



BE THE NARRATIVE

How changing the narrative could revolutionize what it means to do human rights

Krizna Gomez and Thomas Coombes



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ABOUT JUSTLABS

JustLabs is a space for fresh thinking, innovation and out-of-the-box solutions for the social change field. It was established to serve as a [field catalyst](#) for accelerating change and deepening collective impact in social change.

JustLabs' mission is to change the DNA of the human rights movement, giving it an expanded toolkit, using a methodology that incorporates multiple disciplines and fields—away from traditional panels, lectures, and one-way conversations that have come to dominate the way problems are approached in the human rights field.

JustLabs' distinctive trait is its “Swiss-army-knife” approach—we adopt the relevant tools depending on what the challenge calls for. Our logo—a paper clip—further symbolizes our approach: the icon symbolizes a simple, cheap solution to a daily practical difficulty (how to bind papers together). The paperclip also symbolizes coming together: Norwegians, the inventors of paperclips, wore them on their lapels during the Nazi occupation to symbolize the ties that bind them, in protest against the Nazi prohibition against wearing pin buttons with the image of the Norwegian king.

There are five core characteristics to our work, which are direct responses to the limitations of today's human rights work:

1

Collaboration: JustLabs is radically collaborative in three ways. First, instead of competing with or replicating the efforts of existing human rights actors (e.g., advocacy NGOs, funders, academic research centers, and so on), we operate as an intermediate organization that [catalyzes collaborations](#) across the field. Second, all our work is carried out in collaboration with other human rights actors. Third, the outcomes of our projects are public goods for the field, meant to be widely disseminated and freely available.

2

Experimentation and learning: To counter fragmentation and strategic stagnation, our projects incubate innovative solutions to human rights challenges and share them with the field at large. To that end, all of our initiatives proceed through three moments: ideation, experimentation, and dissemination and learning. These stages form part of a non-linear experimentation process or a cycle whereby with greater insight from our experimentation and learning, we go back to the drawing table to produce and test new, even more powerful ideas.

3

Thinking long-term and galvanizing movements into action in the short term: We encourage a long-term view of the challenge at hand, while accelerating solutions in the short term. Thus, we combine methods such as foresight/futures thinking (which encourages a long-term vision), and design thinking (which encourages rapid design, testing and improvement of solutions). As a result, we help the movement anticipate trends and move early and decisively to shape the contours of those trends.

4

Bridging gaps and expanding the field: By design, JustLabs' structure and composition seek to bridge several gaps. Our staff and associates come from a wide range of disciplines and professions, including the social sciences, design, communications, neuroscience, digital technology, marketing, contemplative studies, ecology, law, journalism, and popular education. Our organization thus combines thematic expertise with creative, multi-disciplinary process skills. As an international operation, JustLabs is based in Bogotá, Colombia, and its staff and associates are from all regions of the world. We work not only with human rights organizations and issues, but also with other organizations and movements, so as to help bridge the gap with other social justice fields. And we prioritize projects that seek to expand human rights membership and audiences.



5

Simple responses to complex challenges: Complex problems are best tackled through simple solutions, as other catalyst organizations have demonstrated. Simple solutions are also more likely to be successfully disseminated across the field and be accessible to broader constituencies and audiences.

We employ methods where: we undertake the latest research on the problem at hand to make sure that our creative process is informed by data and rigorous analysis (research); the actors most impacted by a problem co-design the solution in a process of constant and practical testing and iteration (design thinking); strategic decisions for today are determined from an in-depth analysis of and insights from possible futures (foresight/futures thinking); conversations, especially difficult and complex ones that go to existential questions of one's work and life dedication, are enabled by authentic listening and expression drawn from mindfulness and other contemplative practices (contemplative practices); and, the learning and design of processes are rooted in the lived experiences of the communities and the actors we partner with (popular education).


Learn more about JustLabs at www.justlabs.org.





ABOUT THE FUND FOR GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS

Community members from Rwamutonga, Uganda gather to listen to Community Green Radio, an essential source for information on environmental conservation and rights in Western Uganda.

Photo by FGHR 

The Fund for Global Human Rights (the Fund) believes in the power of all people to envision and realize a better future. We provide financial and strategic support to frontline activists who uplift their communities, regions, and nations. The Fund was created in 2002 to address a critical gap in the human rights sector—catalyzing the bold solutions of locally-rooted human rights defenders. We focus solely on advancing community-driven visions and grassroots initiatives because we know the people most affected by human rights abuses are best equipped to develop solutions. To date, the Fund has invested more than 95 million USD in more than 650 organizations worldwide.

The majority of our grantees live and operate in the Global South, where they focus on access to justice, an enabling environment for activism, and environmental justice, as well as economic, social, and cultural rights for women, LGBTQ people, migrants, indigenous communities, and children. Their work requires agility, creativity, and often, confronting tremendous risks. By equipping these activists with the right resources, the Fund aims to build stronger, more resilient human rights movements with the power to create long-lasting structural change.

Our comprehensive approach to identifying, nurturing, and protecting activists is unique among human rights funders, and it centers on:

1

Giving general support grants that equip activist groups to develop and implement their own visions for achieving equality and justice, and to be nimble and resilient in the face of crackdowns.

2

Taking smart risks on up-and-coming grassroots groups and leaders. Some of our grantees who have never received external support before our funding have gone on to become nationally and internationally recognized activists.

3

Mentoring activists to dream big and anticipate and overcome obstacles. Our program officers come from the regions where we work and have close, trusting relationships with local groups.

4

Convening grantees with each other and with experts, allowing them to facilitate alliance-building, develop multi-faceted solutions that can be scaled regionally or globally, and see their role as part of a global human rights movement.

5

Investing in the long-term, as we understand that real social change takes time. We typically support grantees for five to 10 years, allowing them time to grow as organizations and achieve long-term impact.

6

Fostering organizations' sustainability by supporting the groups where they are now and where they're headed, as well as providing emergency support when needed.

With the Fund's partnership, human rights activists and organizations are effectively addressing abuses of power and systemic inequality in more than 20 countries. Together, we are ensuring that people worldwide can lead lives of dignity with access to basic resources and equal opportunities for full participation in society.

Learn more about the Fund at www.globalhumanrights.org.





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This document is a product of the joint labor and close collaboration with partners both within the human rights world and outside.

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We also express our gratefulness to the 12 human rights organizations from Venezuela, Russia, Turkey, Cambodia, Hungary, Mexico, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the Philippines, Australia, Brazil and India who embraced the process of this lab to find ways by which they can use narratives to win hearts and minds. They are some of the most daring, bravest and most innovative organizations we have met anywhere in the world, and we are thankful for allowing us to join them in their journey of making human rights relevant to the lives of the communities and individuals they work with.

We also extend our heartfelt thanks to the dozens of practitioners and leaders in fields as diverse as neuroscience, technology and data, arts, comedy, entrepreneurship, communications, marketing, design, contemplative practices, storytelling, political strategy, academia and learning, who shared their time and rich experience to help the human rights organizations come up with fresh, out-of-the-box ideas. Your willingness to use your unique skillsets at the service of social change constantly encourages us in our work.

Finally, to our team at JustLabs, an unbelievable space where no ideas are ridiculous, no aspiration too ambitious, and no craving for learning not worth satisfying, thank you for being the home for our ideas, questions and desire to make what small difference we could. We especially thank César Rodríguez Garavito for his invaluable guidance in this paper and his leadership in creating the space, and César Andrés, our in-house artist and designer, for the magic he has worked on this document and all our pieces of work at the lab. We hope that this publication can encourage more people to seek support in this space that we have created together.

[Krizna Gomez](#) and [Thomas Coombes](#)
Bogotá and Berlin, 2019



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2018, JustLabs, a space for experimentation and creativity for the social change field, along with a group of funders, held a series of labs on producing narratives as a response to the increasingly antagonistic tide towards human rights around the world. We worked with 12 human rights organizations from Venezuela, Russia, Turkey, Cambodia, Hungary, Mexico, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the Philippines, Australia, Brazil and India, to find unconventional and concrete solutions to the populist tide against human rights work and human rights as a concept, using a process based on design thinking, contemplative practices, popular education and foresight.

We gathered experts from fields outside of the human rights field—neuroscience, technology and data, arts, comedy, entrepreneurship, communications, marketing, design, contemplative practices, storytelling, political strategy, academia and learning—to work with the 12 human rights organizations in these lab workshops, and at the end of the year-long process, they jointly produced 12 promising prototypes of solutions. Of these 12 prototypes, we have now selected the four most promising ones to support for implementation for a period of at least one to two years.

This paper recounts the story of this experimentation and the analysis of the outcomes of this process, and what we are positing as the bold steps that funders and human rights actors need to take at the tactical, organizational and field-wide levels.

During the labs, we identified a three-pronged narrative strategy of **controversy, crisis and conflict** used by populists to crack down on human rights actors and delegitimize the value of human rights as a concept in their societies. Based on the solutions that were produced at the lab, we saw three possible responses to this three-pronged strategy: **culture, cooperation and community**.

The populist strategies and the narrative responses

Populist strategies	vs.	Narrative responses
Controversy		Culture
Crisis		Cooperation
Conflict		Community

Specifically, the prototypes that emerged from our labs offered practical ideas for human rights actors on strategies built on everyday human values: taking part, empowering people to talk about politics, creating more space for dialogue and bringing people closer together. Whether telling stories, holding community events, leveraging passion for artists and revered thought leaders, the prototypes moved away from judicial institutions and parliaments to daily life, bars, museums, and communities. The prototypes sought to shift the terrain from the courts and television studios, where human rights actors are currently being outplayed, to places where human rights have to matter most—what Eleanor Roosevelt called the “small places close to home”. They sought to capture the hearts more than the minds of their audiences, by talking more about “human” and less about “rights”.

