because they needed the public's support.

They knew they needed to rehabilitate their reputation in the eyes of the public and to reclaim the narrative. They decided to collaborate with other CSOs to communicate to the public precisely who they were, what their work was, and why they were doing it. BCNL sought the advice of

communications specialists to build their strategy, who pointed out that launching a negative campaign would conflict with their values and would likely fail. They developed a campaign that humanizes the type of people who work for CSOs, showing that they are similar to all Bulgarians' family members, neighbors, or friends.

The campaign did not aim to change their fiercest opponents' hearts and minds or target their most ardent supporters. Instead, the campaign aimed to reach Bulgarians who were neutral or undecided on the role and reputation of civil society organizations to build more robust support among the public. BCNL wanted to make people less receptive to the negative messages circulating by priming them with a positive campaign centered around three key messages: 1) civil society is made up of Bulgarians committed to improving Bulgarian society; 2) civil society is diverse and represents many different communities; and 3) civil society is wherever people need us.

BCNL launched a social media campaign highlighting over a dozen individual activists and their achievements across the human rights sector. They asked each individual to bring a personal item that could help demonstrate who they are, the challenges they have overcome, and the inspirations and values they have cherished along the way. In this way, everyday objects helped bring the activists' stories to life—something as simple as baby socks, a wooden train, or even a handful of cherries could help foster an intimate connection between the activist and the viewer.



The campaign compelled viewers to see activists as real humans and not the enemies they were made out to be. This campaign presented the impact of human rights work and the faces of the people who do it, effectively humanizing and grounding those who work at CSOs as relatives, friends, and acquaintances embedded within both society at large and within their local communities.

**Impact:** Looking at survey results from 2018 compared with 2020, BCNL observed a 10% increase among those surveyed in support for civil society organizations. While many factors led to this increase in support over the two years, counter-narrative campaigns like BCNL's played a critical role in contributing to this shift in public attitude towards CSOs. Participating CSOs and their staff were able to gain something

powerful yet intangible: a renewed sense of energy, empowerment, and confidence in themselves and their causes. To other organizations facing similar challenges and seeking to launch a counter-narrative initiative, BCNL simply says: "Go for it."

**Key Takeaways:**

1. **Be strategic with whom your campaign targets.** Rather than preaching to the choir or expending energy on those already turned against your cause, appeal to an audience that you can persuade to align with your mission.
2. **Humanize your message.** Who are the people on your team? What roles do they play in everyday communities? Infusing your mission with a sense of familiarity can help convey your message.
3. **Stand united as a sector.** Counter-narrative campaigns are more when mobilized across the human rights sector. Work with partners to build a cohesive moment and decide on the best strategies to maximize your campaign's impact.



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*Most of the images in this toolkit were taken from an incredible resource called [The Greats](#) created by Fine Acts - a non-profit creative studio for global social impact. The Greats is a free vault with carefully curated socially engaged visual content open to anyone to use or adapt non-commercially. You can use these free images in your campaigns, social media, and external communications!*

# Other Good Practices

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## [Reimagining human rights for the 21st century, Thomas Coombes | Hope-Based Communications + Fine Acts, 2020](#)

This brief blog post explains Fine Acts and Hope-Based Communications' joint initiative to change how people envision human rights. "Reimagining Human Rights" is an online collection of free, evergreen, hopeful visual content around human rights for activists and nonprofits worldwide to use in their campaigns. It seeks to draw upon the creative power of artists globally to illustrate human rights as a positive collective good from which all of us benefit, not just something that is violated, destroyed, or abused.

Some of the new "visual vocabulary" for human rights that Coombes advocates for include:

1. Human rights is about cultivating communities. (fig. 1)
2. Human rights is about what we have in common. (fig. 2)
3. Human rights is about cultivating the humanity in everyone. (fig. 3)

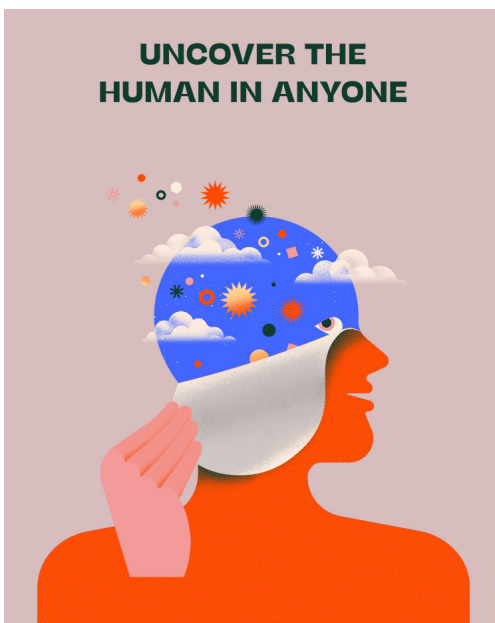


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## [Hope, not fear: A new model for communicating human rights, Thomas Coombes | Medium, 2017](#)

