

TRANSFORMING NARRATIVE WATERS

Growing the practice of
deep narrative change in
the UK

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ruth Taylor is a narrative strategist, specialising in the intersection between deep narratives and human values. She works part-time at the [Common Cause Foundation](#) in the UK and supports different narrative initiatives as a freelancer. Ruth is a trustee for [People and Planet](#), a student campaigning organisation, and writes the [In Other Words](#) newsletter, a fortnightly round up of narrative and culture change content.

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The title of this paper is taken from a quote by Bridget Antoinette Evans, CEO of the [Pop Culture Collaboration](#), which you can read in full on page 12.

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Introduction

“We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, double, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future.”

Barbara Hardy

This paper explores the practice of deep narrative change in the UK. Over the course of three months in 2021, I reviewed some of the existing literature on the subject, produced mainly in the UK and the US, and also spoke to 12 people involved in narrative work to build up an idea of the



ways in which deep narrative change is understood and practiced across the country. This paper details the findings from my research, giving particular attention to the ways in which deep narrative change can be said to be being practised in the UK today, and the barriers and opportunities that exist to growing and embedding this practice in the future.

Deep narrative practice, as a named approach, is still yet to be completely formalised, although it draws on methods that have existed in the social and environmental change space for many decades. It is important to recognise and honour from the outset that much of this work to date has been designed, developed and grown by marginalised communities across the world, shedding light on the deep narratives that govern our lives.

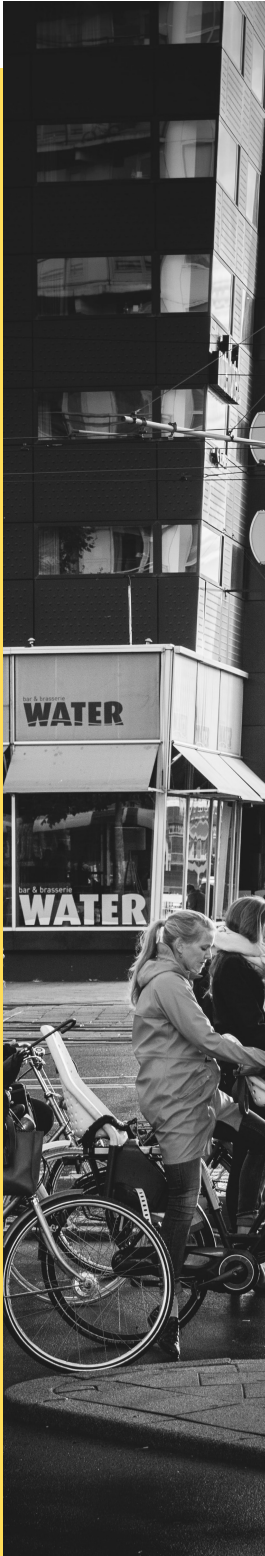
Despite varying interpretations for what exactly is included in the practice of deep narrative change, there was agreement across those I interviewed and from my wider reading, that work at the level of narrative needs to be further invested in.

Brett Davidson put it extremely well, when he wrote:

“While we might win occasional policy battles, these wins are constantly under attack and in danger of being reversed. We win some battles, but we are losing the war. One of the reasons for this is that we are often working against powerful narratives that are embedded in the overarching culture. Thus we also need to look beyond the policy sphere, as narratives are embedded in the larger culture and in institutions. They shape the way in which problems and priorities are identified; they limit the types of solutions that are viewed as acceptable and possible, and determine how certain types of people are categorized and treated.”¹

I hope this paper advocates for ways in which narrative can be utilised to help transform the cultural context in which our wider advocacy and campaigning efforts sit, and that it provides inspiration for ongoing discussion and exploration of this growing field.