The prototypes also articulated different ideas of what it means to “do” or carry out human rights work. These alternative understandings of human rights celebrate humanity and all the positive things that make us human: compassion, togetherness, family, friendship. They carry an unashamedly hopeful message of peace and love with the confidence that this message can have as much political legitimacy and influence as the message of hate and fear. They are deeply cultural, firmly embracing the creative sector to capture the imagination of a broad, non-aligned public, and building community by talking about values and not issues, so that they exist independently of the political sphere. Narrative strategies, such as the prototypes developed in the workshops, can allow human rights actors to bring shared values to life in an open and welcoming way that makes it easy for allies to join them—transplanting such values from highly technical, politically-charged and legal spaces to deeply cultural, more day-to-day ones.

“
Narrative work involves more than just communications campaigns. In fact, what one does is the message.
”

To achieve the above effects, *narrative work involves more than just communications campaigns. In fact, what one does is the message*, which means that narrative work goes to the very heart of how human rights organizations and actors operate and make their existence felt in communities—at the strategic, organizational (including staffing and skills cultivated in the staff), and fieldwide levels.

As a step forward, there is a need for a space that allows human rights actors to address these challenges together by supporting innovative new narrative strategies and sharing successful iterations in a highly collaborative manner. Human rights actors need a permanent platform for ideation where they can develop narrative strategies and the tactics to implement them, free from the dominant narratives limiting them at home.¹ Moreover, such change must have the buy-in within one’s own organization and that of one’s funders and allies to experiment and make the game-changing adaptations mentioned in this paper.

Our hope is that the learnings we share in this document ignite internal reflection within the human rights field, compelling it to deeper introspection on how it genuinely could transform from within. And as part of our commitment to our peers, we will continue to share our learnings as we move through incubation to implementation of the four selected narrative prototypes in the coming years.

¹ For example, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights is convening human rights actors to design new narratives and communications tactics that actors committed to human rights would use in tandem.



I. Introduction

In 2018, JustLabs, along with a group of funders, held a series of labs on producing narratives as a response to the increasingly antagonistic tide towards human rights around the world. Our starting point was the diagnosis—based on a series of workshops we ran with human rights leaders from Africa, the Middle East, Europe, the United States, Asia and Latin America—that the human rights field was undergoing a long-term period of profound *transformation* instead of a moment of *crisis*.²

In this new, permanent state of existential doubt about the human rights field's relevance and way of working, we needed to carry out this exploration process in a way that had not yet been done systematically in the field—an honest experimentation where failure was a given, where we worked with people from disciplines often unheard of in our circles, and where we aimed to surprise ourselves with something bold and fresh, and sometimes even “scary”.

To do this, first, we mapped the world according to the level of crackdown against civil society and ended up with three types: 1) relatively open but with signs of closure; 2) dangerously closing space for civil society; and 3) almost closed space for civil society. We selected four countries per type: 1) the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa and Brazil (relatively open; this was before the election of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro); 2) the Philippines, Mexico, Hungary and India (dangerously closing); and, 3) Russia, Cambodia, Turkey and Venezuela (almost closed).

Not only did we seek a variety in contexts, we also wanted to focus on countries that had clear elements if not full embodiment of what we considered a populist context. Our working definition of populism consists of two core elements: 1) *anti-elitism*; and 2) *anti-pluralism*.³ In the *anti-elitism* component, there is a “real people” who are represented by the populist alone. The struggle is between these “real people” against a corrupt and immoral “elite”, and these elites are often coddling “The Other” in society or are not being sufficiently tough on the latter—such as migrants and minorities who commit crimes and take away opportunities from the “real people”. In anti-pluralism, the common will of “the people” can only be divined by the populists, making moral claims which are not subject to contrary evidence. The 12 countries above had both or at least one element of populism, and we wanted to see whether the initiatives from our lab would make an impact.

We then built a team of experts from outside of human rights around each client. These experts came from storytelling, political strategy, marketing, communications, technology (including computational propaganda), comedy, organizational development, behavioral and cognitive sciences, design, creative campaigning and low-cost guerilla activism.

² See César Rodríguez-Garavito, *The Future of Human Rights: Existential Challenges, Disruptive Responses and a New Paradigm for the Field* (Bogotá: JustLabs, forthcoming).

³ Jan-Werner Müller. *What is Populism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).



After the three ideation labs, 12 prototypes of narrative initiatives were produced, which we then narrowed to the four most promising ones that now have entered a one to two-year period of testing in the real world. These prototypes are currently at their initial, high-fidelity prototype pilot stage, and depending on the outcomes of this six-month testing, they may or may not proceed further.

This paper recounts the story of this experimentation and the analysis of the outcomes, and what we are positing as the bold steps that funders and human rights actors⁴ need to take at the tactical, organizational and field-wide levels. In the radically experimental spirit of JustLabs, many of these proposals are learnings that we have picked up along the way as we have been testing our assumptions and ideas ourselves. We have only taken the first step on this voyage of discovery, and we now hope that this paper will serve to invite further debate, questions and introspection from our peers.

II. Why narratives matter to human rights

Human beings understand the world around them through a combination of emotional and rational thinking, but brain science increasingly shows us that the emotional, subconscious thinking is the more dominant of the two, even in rational domains like law. “To minimize unnecessary work, the brain uses a whole set of shortcuts to make sense of the world.”⁵ Put simply, even if we think we are using neutral, scientific or legal language, our words may be interpreted by others in ways which we do not expect.

⁴ While this paper and process have focused on the narrative challenges faced by human rights actors, its salience is across all forms of progressive civic activism for social justice causes.

⁵ Matthew Taylor, “Twenty-First Century Enlightenment” (London: RSA, 2010), https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa_21centuryenlightenment_essay1_matthewtaylor.pdf.

[The Narrative Initiative](#) defines a **narrative** as “a collection or system of related stories that are articulated and refined over time to represent a central idea or belief”.⁶

Narratives are not to be confused with **stories**: “What tiles are to mosaics, stories are to narratives. The relationship is symbiotic; stories bring narratives to life by making them relatable and accessible, while narratives infuse stories with deeper meaning.” Narratives matter because they influence which ideas are so widely accepted in culture as to have become “common sense”.⁷

One way of reinforcing narratives is through **frames**, which are a conscious use of *words, metaphors or analogies to give a specific context to events and statements*. Frames are “mental structures through which we view the world”. They function as a subconscious lens through which people interpret the world and the things they encounter in it.⁸ Frames trigger unconscious thought in the listener, based on memories and mental associations. When people encounter new ideas, information, stories or experiences, they interpret them using the existing narrative frames that those stimuli activate in their brain. These frames exist in the minds of our audience whether we trigger them consciously or inadvertently. As political strategist Frank Luntz writes: “You can have the best message in the world, but the person on the receiving end will always understand it through the prism of his or her own emotions, preconceptions, prejudices, and preexisting beliefs.”

All of this means that the language used to address an issue will decide the context



Even if we think we are using neutral, scientific or legal language, our words may be interpreted by others in ways which we do not expect.



and the perspective from which people see that issue. For example, the term “refugee crisis” suggests a natural disaster without human cause or solution, against which we can only build a barrier. Instead we should frame it without even referring to “refugees” but “people moving as a natural and dynamic part of life”, which a community can “welcome”. This turns the focus more on the communities who welcome them, or the act itself of welcoming.

Understanding framing helps explain why reacting to populist messages, even to reject them, can play into the hands of populists by making the underlying ideas stronger in the minds of audiences. Populists, for example, are careful to use words that evoke their frames. If human rights actors use the same language to reject their message, they inadvertently evoke the same frame (for example, saying “human rights defenders are NOT criminals” can actually reinforce the concept of being criminals). To “reframe” a debate, then, is to try to make people see it from a different context.⁹

⁶ The Narrative Initiative, “Toward New Gravity: Charting a New Course for the Narrative Initiative” (Brooklyn: The Narrative Initiative, 2017), <https://narrativeinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/TowardNewGravity-June2017.pdf>

⁷ See also: George Lakoff, *The Political Mind: Why you can't understand 21st-Century American Politics with an 18th-Century Brain* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

⁸ Public Interest Research Centre & ILGA Europe, “Framing Equality Toolkit” (UK: Public Interest Research Centre & ILGA Europe 2017), <https://publicinterest.org.uk/FramingEqualityToolkit.pdf>

⁹ Frank Luntz, *Words at Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear* (Boston: Hachette Books, 2008).

More broadly, narratives that become pervasive, salient or simply “common sense” in societies have the power to influence people’s thinking about how the world works, and by extension how people understand the stories, facts and other stimuli they encounter in daily life. These can be thought of as worldviews, or what we call **meta-narratives**: beliefs about human nature and how the world works that are built up over time by experience, beliefs and people or institutions who influence us.

<i>Concept</i>	Frames	Stories	Narrative	Meta-narratives
<i>Definition</i>	Words, images, metaphors or other triggers that make the audience interpret a story through a certain narrative	How a specific moment or event is recounted. If repeated, stories start to form a consistent narrative.	The way events or stories are connected and presented to form a new belief, a “common sense” understanding of what is happening	Narratives that become ingrained in our thinking, not just about that issue but other areas of life and how the world works
<i>Example</i>	Angry protestors take the fight to the street (frame of violence).	At noon today, protestors who were throwing bricks injured a police officer.	The protest movement in the streets this month is violent, extremist and divisive.	People who challenge the state are a fundamentally violent threat and sometimes need to be treated forcefully to preserve law and order.

Narrative strategy then is about using language that fits the speaker’s worldview or metanarrative that will then be imbibed by the audience. George Lakoff, for example, contrasts a “strict parent” worldview that encourages conservative thinking with a “nurturing parent” worldview more likely to support liberal, progressive policies: “What you want to do is to get them to use your model for politics—to activate your worldview and moral system in their political decisions. You do that by talking to people using frames based on your worldview.”¹⁰

Lakoff specifically ties certain emotions to certain meta-narratives, arguing that triggering hope and empathy should be a major strategic end in itself for liberals and progressives:

¹⁰ George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004).



Triggering hope and empathy should be a major strategic end in itself for liberals and progressives.