Coombes encourages folks to ask themselves the following questions whenever they engage in communications:



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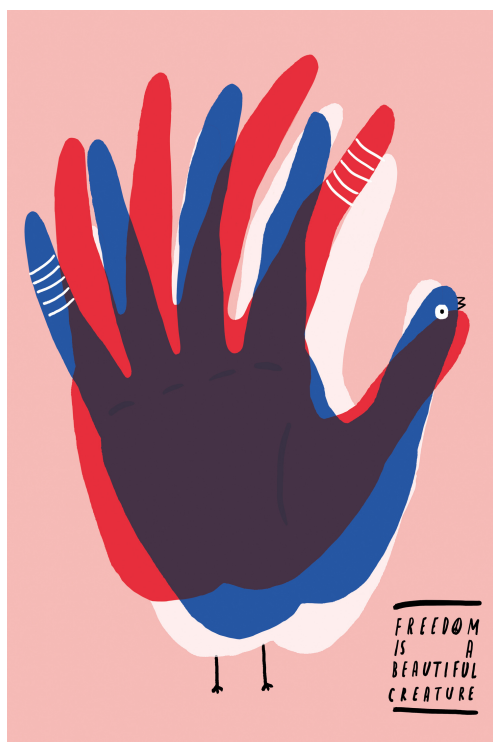
- Are you talking about what you are **FOR**, or what are **AGAINST**?
- Are you campaigning for a **SOLUTION**, or against a **PROBLEM**?
- Are you warning about **THREATS**, or highlighting an **OPPORTUNITY**?
- Are you telling people they need to be angry and afraid, or that there is a reason for hope and determination?
- Are you telling people what to think, or telling them how you came to your conclusion so that they can make the same journey?
- Are you talking about victims, or everyday heroes?

## [5 ways to change the narrative from fear to hope](#), Thomas Coombes | BOND, 2019

This blog post briefly introduces hope-based communications, which Coombes describes as a five-step approach towards narrative strategy. He includes multimedia examples from various human rights campaigns led by civil society organizations to illustrate each step of his process.

### **Sell the solution before documenting the problem**

If your audience sees an intractable problem, it risks becoming a new normal, an unfortunate but accepted reference point for how things are. Our challenge is to show how human decisions created the problem and how different choices can fix it. We need the courage to promote intelligent solutions, using communications to shift them from radical ideas to common sense. You can oppose austerity, but policies will not change until the public believes public spending actually works. Talking about solutions is hard in the midst of dire crises, but the darkest times may be the moments where people most need a path towards the light.



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### **Make people feel hope, not fear**

Civil society needs to be ambitious and lay claim to a brighter future. We will always use facts and research to make our case, but we can no longer avoid asking ourselves: "What is the emotion you want to trigger in your audience? Can you give the anticipation of feeling good later?" At Amnesty International, audience research showed us that what our supporters want to know above all is how change happens and how they can be a part of it. That is a crucial insight for civil society campaigns against "shrinking civic space."

### **Offer opportunity instead of threat**

Civil society needs to move on from tactics based on shocking audiences with the scale of abuses and suffering. We must cultivate passion and determination to achieve positive change.

### **Celebrate what you stand for instead of criticizing what you oppose**

With our energy focused on calling out the behavior that we oppose, we miss opportunities to celebrate the behavior we want to model. Worse still, we make the things we are against the new reality; we may even be inadvertently promoting what we oppose in the subconscious of our audience.

### **Tell stories that show people as everyday heroes, not victims**

Civil society should focus on telling stories that celebrate humanity and model the behavior we want to see. Stories, in short, that show what it looks like to act on our values and that put in people's minds the picture we want them to see when they think of words like "civil society" or "human rights." A powerful way to change your audience's mind is to show people they can relate to behaving a certain way or changing their mind, according to the HeartWired insight.