1. Brett Davidson writing for *On Think Tanks* in 2016. This quote is from a longer article entitled ‘*The role of narrative change in influencing policy*’, which can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3vynUWn>



Defining deep narrative change

Over the past few years we have seen a growing number of organisations recognise the importance of adopting narrative change strategies in their work to achieve social and environmental transformation. In an increasingly developing sector in the US, numerous narrative change frameworks and methodologies have been incubated, tested and applied.² However, the UK is seemingly slightly behind in its understanding and utilisation of narrative as a cornerstone to building progressive power.

This paper considers the practice of deep narrative change. Throughout the conversations and reading conducted, a clear picture of what is understood by ‘deep narrative’ emerged. Across practitioners, deep narratives are considered those that sit *beneath* other more specific narratives - ones that we often reference when discussing particular social and environmental issues.

2. Some examples include the Narrative Initiative's [‘Four Basket’ framework](#) or ReFrame's [VISION framework](#).

The [Culture Hack Labs](#), a cooperative consultancy that works to change dominant narratives so as to create systemic change, talk of how more specific, issue-related narratives can be understood as instantiations of more deep rooted narratives.³ One interviewee used an example of narratives pertaining to refugees to explain how they understood deep narrative in comparison to narrative:

“The accumulation of lots of different individual stories of refugee or migrant boats crossing the Mediterranean, could be understood through the framing to add up to a narrative that refugees or migrants are ‘taking over’. The deep narrative though, would be something like ‘fear of the other’, which relates more directly to our view of human nature and the way the world works. Without this deep narrative being firmly embedded, the narrative of refugees and migrants taking over would not necessarily be so persuasive.”

A deep narrative, like the one mentioned in the above example, could underpin numerous social and environmental causes at the same time.

3. More can be read about the Culture Hack method in their ‘Culture Hack Method: Toolkit 1.0’, which can be found here: <https://bit.ly/2PAc66O>

‘Fear of the other’, as well as relating to narratives on migration, could also, for example, be said to underpin attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, which are transphobic or homophobic. As one interviewee commented, deep narratives can “*show their face in numerous ways*”.

As well as underlying more frequently discussed narratives, deep narratives were also talked about as being strongly embedded in our culture, due to their consistent repetition and reinforcement over time. They are often invisible to us, existing in our subconscious and so are difficult to excavate. For example, core ideas about human nature and how we relate to the world around us, could be considered deep narratives. They also act as a lens through which we assess historical events, the present moment and possible futures.⁴ Finally, there was also wide agreement that deep narratives are not just contained in written or oral stories, but that they instead permeate and are reinforced by nearly everything around us. Jee Kim, former Director of the [Narrative Initiative](#), has

4. The Narrative Initiative's website has a helpful page called ‘What is narrative?’, which goes into some of these distinctions. The page can be found here: <https://narrativeinitiative.org/what-is-narrative/>

spoken about how city planning and urban design can be considered the real-life manifestations of narratives, insofar as they mirror our values back to us.⁵ For example, if we create train stations without accessibility for people living with a disability or with reduced mobility, we are sending a clear value message and feeding into a narrative that only abled-bodied people matter.

When we consider the scope of deep narrative change, a symbiotic relationship between narrative and culture is brought to the fore. Culture, as defined by [The Culture Group](#), is understood as the “prevailing beliefs, values, and customs of a group”, as well as “a set of practices that contain, transmit, or express ideas, values, habits, and behaviours between individuals and groups”.⁶ Considering the pervasiveness of deep narratives and how they are woven, almost seamlessly, into our cultures, deep

5. Jee spoke on a brilliant episode of *The Other Story* podcast where he talked about the real-life manifestations of narrative, which can be listened to here: <https://bit.ly/3vwRnjO>

6. *The Culture Group* is a collaboration of social change experts and creative producers who joined together formally in 2010 to advance progressive change through expansive, strategic, and values-driven cultural organizing. In 2014 they published a report called ‘Making Waves: A Guide to Cultural Strategy’, which can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3u96waz>

narrative change can be considered a type of culture change. To shift deep narratives is to shift the deeply embedded values and norms that make up our culture. At the same time, culture itself is a vehicle by which narrative can be brought to life. Through cultural practice deep narratives and narratives can fall in and out of favour amongst the general public and thus, culture itself is a key site of building narrative power.