There is a moral here for progressives. The more they can activate empathy in the public, the more support will be available to them and the worse conservatives will do. Correspondingly, the more conservatives can generate fear in the public, the more support they will generate, and the more that will inhibit support for progressives.

If this is true, then progressives should be talking more about their moral worldview—about empathy, responsibility, and hope—rather than accepting fear-based frames to think and talk within. Instead of moving to the right and activating the conservative worldview, stay within your own moral universe and activate the progressive worldview.¹¹

With their faith in the power of facts and truth, human rights actors have for too long neglected to consider what sort of frames would reinforce their values and beliefs, taking for granted support for their own worldview or meta-narrative. Identifying and articulating these meta-narratives and their accompanying frames in their societies

would open up space for symbolism and metaphor more effectively. Framing language that explains what human rights are and what human rights actors are doing when they do human rights work is therefore crucial.¹²

However, developing new narrative strategies requires far more than the clever use of words, an understanding of findings from neuroscience and cognitive linguistics, and a mastery of sophisticated digital marketing tools that have become the hallmark of populist victories. Narrative strategies must identify stories and actions that bring narratives to life and make people talk about them. At the end of the day, while narrative initiatives must include a strong communications component, they encompass a broad array of tactics beyond communications—from policy-making to activism. In fact, as will be evident throughout this paper, our finding is that communications are not enough. What one does is the narrative.



Narrative strategies must identify stories and actions that bring narratives to life and make people talk about them.



¹¹ Lakoff, *The Political Mind*.

¹² Part of the challenge for the legalistic human rights movement lies in accepting that human rights exist not only as laws, but as invented stories that capture the imagination of human beings. Yuval Hariri uses 'stories' in the narrative sense, calling them the "mysterious glue" that enables humans to cooperate. Harari, Yuval N., *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper, 2015).



III. Twelve Populist Challenges And Twelve Prototype Responses



"The campaign is the message."
- Barack Obama¹³

1. The populist challenge we set out to address

Why does the populist moment feel like such an existential crisis for human rights? In taking a step back to understand why populist narratives were so damaging, the teams in our labs identified a three-pronged narrative strategy of controversy, crisis and conflict used by populists.

1. CONTROVERSY

Populists thrive in controversy because it is in such environments that they highlight their relevance—a steady hand in the midst of confusion and conflicting visions of the future or claims of facts. Moreover, by creating such confusion in the public imagination, they distract attention from their failure to deliver on their promises.

In stirring up controversy through false or exaggerated claims and in putting out rhetoric that contradicts the values of human rights actors, the latter go on the attack—a principled stand that populist leaders in fact count on to elevate and prolong the controversy. The more hypocritical the attacks on human rights values or actors, the more they seem to get under the latter's skin, like an itch that they cannot resist scratching. Human rights actors, and civil society organizations in general, have long seen such rebuttals as the main purpose of their communications functions, but it could be counter-productive. The act of rebuttal is also an act of repetition of the populist narrative, which framing experts warn against: "What you fight, you feed".¹⁴ Sunlight may disinfect, but it also makes [it] grow.¹⁵

2. CRISIS

Populists also seek to create a sense of crisis, whether real or fabricated. They use it to more effectively rally people behind their "savior" persona and justify their strong-armed policies, unilateral actions outside of established norms, and their suppression of dissenting voices.

In such situations of crisis, human rights actors do damage control. One team in this project said that rather than affecting change, their goal was merely to "limit the political cost of being in favor of human rights". Others said that their role had to be focused less on making advances and more on preventing a backsliding, that is, holding back the populist tide. One organization's goal was even more minimalist, seeking "a world where you can say 'human rights' without cringing".

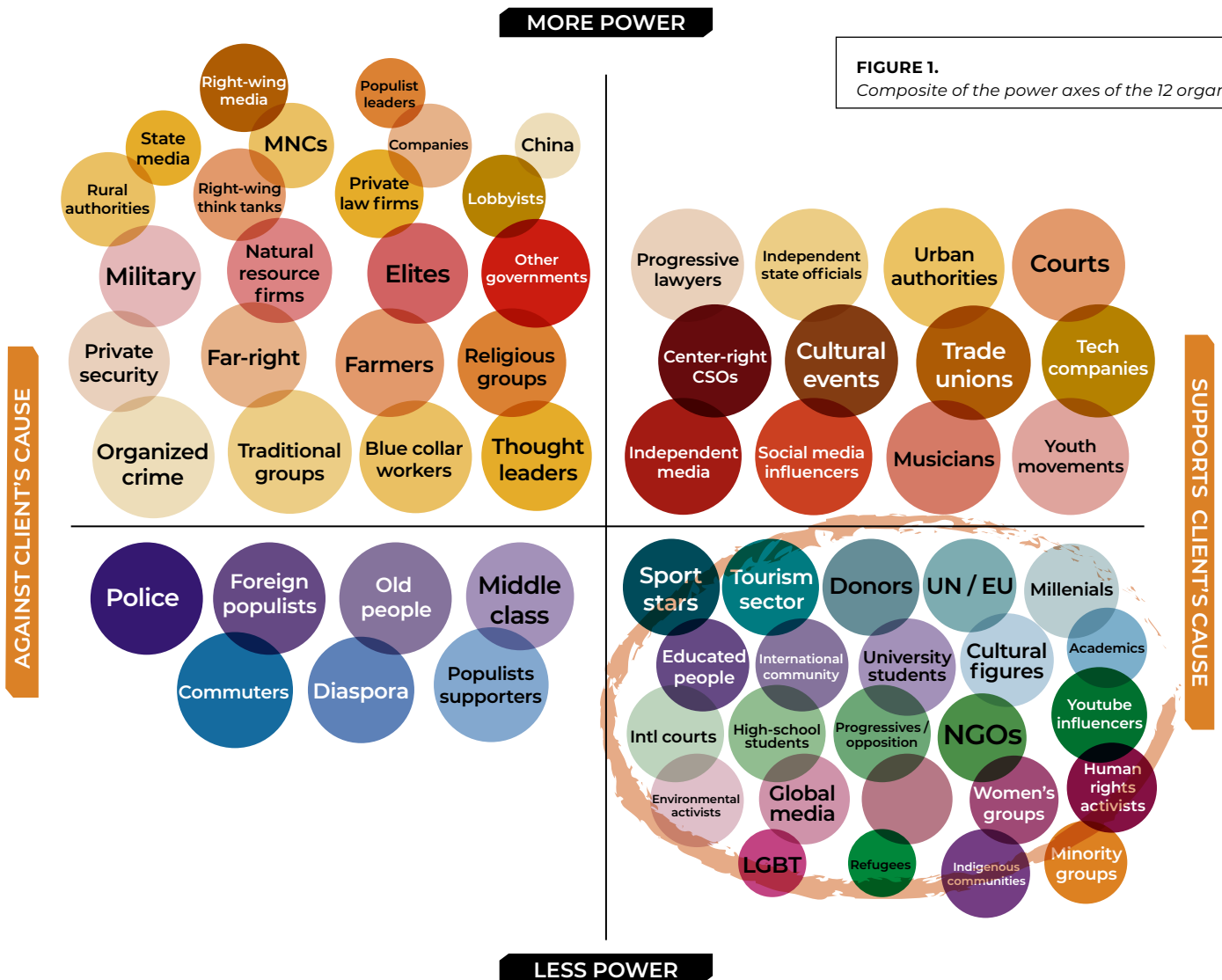
¹³ Cited in Dan Pfeiffer, *Yes We (Still) Can: Politics in the Age of Obama, Twitter, and Trump* (New York: Twelve, 2018).

¹⁴ For more on avoiding frames, see the work of Anat Shenker-Osorio: <https://asocommunications.com>.

¹⁵ For more on amplification of populist messages, see the work of Whitney Phillips, cited in: Ezra Klein, "The media amplifies Trump's racism. Should it stop?" *Vice*, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/8/2/20702029/donald-trump-racism-squad-tweets-media-2020>.

“ One organization’s goal was even more minimalist, seeking “a world where you can say ‘human rights’ without cringing”. ”

This discouraging landscape for human rights actors became more starkly clear when we merged the 12 power axes developed in the ideation workshops. The teams plotted on a power mapping axis the different actors involved in their narrative challenges, based on the level of power (economic, political, symbolic, cultural) wielded by the actor and its supportiveness to the cause of the human rights organization. What emerged from this exercise was an alarming finding: for almost all of the 12 human rights organizations in our labs, many of the powerful actors they identified were their opponents (see top left quadrant in Figure 1), while their allies were the ones that had much less power (see bottom right quadrant in Figure 1). Moreover, the main allies of human rights actors tended not to come from the general public, but rather were institutional actors, whose influence is derived from state power rather than cultural or narrative influence (and which therefore are easily disempowered by the sitting government).



3. CONFLICT

Populists carve their identity as an opposition to something or someone. In this antagonistic script, human rights actors are a useful “Them” to the populist “Us”—a stand-in for the imagined and corrupt “elite”, who are seen as enabling those often tagged as the “Other” in society, such as refugees, Muslims and minorities. In this set-up, populists present themselves as the defenders of “the” real people whom the corrupt elite have been working against. The stage is thus set for a narrative of division in which the audience must choose a side.

To achieve this Us vs. Them antagonism, populists deftly make use of cultural symbols and ideas that stoke people’s fears. They make rich cultural capital from baseball caps and social memes, and they drown out the stories of marginalized groups that human rights actors seek to help.

Excluded from the political sphere by the above narratives, human rights actors sometimes also cede the cultural sphere in which populist leaders appear more fluent. Some of this is self-inflicted by organizations, who have traditionally used a purely expert, academic or legalistic tone of voice. Indeed, many human rights actors are afraid and even suspicious of publicity. They fear a variety of risks: over-simplifying issues, reinforcing stereotypes of marginalized groups, or risking their words being misrepresented. The words of one participant aptly captured this conundrum: “The purity of mission has led to an inability to act”. In the conflict created by populists, therefore, human rights actors are not able to effectively demystify the idea of an antagonism.