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## [A Guide to Hope-based Communications, Thomas Coombes | Open Global Rights, 2019](#)

This guide is an in-depth compilation of strategies and resources built on the prior two resources. It discusses the five-step approach to hope-based communications as mentioned above, in addition to providing resources such as:

- A [checklist](#) for applying hope-based communications to your work.
- Links to organizations that facilitate foresight sessions that identify alternative future possibilities and help create new meta-narratives built on concrete solutions or assist in mission-grounding discovery sessions.
- Toolkits and guides for framing, developing new narratives, positive marketing, and more—some of which are highlighted throughout this literature review.



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## [Civil Society Innovation and Populism in a Digital Era, Vicky Tongue, Krizna Gomez and Thomas Coombes | Just Labs + International Civil Society Centre, 2019](#)

This report showcases 14 innovative civil society responses in the face of rising populism, one of the defining political features of our times. It is also the first publication to take a broad civil society overview in documenting and sharing effective response strategies and case studies from various organizations – national CSOs and networks, ICOSOs, and campaigns or movements.

*Civil society* presents different innovative strategies by CSOs that respond effectively to some of the challenges and defining features of populism. The case studies include reflections on specific contextual factors – including the role of digital media – and details of the audiences targeted, the tools and tactics used, and the stage of implementation.

### **The seven key strategies, highlighted by 14 case studies, are as follows:**

1. Creating alternative digital youth-led spaces.
2. Building citizen skills to combat misinformation and fake news.
3. Using new digital tools and tactics to speak to all sections of society.
4. Developing new positive narratives for an alternative future.
5. Inclusive communications and social listening in divided contexts.
6. Strengthening civil society solidarity and resilience networks.
7. Renewing trust from the roots up through a new concept of accountability.



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### **Taken together, the case studies suggest the following overall recommendations for other innovators, movers and shakers in civil society working in populist contexts:**

- Invest in citizen conversations and capacities to test and develop new narratives.
- Reimagine partnerships and alliances to form new “non-traditional” relationships and mobilize existing partners further.
- Rewrite the rules and find new formats, whether that means revamping digital campaigns and communications to engage youth audiences.
- Encourage the enterprise that exists elsewhere in citizen democracy and issues-based campaigns, from allowing young people to take charge of initiatives to empower the public at large with the agency of experimenting with campaigns.
- Build an “army of love” by investing time and resources in proactively building and contributing to inclusive solidarity actions.
- Experiment together with new narratives for and about civil society.

## [Closing Space for Civil Society: Countering the Toxic Narratives](#) | International Human Rights Funders Group & Human Rights Lab, 2016

As part of the effort to address increasing repression and restrictions on civil society across the globe, 35 human rights funders, activists, and advocates from 12 countries came together on January 22, 2016, at an IHRFG-hosted workshop in San Francisco organized by Human Rights Lab. The Lab guided the eclectic mix of practitioners through a dynamic problem-solving process to brainstorm workable strategies that address one element of tightening civil society space: the corrosive narratives that feed it. To arrive at strategies to counter the narratives, the funders and activists in the workshop applied "design thinking" – a highly interactive and collaborative method of collective problem-solving.

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This brief, 4-page report describes the workshop structure, summarizes the key takeaways from the prototype solutions the groups came up with, and highlights three prototypes. Overall, most of the counter-narrative prototypes shared the following themes:

- Be grounded at the community level.
- Enlist and actively engage allies, particularly from the community, including family members, religious leaders, and teachers.
- Devise creative but careful messaging that dispels myths and misconceptions by appealing to personal sentiments.
- Use the full range of info-sharing and media platforms, such as radio, posters, and mobile phones, as well as the unconventional (if resources permit), such as television ads, sitcoms, and soap operas.
- Adapt funder-grantee procedures to the context and be flexible with bureaucratic expectations.



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The Lifeline Fund for Embattled CSOs provides emergency financial assistance to civil society organizations (CSOs) under threat or attack and rapid response advocacy and resiliency grants to support CSOs in responding to broader threats against civic space. Founded in 2011, Lifeline is a consortium of 7 international non-governmental organizations funded by 20 governments that aim to push back against civic space threats. Freedom House leads the Lifeline consortium, and it consists of Front Line Defenders, CIVICUS, International Center for Not-For-Profit Law (ICNL), People in Need (PIN), FORUM-ASIA, and Swedish International Liberal Center (SILC).

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