Although there seems to be wide agreement as to what is being referenced or defined through the use of the term ‘deep narrative’, throughout the research conducted during the course of this project, an interesting difference in interpretation emerged as to what constitutes narrative *change*. In the US, the distinction between deep narrative and narrative is not widely used. Two US-based interviewees commented that in their experience the separation between levels of narratives are really only of interest to academics or those with a particular focus on the theory behind narrative change practice. Narrative change as a whole, understands itself as creating long term and foundational culture change.

In the UK, however, narrative change (as distinct from *deep* narrative change) is often equated with the practice of strategic communications, such as framing. This work is, more often than not, about the pursuit of specific, often short term goals, such as policy change, supporter acquisition or even an election win.

In exploration of this contrast, I found that interviewees from the US understood narrative change as being distinctly different from strategic communications practice. Bridget Antoinette Evans, CEO of the [Pop Culture Collaboration](#) in the US, articulated this difference when she wrote that strategic communications (whereby we craft messages for dissemination), in essence amount to “squeezing drops of justice into an ocean largely composed of unjust ideas”. Narrative change on the other hand, comprises “supporting a field of practitioners to holistically transform these narrative waters”.⁷

It may be that as narrative change practice evolves and formalises in the UK, an

7. This quote can be found in an excellent report written by Bridget called ‘From Stories to Systems: Using a Narrative Systems Approach to Inform Pop Culture Narrative Change Grantmaking’, which can be read in full here: <https://bit.ly/3nzs6T1>

understanding of its relationship to cultural practice will take shape, making the distinction between ‘narrative’ and ‘deep narrative’ redundant. However, currently, whilst the language used to chronicle narrative intervention in the UK is still in flux, it feels like a distinction which is important to mark, especially when considering what a deep narrative change approach entails, which we shall turn to now.



What it means to *do* deep narrative change

From conversations with practitioners, as well as an analysis of the existing literature on the practice, I believe the work involved in deep narrative change can be encapsulated in three broad approaches. Of course, in reality, these three practices often weave into each other. We can also confidently assume that in order to progress narrative shift effectively, attention needs to be given to work at every level.

1. Understanding that we are more than the sum of our parts.

We know that deep narratives are firmly embedded within our cultural psyches and so one organisation acting alone could never amass the influence needed in order to durably shift a deep narrative towards a more progressive alternative. In recognition of this, it is important for civil society actors to consider how their work and communications are adding up to a greater



whole when accumulated together. A key element to deep narrative change practice is advocating for this way of thinking across our movements, through the design and dissemination of narrative education and training, as well as investment in in-depth, cross-cause research. Through the adoption of values-led messaging principles, a consistent narrative thread is woven between the outputs of various, diverse NGOs and grassroots groups. Without the need for overly formalised coalitions that agree slogans and develop shared branding, groups are able to coalesce around a shared vision for the future, feeding into complimentary narratives that progress their individual cause at the same time as progressing other, seemingly distinct, causes. Through this approach, organisations are able to ensure that their issue-specific work does not, unintentionally, undermine the efforts of others, but instead adds to a powerful narrative tapestry for change.

2. Finding common cause

A second understanding of a deep narrative change in practice is to work with others to identify the common cause narratives

spanning different social and environmental issues with the intention of amalgamating resource in order to shift deep narratives to the benefit of multiple causes at the same time. Finding common cause, importantly, refers to coming together to assess the *means* by which dominant deep narratives (both positive and negative) are reinforced over time. For example, the deep narrative of individualism could be said to be upheld by the practice of corporate advertising. Finding common cause could entail a group of organisations co-creating and investing in campaigning interventions to challenge advertising practice. Equally, finding common cause could encompass activities to identify and strengthen the shared narratives we want to see take root in culture in the long term. For example, organisations could campaign together for greater access to green space to strengthen the deep narrative around our interconnection with nature. It is through an understanding of deep narrative that issue-specific organisations can come to recognise that the success of their individual campaigning and advocacy largely rests on the success of being able to shift deep narratives towards more progressive alternatives.