2. The responses through the prototypes



“Good messaging is not about saying what’s popular. It’s about making popular what needs to be said.”
- Anat Shenker-Osorio¹⁶

JustLabs has analyzed the 12 prototypes and categorized them into three coherent narrative strategies: that of **community, culture** and **cooperation**—which each correspond to the above three populist strategies. It must be noted though that in most cases, the response is a combination of these narrative strategies, the same way that populist attacks against human rights actors often involve a combination of controversy, crisis and conflict. Together they offer a new vision of what creative, nurturing human rights work can look like, and how it can offer an antidote to divisive, destructive populism.

¹⁶ Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, “Words that Work: Making the Best Case for People Seeking Asylum”, 2017, <https://www.asrc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/AS-RC-Words-that-Work-4pp.pdf>.



1. CULTURE: A RESPONSE TO CONTROVERSY

The first narrative approach responds to the populist strategy of controversy. It involves reaching people in a non-politicized space through the arts and entertainment sectors. It involves showing people their shared cultural bonds to allow them even subliminally to overcome confusion created by populist controversy.

“Culture” in this sense means a form of storytelling that reaches people on an emotional level—through things like hip hop in Brazil or soap operas in Mexico—lifting the experience above the contradicting claims of facts or correctness in the controversy stirred up by populists. Organizing activities in cultural rather than political spaces, like museums and comedy clubs, not only makes it easier for potential allies to engage, but it also allows human rights actors to reach people in positive, emotional spaces that invite more open responses—away from knee-jerk reactions of fear or close-mindedness often stirred in the political space. For example, the South Africa prototype was a travelling “living museum” where the exhibits are interactive videos of protestors. The India prototype was a series of

comedy events where the comedians were from marginalized communities, such as Dalits, who occupy the lowest rung in the caste system. They live beyond specific locations or events, travelling to different communities and are participatory, interactive and inclusive—from comedy nights that showcase diverse talent to knitting roadshows to living museums where visitors engage with actual protestors and their loved ones.

Cultural spaces also serve to mobilize the traditional, institutional actors—judges, ombudspersons, anti-corruption officials, media commentators, independent authorities and the political opposition—whom they feel might favor change but have been less vocal in political debates.

These strategies make the cultural experience of the audience an end in itself. In doing this, there needs to be a high degree of originality and even “rawness” or amateur quality in the format to ensure that these stories stand out from the crowd (for example, video clips taken with a mobile phone instead of professionally edited videos). While professional documentary makers can ensure high-quality footage, rawness makes the message more authentic and closer to ordinary people.

These prototypes aspire to tap into a sense of being underground, cool or authentically grassroots. They are also driven by the insight that humor, emotions and the arts can challenge the status quo using spectacle and symbolism—while highlighting the fact that these tools are rarely representative of diverse groups.

“**These prototypes aspire to tap into a sense of being underground, cool or authentically grassroots.**”

Part of the strategy involves creating a shared, apolitical brand (and associated guidelines and toolkits) that bring together NGOs, artists and cultural institutions. If successful, they can carve out new cultural spaces and moments where voices can be heard. Human rights actors in this scenario become more than activists: they become a cultural force in their communities that have strong emotional connections to people not just based on issues but on emotions and ideas.



2. COOPERATION: A RESPONSE TO CRISIS

In the midst of a sense of crisis, people seek stability and security. This often justifies strong-arm policies of populists that promise protection from threats. To effectively respond to this, the narrative strategy of “cooperation” between unlikely allies and human rights actors seeks to demystify such sense of insecurity and doom by giving a sense of empowerment to the people, showing them that they are capable of rising above the fear and can proactively do something to help society.

Human rights actors normally feel that their strongest potential and untapped allies are institutional ones mentioned in the previous section (judicial actors, anti-corruption institutions, for example). These allies however are the very actors whose influence is being targeted by anti-system populist narratives. While the culture strategies in the previous section seek to give these traditional allies a new stake in the human rights cause, the “cooperation” strategy here seeks to engage *new, more influential and less*

political/institutional influencers in ways that would actually generate pleasant surprise rather than cynicism. They offer new role models for potential supporters to follow.

These unusual allies—companies or cultural institutions—take human rights actors' usual act of making voices heard to a new level and a new audience, such as through telephone booths sponsored by a large telephone company in different locations around the country, as in one of the versions of the Australia prototype. This prototype sought brand partnerships to reach wider audiences, providing spaces for conversations among ordinary people, where people tell their story of kindness to immigrants, reframing what it means to be “Australian”.

The prototypes for the Philippines and for Mexico leverage social media and video. For the former, it seeks to get influencers to take part in activities that the human rights organization wants target audiences to replicate, such as getting people out to vote. For the latter, the video will depend on celebrity or brand endorsement to pressure the newly elected Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) to promote the causes advanced by the human rights organization.

Finally, the Hungary prototype uses social media influencers to engage with young people, who will create a viable political alternative to the current regime. This is part of a competition among school-age youth to invent a new Hungarian word which is the exact opposite of a “keyboard warrior” (which currently does not exist in the Hungarian language) and make it “Word of the Year” in 2020. They will send in their ideas through artwork, pictures, memes, videos, slam poetry, animation, etc., which will then be judged by a jury of “cool people”. The process of the word's creation as well as its future inclusion in the Hungarian dictionary will become a symbol of those Hungarians who take action for social change. This is cooperation at its most ambitious.



**You are,
I am,
We are
Australian.**



3. COMMUNITY: A RESPONSE TO CONFLICT

The “community” narrative strategy aims to activate the base and engage new supporters, creating new bonds and a sense of togetherness by focusing on everyday things people have in common—distinct from the “Us vs. Them” conflict that populists attempt to stoke. It must be noted however that creating a sense of community, especially to majority sectors of the population often excluded in expert, elite circles, is one of the strongest suits of populists to which human rights actors have not responded well, at least not at an equally effective level.

This narrative strategy creates what the Brazil team called “social rituals”—events that bring people together in their most common and natural spaces of being—but unlike “cooperation”, exists outside of the arts and entertainment sectors in more casual, daily life settings. The use of the term “ritual” by the lab participants is noteworthy because it is universal in human society, cementing bonds and creating loyalty. In other words, rituals are a foundation for meta-narratives that have dominated and shaped society since the dawn of humans, such as religion.¹⁷ Above all, ritual offers people stability and certainty in times of uncertainty and

¹⁷ Yuval Harari explains: “The real difference between us and chimpanzees is the mysterious glue that enables millions of humans to cooperate effectively... This mysterious glue is made of stories, not genes. We cooperate effectively with strangers because we believe in things like gods, nations, money and human rights. Yet none of these things exists outside the stories that people invent and tell one another. There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money and no human rights—except in the common imagination of human beings.” Yuval Noah Harari, “Power and Imagination”, 2019, <https://www.ynharari.com/topic/power-and-imagination/>.

conflict, mobilizing those who are demotivated or afraid, and appealing to more personal, apolitical identities—mothers, fathers, grandparents, students, veterans and families.

To win support and trust from these target audiences, human rights actors need to give people a feeling of belonging, often to something bigger than themselves, particularly when targeting audiences beyond the political spectrum.¹⁸ The Russia team, for example, sought to offer youth a “sexy” home that would constructively channel their activist energy: “this is the place you go to create your family” and “a place to be ourselves and to learn”.

These prototypes seek a shift from human rights being seen as hard work and aggressive to something fun, engaging, creative and solutions-oriented. Bringing young creative leaders and activists around these projects in new communities is an end in itself, which can evolve into further actions. Young leaders would be elevated by the prototype, serving as role models for others with their energy feeding the movement. They aim to propagate a narrative of youth leadership, hope and taking charge. Moreover, these platforms can channel international solidarity, as a forum where international figures or diaspora can reach groups that human rights actors want to engage, teach policy research skills to or produce videos for. In this scenario, human rights actors are a convener or a home for people who want to make a difference.



The Russia team sought to offer youth a “sexy” home that would constructively channel their activist energy: “this is the place you go to create your family” and “a place to be ourselves and to learn”.



¹⁸ Research into the pro-life movement suggests that community forms values, rather than the inverse. See Ziad Munson, *The Making of Pro-life Activists: How Social Movement Mobilization Works* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010).

“ To work, these initiatives need to gather people away from politics and controversial matters and, instead, connect them through pleasurable or more primordial aspects of daily life: sports, food, coffee conversations. ”

The Brazil and Venezuela prototypes leave out the intermediary and go straight to their audiences. The Brazil prototype would hold informal “beer and football” community gatherings to make connections to people otherwise not politically engaged or may not be aware of the human rights organization’s advocacy. The Venezuela prototype, on the other hand, is a “food truck” (or a truck providing other public goods needed at the time, such as electricity, given the wide power outages) which will deliver public services to communities that are, in the context of the humanitarian emergency in the country, in dire need of food, water, power plugs to charge phones in or even Wi-Fi, along with the organization’s main service: legal advice.

To work, these initiatives need to gather people away from politics and controversial matters and, instead, connect them through pleasurable or more primordial aspects of daily life: sports, food, coffee conversations. They are a space where people can just “hang out”, and where the passion for the human rights actors’ values can come later. They seek to elicit their support in more personal settings—bars, schools and shop windows—reaching people in their daily life, rather than expecting them to come to the spaces of debate or action normally inhabited by human rights actors. The aim is to create sustainable bonds that come to form a part of people’s identities because it has become a community tradition. In this scenario, human rights become a glue that brings people together, and human rights actors become “advocates and friends solving community problems”.

Populist strategies	vs.	Narrative responses
Controversy		Culture
Crisis		Cooperation
Conflict		Community

FIGURE 2.
The populist strategies and our narrative responses



IV. What needs to be done to get these narratives right

More than what specific narratives could stick, we need to consider how to make them stick. The worst kind of performance is one that is obvious as a performance.¹⁹ Narratives that merely create a façade over the same old, undesirable reality can backfire if they are seen as inauthentic. Therefore, narrative work entails more than just the use of witty one-liners and slick marketing campaigns that will repackage an otherwise unchanged way of working for human rights actors. It requires that human rights actors be living, breathing, walking testaments to the stories they want people to imbibe. Showing is way more powerful than telling. What one does is the narrative, what one says is merely the attempt to frame it.

In addition to this, we also learned from the labs about the need for the entire human rights field to come up with meta-narratives—broader claims and worldviews on human rights—that everyone can take up together as a community, like a music sheet in an orchestra (some would prefer the analogy of a more free-flowing general rhythm in a jazz band). Every member of the orchestra or jazz band has a different instrument that works for their context and which produces a different sound, but together, the narrative that is told about human rights is one harmony.

This means that for these meta-narratives to work, or any lasting, powerful narratives to work at all, they require a fundamental shift in the way human rights actors work. We identify below the three levels to do this: 1) at the easier, **tactical** level; 2) the more painful, but potentially more rewarding **organizational** level; and, 3) the seemingly gargantuan **field** level that involves everyone—from the human rights actors themselves to funders.



Illustration by Alejandro Ospina

“
Showing is way more powerful than telling. What one does is the narrative, what one says is merely the attempt to frame it.
”

¹⁹ Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

1. TACTICAL CHANGES

1. A NEW FRAME FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

If human rights actors are to earn trust, relevance and authenticity in the eyes of their target audiences, they will need a new image or brand and a new way of talking about human rights. The narrative labs revealed how the current vocabulary of human rights actors is unsuited to counter the populist challenge. To address this, the prototypes produced at the lab had the following characteristics:

First, 11 of the 12 prototypes were overwhelmingly positive and forward-looking in tone. Many messages focused on positive visions of their country: “The Cambodia we want to see”, #WeAreAllAustralia, “Building Turkey for the Future”. Moreover, nine of the 12 prototypes eventually created their own, alternative messaging frames instead of simply reacting to what populist leaders say.

Second, the positive tone had a distinct element of hope and a strong embrace of the art of the possible. Encouraged to use a hope-based communications approach,²⁰ the human rights organizations thought big in terms of the society they want to see beyond policy gains, new laws and narrow thematic sectors or issues. Instead they began to envision united communities, a kinder politics and vastly new fields of operation that could be enabled through the support of unlikely allies like business or cultural figures. For example, as the Cambodia team explained their effort to counter the Chinese “development model” where economic progress comes at the cost of political freedom, their prototype “propagates a narrative of new youth leadership, hope, and taking charge, without responding directly to the development narrative”.

Lawyers began to ask themselves what it would look like if entirely new constituencies were enacted on their values. They expressed faith in the decency, tolerance and basic humanity of the audiences they wanted to reach, and a confidence that they could find ways to share their values with the majority of the public.

Third, they tried to make human rights cool—something people actually want to be associated with—by speaking more authentically about what they stand for.

These three themes point to the need for new frames in human rights that will get people’s attention without going negative and overcome the haunting sense that human rights are boring.

²⁰ Hope-Based Communications is an approach to narrative framing that builds on an organization’s values and vision, shifting from negative (what you are against) to positive (what you are for) messaging. A full guide is available on Open Global Rights, <https://www.openglobalrights.org/hope-guide/>.

When called on to describe themselves with a drawing, clients and their teams began moving away from the usual activist imagery like fists, protests, crowds or law-related symbols like scales of justice or ballot boxes. Instead, they drew imagery that called to mind daily life, such as a table or coffee cup symbolizing conversation, or a tree symbolizing unity and shelter for the community—using little of the traditional metaphor of war and conflict.

While further social listening and narrative analysis is needed to verify whether any of these narratives are already salient in public discourse, the new ingredients for potential narratives that emerged during the workshops can be categorized under three overarching meta-narratives which offer new ways of talking and thinking about how human rights actually work. Many of these were identified by cognitive linguistic analysis for how human rights advocates speak in the United States, the UK and Australia, carried out by Open Society Foundations fellow Anat Shenker-Osorio.²¹ In further testing based on that research (which we have found also apply in diverse and challenging geographic and geopolitical contexts beyond the Global North), we identified the language of: *a) journeys*; *b) building a better future*; and, *c) bringing people together*.

These three different metaphors/meta-narratives for human rights align with Shenker-Osorio's insight that human rights advocates should talk about human rights as something people do, or as a tool that people can use to make society better or to get along with each other. They do not necessarily need to be used as explicit messages, but human rights actors can use them to better frame their interventions in order to better control the narrative through which audiences will interpret both their actions and the events that take place in society. They will also help address a fundamental challenge: that even people who support human rights have very little idea of what they actually are or how they work.²²



JOURNEYS: HUMAN RIGHTS AS A MAP TO A BETTER FUTURE

This frame uses the language of travel and journeys. In this metaphor, human rights as a tool is a map, a compass: the rules of the road that keep us moving in the right direction because they are common rules that people live by to get along. This frame focuses on narratives that are future-oriented, with prototypes that seek to “offer hope for the future” (Turkey) and “move beyond rigid positions to dialogue” (Hungary). Prototypes developed with this narrative also aim to show people the way forward: “show people how change happens”, or show “how Australians are driven to multiculturalism”; “switch the conversation to show what can be made possible”, that “we can go back to peace” (Turkey).

²¹ She also advises us to talk about human rights as a tool we use, rather than something we are given. Anat Shenker-Osorio, “A Brilliant Way of Living our Lives: How to Talk About Human Rights”, (Open Society Foundation, 2018), https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/ece6dfc1-8e05-49ad-9c27-9388708f911f/downloads/1cpt4br1b_966482.pdf.

²² Various studies, as well as focus groups and social listening analysis conducted by the authors, have suggested that the dominant narrative around human rights is that they are a “basic” set of services or needs provided by governments, which in turn feeds the idea that they mainly benefit “undeserving” groups like criminals. See, for example: <https://www.ipsos.com/en/human-rights-2018>.

Workshop participants also evoked this frame when they used the literal language of travel: finding persons with gravitas (“the velocity and sheer mass appeal of this personality can drive a popular vote towards something”) and seeking to “drive engagement and momentum”.

The power of this frame is its focus on empowerment, making human rights a force that is about giving people the mobility and ability to move: the support of big companies “could create a large and mobilized community of advocates”, or when the Russia team sought to mobilize active youth to “harness their energy”.



BUILDING: *HUMAN RIGHTS AS A PLAN FOR CONSTRUCTING A BETTER WORLD*

This narrative focuses on the metaphor of building and construction—human rights as a blueprint or guide for creating a better society. Prototypes using this narrative frame aim to build: networks, capacity, societies, a sense of solidarity, the future, and “support from the bottom up”.

In a bigger picture, they seek to “build” a society grounded in decency, compassion and respect (Australia). In the case of Brazil, its aim is to “build” a fair and free society and build confidence in public institutions. They also want their organizations to offer a “home” to people. When invited to draw a logo symbolizing their role, clients drew the image of trees or gardens to represent their strong roots in the community and their role in providing stability, shelter and fruits to people.



GLUE: *HUMAN RIGHTS AS BINDING US TOGETHER IN A COMMON HUMANITY*

Prototypes using this frame sought to offer a unifying idea and offered a sense of belonging and home, building on the idea that rights are what make people human. This narrative frame is based on the idea that people are stronger together, with the word “together” as predominant: work together, come together (to tell a story), hold a sign together, watch football together, bringing people together in bars, bring different communities together, find identity that binds people together, make people feel connected when they do things together, look for hashtags that connect people together.



In this metaphor, the purpose of human rights actors is to offer people connection and belonging. For example, the UK organization drew a table to represent their role. In this visual metaphor, the human rights organization acts as a table where people sit together and views are aired, where everyone has a seat at the table, creating open and constructive relationships between people and power. Similarly, the team from Hungary drew a cup of coffee, symbolizing the organization's desire for rational, respectful conversation, and also speaking to the idea that human rights actors serve people and bring people together. They are a normal part of life where people can come together and talk.

The words used matter because of the associations and ideas they trigger with audiences. These are just three potential alternative vocabularies for talking about human rights. A core part of narrative and framing strategy is identifying the words to tell the story of human rights the way one wants it to be understood.

2. FROM LEGAL OR POLITICAL TO CULTURAL TACTICS

Many of the core goals human rights actors expressed, particularly the relationship they desired with the general public, are best achieved through activities that are markedly different from the legal and political activities traditionally associated with human rights work. While many human rights actors have been using cultural strategies in their work, they are too rare, with too little participation from people outside of human rights circles.

The key to achieving this is to find allies from outside human rights on the basis of shared values, and to be more flexible in terms of who human rights actors work with to advance those shared values. Finally, as this arose in a number of the prototypes, working with celebrities and artists should be seen not just as a tool for promotion or fundraising but as enabling human rights causes in building cultural capital.

3. OFFER SOLUTIONS, NOT SIMPLY PROBLEMS

People are tired of hearing about problems, and human rights actors do not alleviate this by constantly showing what is wrong with the world without actually proposing solutions or a compelling alternative world. Human rights actors, through their offered solutions, can influence mindsets and give audiences the courage to support different policies.

More than that, it is not sufficient to show just issue-based solutions. Human rights actors need to be able to offer an encompassing, alternative vision of the future—something that populists have been good at as they offer grand images of what life could be with them at the helm (“Make America Great Again”).



It is not sufficient to show just issue-based solutions. Human rights actors need to be able to offer an encompassing, alternative vision of the future.



4. VALUES AND EMOTIONS, NOT JUST FACTS OR ISSUES

At a time when leaders appear to be without shame, naming and shaming has proven to be an often limited, if not counterproductive, strategy. According to Jan-Werner Müller,²³ exposing corruption or even crime does not necessarily bring down populists, because they can easily claim that they are doing it for the people, to redistribute wealth and opportunities otherwise selfishly appropriated by “corrupt elites” to the detriment of “the people”.²⁴ This explains the openness in the attacks by populists against civil society, and their brazen candidness even with respect to corruption—a departure from the ways of secretive dictatorships.