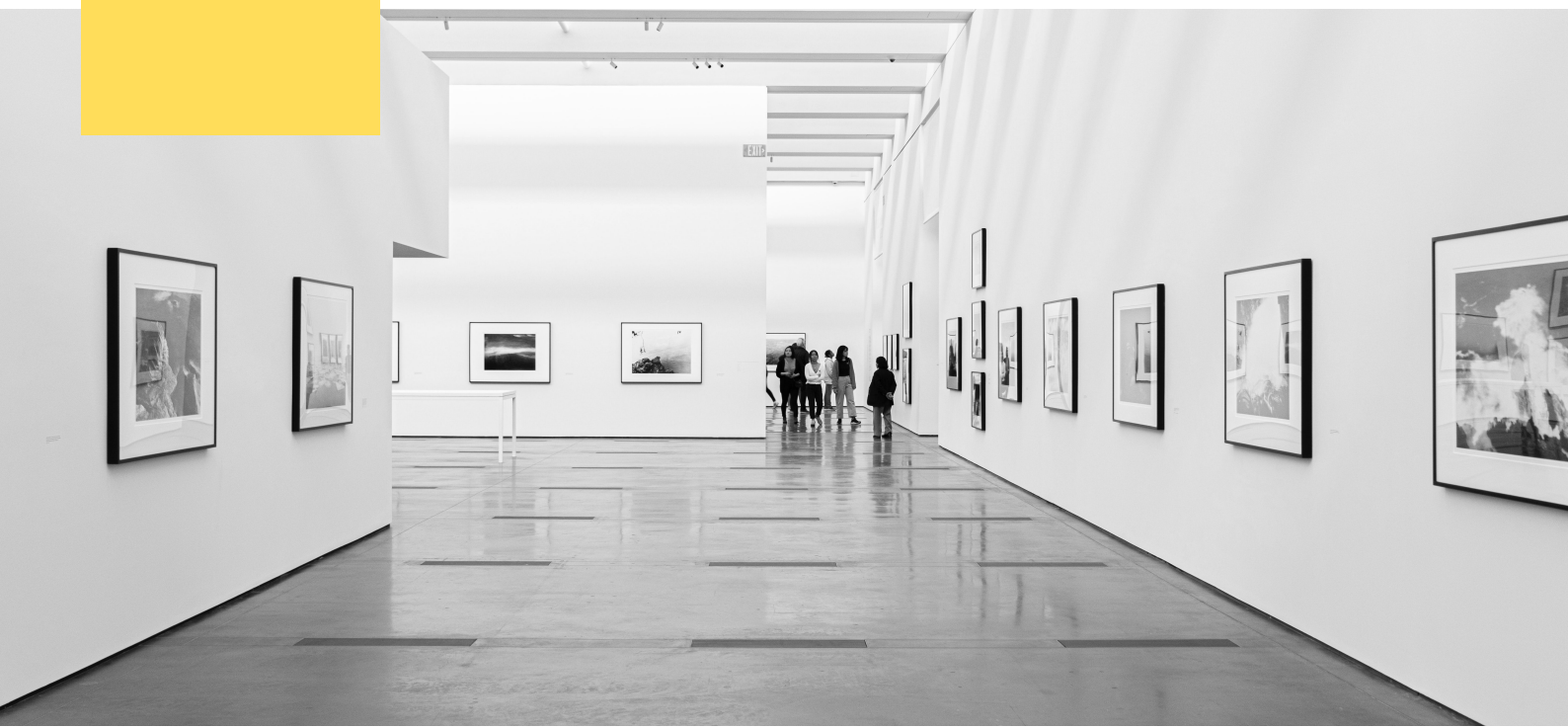
3. Designing deep narrative immersion

As well as how we identify narratives and craft narrative messaging, we also need to think about how narratives are experienced by the general public. Rashad Robinson, President of [Color of Change](#) in the US, argues that at the heart of narrative change strategy is the ability to not only get “our message out”, but to get “our message in”. Meaning that it is not enough to simply craft well-structured messages, but that we also must ensure that people are provided with opportunities to immerse themselves in our worldview and importantly, express it for themselves. It is through this practice that deep narratives become to ‘feel right’ to people, equating to a new form of common sense. Robinson argues that the deep narratives we want need to be brought to life in “social and personal spaces that aren’t explicitly political or focused on issues, but are nonetheless... venues through which people shape their most heart-held values”.⁸ Cultural experiences, be they mediated via digital mediums such as television, gaming and music, or offered in physical spaces

8. These quotes are taken from a piece Rashad wrote for *Nonprofit Quarterly* in July 2020, called “Changing Our Narrative about Narrative: The Infrastructure Required for Building Narrative Power”, which can be accessed here: <https://bit.ly/2Rca0KI>

such as museums, theatres and libraries, have huge influence on the ways that people understand themselves and the world around them. Through the design of deep narrative immersion we are able to provide people with the opportunity to glimpse what a different world could look like.

We have reflected on the various interpretations of what deep narrative change constitutes and begun exploring the three overarching practices that are most commonly employed to strengthen deep narrative change in action. Now let us turn our attention to reviewing how these practices are being utilised in the UK today.



Current practice in the UK

During the course of my research, I explored the current ways that deep narrative change is being practiced in the UK, building on the three understandings of deep narrative change in action, laid out in the previous section. Considering that narrative draws on the insights from many disciplines and does not, as yet, have an established vocabulary here in the UK, it is unclear as to whether all of the actors mentioned below would necessarily define their work in terms of deep narrative change. However, from an analysis into the activities and the approach taken in each instance, I feel confident that they could in fact be thought of as deep narrative change activities.