Without public support, the simple bringing to light of facts and abuses does not cause change. People do not vote or form opinions on big societal issues on the basis of facts alone—more often, they do so on the basis of their values, their lived experience and emotions, and where they feel a sense of belonging and connection with their identity.

²³ Jan-Werner Müller, *What is populism?* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

²⁴ An example would be Egyptian President Sisi's response to a massive viral campaign against him, accusing him of building his palaces with public money—to which he responded by saying he is building them for the people, that they belong to the people. See: Middle East Eye, “Egypt's Sisi makes first public remarks on viral videos.” <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-sisi-responds-to-viral-videos-accusing-him-of-squandering-billions>.

“ Without public support, the simple bringing to light of facts and abuses does not cause change. ”

Human rights actors, on the other hand, thrive in a climate of rational debates where facts are foremost, and truth is sacrosanct. We document violations, provide evidence, and present our findings in a professional, albeit technocratic manner. To be clear: facts are indispensable and need to be put out especially when lies are used by populists. This work of shedding light to the truth should not stop. However, the danger is in relying on facts alone and continuously deploying the fact-centered, technocratic manner of making a statement. According to Benjamin Moffitt in his 2016 work *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, the exact opposite of populism is actually technocracy (where technocracy more often loses): “[w]hile populists... argue that we should trust ‘common sense’ or the wisdom of ‘the people’, technocrats place their faith in expertise and specialist training, and by and large do not concern themselves with ‘the people’.”²⁵

Targeting new audiences does not have to begin with identifying issues that affect people and then showing how human rights can improve their own situation. Instead, people can be engaged through values, emotions and ideas they can relate to, seeing how human rights can be a way to act on these values for the common good, not just for the individual. The very act of exercising empathy and of feeling shared ownership in society, inherent in the prototypes, is a muscle that is strengthened through constant use.

Exposing the facts will always remain central to human rights actors, but that attention should not be solely focused nor end in getting the facts or data out. One can no longer ignore the context and underlying ideas that audiences will use to interpret the facts, and the stories, frames and narratives that human rights actors use, consciously or not, to deliver the facts.

If facts are no longer the sole currency for human rights actors, what would this mean in the way their staffing looks like? What percentage of their public-facing outputs should be technical reports, compared to approaches with greater emotional appeal such as community barbecues or comedy nights?

²⁵ Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).



People can be engaged through values, emotions and ideas they can relate to, seeing how human rights can be a way to act on these values for the common good, not just for the individual.



5. GENUINELY PEOPLE-CENTRED, NOT TOKEN “EMPOWERMENT”

Adopting truly people-centered actions and building in mechanisms by which the audience eventually ceases to be passive spectators and runs the campaign—thus ceding control over something human rights actors started—is foreign to many human rights actors. Ceding control of the message, letting the public genuinely take ownership and even bringing the initiative to an entirely unanticipated direction is a difficult thing to do.

This is the risk that is inherent in efforts to truly “engage” the public in a way that will make them feel part of the cause. It is also the price of moving from a “mobilizing” model to an “organizing” model where the key leadership roles are actually at the grassroots level.²⁶ This is a model where like-minded people mobilize around a shared set of values and vision but issues and tactics are decided by networks of grassroots activists, rather than “technocrats” in NGO headquarters.

Human rights actors need to balance this with the need to ensure that their work does not become a tool for more hatred, polarization or simply the “dumbing down” of issues. The answer to this must be judged on a case-by-case basis, being mindful that such process of enabling people-led initiatives are primarily for enabling conversations among people.

²⁶ Hahrie Han, *How Organizations Develop Activists: Civic Associations and Leadership in the 21st Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014).

6. NEW ALLIES

Human rights actors in the labs recognized the need to engage new allies, or their current allies in a new way, often harmonizing their relationships with the latter with new actors. For most of them however, as with many human rights actors, working with such unlikely allies is completely new territory, carries risks, and requires skills and connections that they often do not have. Human rights actors, especially law-focused ones, can navigate court systems and legislatures with great familiarity, but how does one capture the attention of celebrities who risk political reprisal if the latter spoke out on their behalf?

These are questions that human rights actors will need to learn to navigate. In the lab, the human rights organizations were asked to profile these actors they want to reach, and one of the things they needed to identify are the influencers of these influencers: if one cannot get to them directly, who can one reach who can then get to the target, no matter how many the degrees of separation? Or if the connection is not through persons, what values and biases do they hold that one can leverage? Human rights actors need to be adept in doing these tactical analyses and planning—a new muscle that must be strengthened along with skillfully delivering court arguments and holding street protests.

2. ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES

The tactical moves above are already going to require significant, if not costly, changes to human rights actors. However, they are only scratching the surface. Without a more foundational structure that can support them, they can easily become a fad, a project that will be scrapped for the next big issue, where one leaves narratives as just stories in the usual news cycle of the human rights field.

Below are some changes that go to the heart of the existential realities of human rights organizations. Funders will need to get behind them for them to even stand a chance of being considered by human rights actors.

1. NEW SKILLS AND A DIVERSITY OF EXPERTISE IN THE STAFF

To be a match for populists in the fierce competition of ideas and narrative, one news cycle after another, season after season, year after year, human rights actors need to develop new muscles and new skills. The following will be essential: 1) audience and narrative research; 2) message development and testing; 3) communications; 4) branding and marketing; 5) supporter engagement and movement building; and, 6) greater technological and technical sophistication.

How human rights actors can build narrative muscle

1 Audience and narrative research

2 Message development and testing

3 Communications

4 Branding and marketing

5 Supporter engagement and movement building

6 Greater technological and technical sophistication

First, **audience research** needs to be undertaken to identify and understand target audiences and the existing narrative landscape. Audience research will address one of the weakest links in the current approach of human rights actors compared to populist leaders: *listening*. Human rights actors need to gather greater insights on what gets people to participate and find the issues that resonate with target audiences. This means not working on the issues that populists pick but on those most likely to build a lasting connection between human rights actors and their potential supporters. Crucially, audience segmentation provides a more rounded picture of people, by not just identifying their views on politics but their cultural interests, aspirations and behavior in daily life, which opens a completely new avenue for engaging at a cultural and community level.

Audience research can also include narrative analysis. There are increasingly accessible tools for sentiment analysis and social listening that can empower small organizations to monitor whether narratives are being used, in what contexts and by whom. Through this, it will be possible to identify the prevailing notions and ideas—both positive and negative—around human rights. This will allow human rights actors to enable helpful ideas that are salient in the current discourse and to prepare for potential barriers.

“ Audience research will address one of the weakest links in the current approach of human rights actors compared to populist leaders: *listening*. ”

This work would also inform the second skill needed: **message testing and development.** Messaging that is carefully developed, and ideally, tested out, is essential for prototypes to have the desired impact. Message development and testing would lead to the development of a messaging matrix for dealing with threats such as efforts to “spin” narratives and framing them within existing narratives, ensuring spokespeople do not simply answer hostile narratives directly but deliver messages that present their own alternative vision. If a spokesperson from a human rights actor goes off-topic in an interview, talks about the activity in the wrong context or even calls to mind the wrong issues through an unfortunate use of metaphor, the frame could shift back to predominant populist narratives, making the entire exercise in vain.

Message testing is also essential to ensure narrative strategies actually change people’s views. A first step will be making messages accessible and understandable as well as safe and inclusive for non-expert audiences, avoiding political, radical or divisive rhetoric. This can then bring in partners from beyond the NGO world like businesses, celebrities, influencers or cultural institutions. Moreover, messages will need to be instantly compelling if they are to reach beyond those who are already convinced and those from one’s own silos. Will something like a celebrity endorsement really counter a strong, regularly repeated populist message? It will not if the celebrity lacks credibility in politics. Furthermore, bold messages that mobilize one group might further alienate another. Testing through social listening, focus groups and A/B split tests (comparing different versions of an online message or imagery to see which performs better) can mitigate these risks and ensure clients make the most of their narrative to reach people on a new, more emotional and personal level.

Third, there is also a need for a **professional communications infrastructure,** including traditional media relations and social media, to ensure that activities are talked about at a large enough scale. In other words, are they designed and disseminated in such a way that they are seen and heard by enough people? One person’s feedback to Brazil’s people-centered prototype that tried to reach people through sport was, “Why would you want to ruin the experience of watching football by doing serious things?” The problems that human rights actors are dealing with require massive attention and pull.

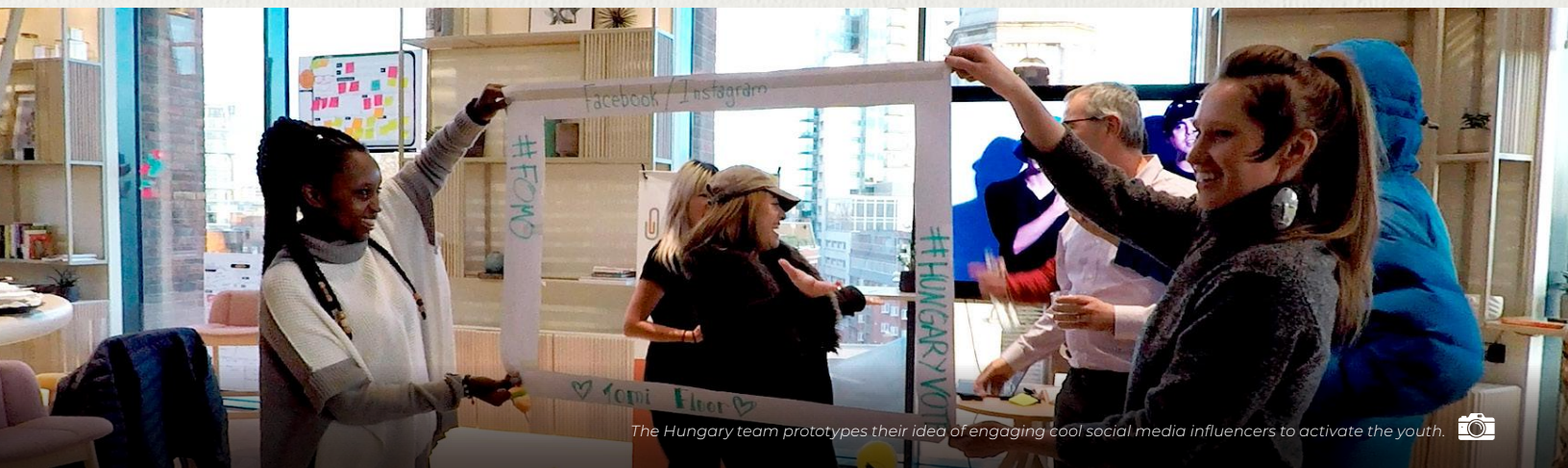


Every narrative by human rights actors must have a distribution and public relations strategy to gain traction.



Taking a campaign to scale requires strategies for distributing news and content. The message will need to be newsworthy to achieve media penetration. Media coverage delivers not only exponential growth in the size of an audience but also lends credibility to messages, which is essential for it to have an impact on prevailing narratives. Quite simply, human rights actors cannot rely on their own channels. A member of the South African team pointed out the flaw in a story-telling video series: “It is hard to capture attention these days just via a YouTube video”. Every narrative by human rights actors must have a distribution and public relations strategy to gain traction.

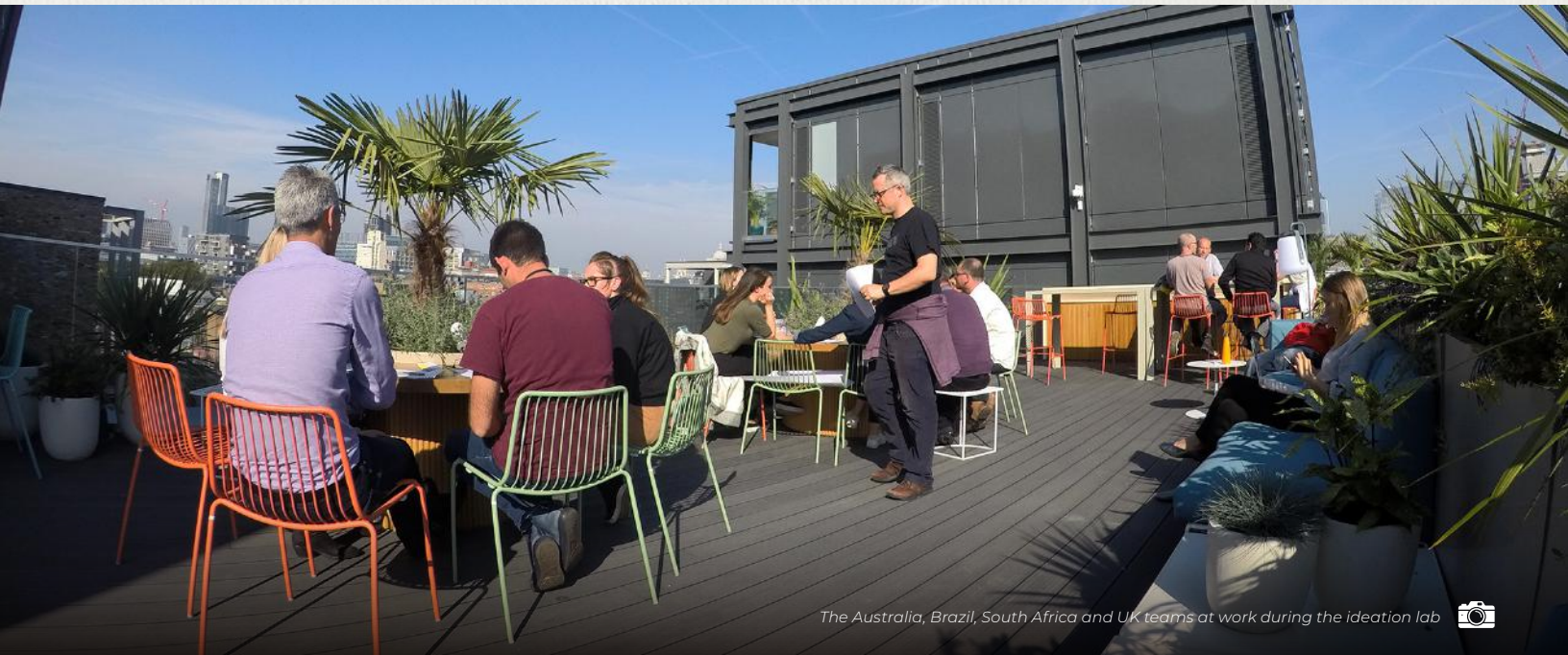
Since what one does is the narrative, every activity one carries out is an opportunity to influence the wider narrative if the story is told well. This applies even to local community work: indeed, at a time when the photo-sharing platform Instagram is the dominant media among the much sought-after 16- to 25-year-old demographic, which pursues experiences rather than products, the more authentic and human the story, the better.




Furthermore, communications support will not just deliver scale, but also ensure that the narratives are interpreted and talked about by the media and other people in the way human rights actors intend. Communications support therefore also includes media training. An organization’s staff need to be trained in interview control to ensure that their actions reinforce the right narrative, rather than framed by the media or populists using old, harmful frames. If successful, good communications support should ensure that rather than reacting to populists in every news cycle, human rights actors create an ecosystem of their own that makes the stories that matter to them heard.

Fourth, human rights actors need to consider several aspects of **marketing and branding work**. Marketing and branding create a demand among their target audience to want a product or experience and to identify their expectations from it. These are fields that the human rights movement has often neglected, with the consequence that many people do not know that human rights are relevant to them, either as a cause to support or something they benefit from. To build wider constituencies, human rights actors must consider supporter experience and what they actually offer to potential supporters.

In the above skills, large parts of narrative strategies, particularly when underpinned by people-centered activities, depend on third-party logistical, design and distribution support, such as ad agencies. Managing these third parties requires experience and is not necessarily intuitive nor easy. There are too many stories out there already. For example, when the Australia team discussed a storytelling documentary about rights holders, the team wondered, “Who on earth will watch this unless forced or bribed?” Many exciting human rights narratives depend on being funny, surprising or inspiring in order to gain lasting cultural salience and “word-of-mouth” currency. The development of successful narrative strategies demands professionals who specialize in creativity.



The Australia, Brazil, South Africa and UK teams at work during the ideation lab 

Furthermore, strong, values-based “brands” that all parties can get behind can help to protect narratives against efforts to smear them and to support the creation of coalitions around a clear set of inclusive values, messages and goals.²⁷ For example, if opponents attempt to smear a protest as violent, whether people believe the smear would depend on their understanding of the coalition or campaign’s brand as fundamentally peaceful or in fact radical, and therefore prone to violence.

Paying attention to brand can also address the challenge of authenticity. Without overcoming preconceived notions about human rights actors, narrative initiatives will be seen as out of touch or a waste of time and money. When the Philippine team broached the idea of a human rights actor teaming up with a celebrity, the fear was that the partnership would seem artificial and staged and therefore not be taken seriously. Authenticity and relevance are vital to be taken seriously by other communities such as artists.

²⁷ While the term “brand” is seen with suspicion by civil society, it should be seen as synonymous with an organization’s vision, the story it has to tell, which is crucial for creating an emotional connection with people. See Jonah Sachs, *Winning the Story Wars*, (Cambridge: Harvard Business Review, 2012) and Nathalie Laidler-Kylander and Julia Shepard Stenzel, *The Brand IDEA: Managing Nonprofit Brands with Integrity, Democracy, and Affinity*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass 2012).

Furthermore, conducting influencer and artist liaisons is resource-intensive and best carried out by professionals who do it every day.

Also, digital marketing is now at the heart of any business. To ensure that narratives deliver a lasting relationship with new audiences, human rights actors need to be able to ensure supporter journeys that convert attention and engagement into lasting, loyal support. Development of supporter journeys and paid advertising on social media can also be used to refine and subject messages to A/B testing, as mentioned above.

Fifth, building effective supporter journeys requires **organizing or community management**. Human rights actors should develop plans to move from “mobilizing” people for an initial moment, activity or campaign to “organizing” by encouraging people to take up the campaigns by developing their own stories and activities that will reinforce the desired narrative.²⁸ Community organizers build movements by building up networks and local groups and by decentralizing projects through shared, open-source methodologies in order to create a sense of ownership and empowerment among target audiences. Organizing would also be facilitated by technologists who could support the development of community groups, apps, and other relevant innovations.

Sixth, to understand the opportunity for narrative change, human rights actors must also better understand the specific **technical and operational obstacles** to their work and develop innovative ways to overcome them. Alt-right troll farms, “deep fake” videos, and other technical devices that work at scale to mislead, and organize and incite action against human rights actors and their activities present very practical challenges. Digital and technical experts and strategists must be able to develop and deploy tactics that work within and across countries to neutralize these obstacles.

Finally, needless to say, there is a need to ensure **security** so the people involved do not become a target for retaliation such as trolling and other forms of online abuse.

All the above challenges demand that there be a greater diversity of skills in the organization’s staff. An organization should consider having communicators, social psychologists, political strategists and creative people in the team. Organizational cultural change is slow, often fraught and intimidating for those who have relied for a long time on something that has worked—in this case, the law. We treat this as a bigger but potentially more fulfilling challenge, as it will require bolder cultural transformations, and this could start in the way an organization’s staffing looks like and what skills they start building across the board in their organizations.

²⁸ On the difference between organizing and mobilizing, see Hahn, *How Organizations Develop Activists*.

In short, in addition to hiring those who have the requisite skills (which in many resource-strapped organizations may not even be a viable option), the above capabilities need to be internalized to some general degree even by those who normally would not specialize in communications, so that they become part of the organization's DNA. This building of capabilities and cultural shift can also be supported by a "brain trust" of experts willing to work with human rights actors, perhaps in a more efficient manner through networks or alliances rather than separately with individual organizations.