Understanding that we are more than the sum of our parts.

As discussed in the previous section, adopting a deep narrative mindset allows organisations and communities working for social and environmental transformation to



communicate and campaign in such a way as to constantly reinforce a shared worldview, despite not working in formalised coalitions or collaborations. By adopting key narrative principles in everyday work, advocates are able to feed into a broader chorus - still working on their specific issues and speaking in their particular tone of voice, but all the while adding to an overarching progressive narrative for change. This approach, in part, speaks to the importance of values and frames, which has been steadily growing in recognition in the UK throughout the past ten years.

There are a number of examples of ‘more than the sum of our parts’ thinking to be found in the UK at the moment. Captured below are a handful, but this list is by no means exhaustive.

Equally Ours

Equally Ours, drawing on the work of the Common Cause Foundation, Public Interest Research Centre and the Frameworks Institute, offers practical and interactive workshops for civil society organisations,



where they focus on developing and strengthening the capacity of the sector to communicate more effectively on the issues they work on. They cover key communication tactics, such as frame and message testing, audience insight research and content creation, so as to encourage take-up of a values-led approach to campaigning.

Public Interest Research Centre

PIRC are hugely well respected within the social and environmental change space for their work on framing and storytelling. Through projects such as *Framing the Economy*, *Framing Climate Justice* and *Framing Equality*, they are uncovering and bringing to light numerous deep narratives that span different issue areas. Through their accessible resources, they provide guidance for numerous campaigners and communicators on how to speak to the larger, deeper narrative change we seek, for example in their piece ‘The Narratives we Need’.⁹

9. The PIRC website houses all of the organisation’s framing research, including the blog piece ‘The Narratives we Need’, which can be found here: <https://publicinterest.org.uk/narratives-we-need/>

hope-based comms

3

Established by Thomas Coombes, hope-based comms supports organisations and communities across the world to centre hope in their campaigning and communications. Thomas also co-authored a fantastic Medium article, *From megaphone to mosaic: five principles for narrative communications*, in partnership with Alice Sachrajda, that articulately makes the case for ‘more than the sum of us’ thinking and practice.¹⁰