2. NEW DEMOGRAPHICS: A DOSE OF YOUTHFUL ENERGY

Aside from bringing in people with skills in communications and other relevant capabilities as discussed above, the importance of bringing youth into human rights causes needs to be reflected, not just in focus group discussions but even in the age of the staff that human rights groups hire. This ensures that the young people's contributions are not just external inputs but become ingrained into human rights organizations' way of being—an internal stimuli for what they want to be in the world.

More broadly, this also means that in the causes that human rights actors work on, they have to build in mechanisms where they are able to let go and let young people lead, particularly in issues most salient to them. The fact is, in many places and in a good number of causes, young people do not see big NGOs as the natural leaders or even as helping their causes. Young people need to see their relevance, mainly by giving them the freedom to lead instead of being treated as a mere "target audience" to influence.

3. NEW IDENTITY: PROJECTING A DIFFERENT IMAGE

The transformation would not only need to happen internally, but externally—in the way that human rights actors, particularly law-focused organizations, present themselves and in what public spaces they seek to reach.

In the Venezuela prototype, the human rights organization said that the lawyers of the organization have been doing community work ever since its creation. When asked how, they would say that after being introduced by their local community partner to the people, they set up their tables and receive individuals who come with their legal questions—in the normal fashion of an attorney-client relationship.

This normally would work well, except in this case, the human rights organization itself set out to change the image they want communities to have of them and of human rights as a concept. Instead of setting up a table from where they dispense

expert, formal advice to unknowing community members, the human rights organization now appreciates that they need to take a bigger, more foundational approach for people to think that dealing with human rights matters: the lawyers might need to literally roll up their sleeves (or just leave their formal lawyerly outfit at home), and just sit there and be with the people. This could also mean having the community actively participate and take over for them to have ownership.

This certainly does not mean that the human rights actors need to engage in popularity stunts, because at the end of the day, they contribute best with the skills they know and specialize in, but the fact is that genuine interpersonal interaction in day-to-day community settings and upholding the law for people are not mutually exclusive. Perhaps, this could even mean a significant time invested in just building those ties over a cup of coffee or an *arepa* (a traditional South American food made of ground maize dough). The law could come later.

This means that human rights actors, especially their funders, will need to be comfortable in spending resources and time on *arepa* mornings, coffee afternoons or beer nights, and measurement of impact needs be adjusted to include community ties as real, desirable outcomes.



Human rights actors, especially their funders, will need to be comfortable in spending resources and time on *arepa* mornings, coffee afternoons or beer nights.



4. EXPERIMENTATION AND FAILURE

For human rights actors to freely and thus more effectively find what narratives work in their context, they need to engage in honest experiments—where learning is more important than the projection of success. Failure should be desirable, because the truth is that no exceptional feat that changed the world got it right the first time. If human rights actors knew exactly what to do, they would not be in this dilemma in the first place.

Narrative work is complex and as we discussed above, this is new territory that requires new skills and ways of working for human rights actors. Instead of spending all their time perfecting a theory of what might work, embodied in polished proposals, or trying to avoid failures, as seen in reports that try to extract some “success” even in those that plainly flopped, human rights actors must become comfortable in true experimentation, iterating based on their learnings (which they thus need to document for themselves), and sharing their stories to the world.

For this to happen however, the experimentation should be carefully, almost scientifically, designed and structured—almost like ordered chaos. The “order” is what differentiates a potentially path-breaking process from one which is a simple waste of time. Spaces and groups now abound that can provide methodological support in designing such processes, and human rights actors need to seek them out. This will ensure that the staff can have faith in an otherwise new way of working.

To be able to do this and everything we set out above, however, changes must be made at the field level.

3. FIELD CHANGES

This process has allowed us to test new ways of working with human rights actors, funders and those who come from outside our field. Below are what we see as two inevitable transformations we need to undertake for narratives to win hearts and minds.

1. WORKING WITH FUNDERS

As we discussed above, we tested out a different way of working with funders, which to us changed the dynamics and effectiveness of the process.

First, funders committed to long-term funding—even without knowing what the prototypes would be. This provided energy and parallel commitment by the human rights actors and the non-human rights participants invited. This is the only way that grantees can truly embrace honest experimentation—where no one knows what the outcomes would be, but the process supported could be trusted to produce important learnings anyway.

Second, funders knew that they were committing not to specific *ideas* of narratives but to the *process* of experimenting (and failing) to get there, as well as learning about replicable ingredients in narrative work. Failure was a word that was abuzz throughout our process, and we knew that for the human rights organizations to be comfortable in it, the funders had to be the same in the first place.

Finally, the funders were the ones who took charge in bringing more funders on board. No amount of paper proposal can equal the convincing power of a funder seeing another funder excited about an idea. This set-up also ensures that the funding partners are not mere spectators, but that they actually have skin in the game.



Light-touch collaboration does not mix well with truly powerful narratives.



2. COLLABORATION

The success of populists, aside from the resonance of their fear- and identity-based rhetoric, is their deftness in cross-boundary reinforcement of each other's messages and tactics, showing a clever understanding of our highly mediatized and digital world. The human rights field, on the other hand, has remained disjointed, moving with separate smaller voices rather than as one, compelling message of an alternative future that it offers the world. Its definition of collaboration has been limited to information sharing in conferences and meetings, passing around of reports, toolkits and commissioned audience studies that risk duplication and suboptimal use of resources, and joint campaigns that even when strongly coordinated are limited in issue or geographical scope.

While this is traditionally justified by the laudably high degree of independence that members of the movement (or movements, more aptly) have guarded for good reasons, light-touch collaboration does not mix well with truly powerful narratives. New narratives cannot take root if pushed by one organization, or even one network, alone. In a globally networked media landscape, movements and organizations working on different causes in different places must work together to build support for shared values: this means using common framing and telling each other's stories.²⁹

This is an ambitious undertaking, and one that will need a highly responsive, well-oiled and radically bold machinery where participants are empowered to take charge of their messaging adapted to their context but embrace the need to work as one with others—no matter their geography, sector or issue base. Its design will require a process that provokes and sustains creativity and boldness, utilizes the latest research on the key issues, embraces learning and failure, and integrates such learnings through constant iteration. For this, funders have to be ready to bet behind what could well be the biggest experiment that the human rights field has ever undertaken.

²⁹ See: Common Cause, "No Cause is an Island", <https://valuesandframes.org/no-cause-is-an-island/>; Public Interest Research Centre, "Open Framing", <https://publicinterest.org.uk/project/open-framing/>; Alice Sachrajda and Lena Baumgartner, "More than words: How communicating our shared values and forging mutual connections can bring hope for a new tomorrow" (London: Global Dialogue, 2019), <http://www.ariadne-network.eu/more-than-words/>.



V. Conclusion



"Where, after all, do human rights begin? In the small places close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world."
- Eleanor Roosevelt

The prototypes that emerged from our labs offered practical ideas for human rights actors on strategies built on everyday human values: taking part, empowering people to talk about politics, creating more space for dialogue and bringing people closer together. Whether telling stories, holding community events, leveraging passion for artists and revered thought leaders, the prototypes moved away from judicial institutions and parliaments to daily life, bars, museums and communities. The prototypes sought to shift the terrain from the courts and television studios, where human rights actors are currently being outplayed, to places where human rights have to matter most—what Eleanor Roosevelt called the “small places close to home”. They sought to capture the hearts more than the minds of their audiences, by talking more about “human” and less about “rights”.



The Venezuelan organization working with a multidisciplinary team in prototyping a community truck 

The prototypes also articulated different ideas of what it means to “do” or carry out human rights work. These alternative understandings of human rights celebrate humanity and all the positive things that make us human: compassion, togetherness, family, friendship. They carry an unashamedly hopeful message of peace and love with the confidence that this message can have as much political legitimacy and influence as the message of hate and fear. They are deeply cultural, firmly embracing the creative sector to capture the imagination of a broad, non-aligned public, and building community by talking about values and not issues, so that they exist independently of the political sphere.



They carry an unashamedly hopeful message of peace and love with the confidence that this message can have as much political legitimacy and influence as the message of hate and fear.



Narrative strategies such as the prototypes developed in the workshops can allow human rights actors to bring shared values to life in an open and welcoming way that makes it easy for allies to join them—transplanting such values from the highly technical, politically-charged and legal spaces to deeply cultural, more day-to-day ones.

In this alternative understanding, “doing human rights” is about people coming together. Today, people are increasingly divided and far apart, and in this state, they feel little loyalty to the actors who want to unite them. But the future of human rights is about people coming together and building a better world. The prototypes that emerged from the three narrative labs provide an alternative vision of the future of human rights action. Clients, donors and the wider human rights movement should take forward these prototypes to create a new set of narrative strategies but also to develop this new vision of human rights not only as a set of laws, but a plan for better societies and the glue that binds us all together in our shared humanity.

Most powerfully for the people who took part in the narrative labs, and anyone else who cares about the human rights cause, is that human rights actors have the power to bring these visions to life. However, if we are to believe that what one does is the message, then the human rights field needs to undertake significant changes in its way of working and its way of being—at the tactical, organizational and field-wide levels.

Human rights actors have to make a decision about the actions they take, the words they use and the stories they tell—not only in communications campaigns, but in who they are and how they operate. In that respect, narratives can be a source of inspiration not just for their audiences, but for human rights actors themselves.

As a step forward, there is a need for a space that allows human rights actors to address these challenges together by supporting innovative new narrative strategies and sharing successful iterations in a highly collaborative manner. Human rights actors need a permanent platform for ideation where they can develop narrative strategies and the tactics to implement them, free from the dominant narratives limiting them at home.³⁰

Our hope is that the learnings we shared in this document ignite internal reflection within the human rights field, compelling it to introspection on how it genuinely could transform from within. And as part of our commitment to our peers, we will continue to share our learnings as we move through incubation to implementation of the four selected narrative prototypes in the coming years.



The prototypes that emerged from the three narrative labs provide an alternative vision of the future of human rights action.



³⁰ For example, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights is convening human rights actors to design new narratives and communications tactics that actors committed to human rights would use in tandem.



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