Common Cause Foundation

4

CCF is a not for profit that works at the intersection between culture change and social psychology. Over the past ten years, it has pioneered a new way of inspiring engagement through catalysing action that strengthens and celebrates the human values that underpin the public's care for social and environmental causes. Its work is centered on the research findings that, 1) people are more likely to support environmental and social change when they place importance on their intrinsic values -

10. ‘From megaphone to mosaic: five principles for narrative communications’, written by Alice and Thomas can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3aO5jO8>

values such as equality, curiosity, broadmindedness and community, and 2) that the majority of people in the UK place importance on these values, but are constantly having their more extrinsic values primed due to the consumerist culture in which we live. With this in mind CCF offers training and support to a range of organisations on how to develop messaging and campaigning strategies that engage with people's intrinsic values in order to rebalance the value norms in our societies.

Each of these initiatives encourage communication approaches that think beyond the scope of any individual policy or behaviour change. When the majority of organisations and grassroots groups active in the UK are speaking from a place of hope, inclusion and with an understanding of human values, we begin to create a shared deep narrative for the future that is amplified to a greater extent than if any one organisation pushed it out alone. Although, I would argue, that knowledge of values-led communications has increased significantly amongst UK-based practitioners over the past few years, we still do not see the reinforcement of the frames discussed as much as we need to if we wish to see the

positive effects of ‘more than the sum of our parts’ thinking.

Finding common cause

Becoming more than the sum of our parts is hugely important to the creation and salience of any new narratives. However, when considering deep narrative practice it does not quite go far enough. As was discussed earlier in this paper, there are numerous deep narratives that underlie a whole plethora of different social and environmental causes - many that are not related in terms of policy overlap. By identifying and working on common cause narratives - that is, the toxic narratives which currently exist and undermine progress towards justice, equity and environmental protection, or the possible alternative narratives that we wish to see develop and flourish - organisations and communities can propel forward diverse causes at the same time. Working at this level also allows us the opportunity to invest in the cultural shifts required to sustain progress in the long term.

This approach appears less active in the UK progressive sector in a formalised sense.

Although interviewees commented on how grassroots campaigning groups, often led by those with lived experience of inequality, seem to be far more intuitively drawn to this as a practice.

From interviewing those involved in the work of PIRC, it seems as though a group of common cause deep narratives have consistently been identified. In their extensive research into framing different issues, they have hit upon the same deep narratives again and again. However, because the excavation of these deep narratives are not usually the goal of the commissioning organisation or the funding community, they are often not reflected on to the extent that they could be. One interviewee offered the insight that current work to identify common cause narratives is often woven into other, more cause-specific pieces of framing work, where framing acts as a trojan horse for deeper narrative analysis.

The examples shared below I believe encompass the spirit of finding common cause. The first elevates a positive, alternative narrative; the second seeks to diminish the power of a toxic narrative, and

the third is an example of common cause from a grassroots group.

Larger Us

1 Set up by Alex Evans in 2018, Larger Us wants to see the end of ‘them-and-us’ thinking, replaced with a ‘larger us’ that incorporates all human beings, other species and future generations. Its work encourages the take up of a ‘larger us’ narrative by diverse organisations working on social and environmental change, and its principles have been incorporated into various messaging houses for the sector in the past year. The ‘larger us’ narrative is in direct opposition to the well-embedded ‘them-and-us’ deep narrative, which influences many causes, from refugee rights to economic reform.

AdFree Cities

2 AdFree Cities is a network of activist groups across the UK who are concerned about the effects of corporate advertising on individual, community and planetary wellbeing. They campaign to remove corporate advertising in communities and replace it with messages that celebrate

connection, creativity and nature. This is an example of people identifying common cause and working together to counter an activity, which ultimately reinforces deep narratives of individualism, growth, consumption and competition.

Sisters Uncut

Sisters Uncut are an intersectional feminist direct-action collective. They ‘campaign for better domestic violence services that recognise the particular experiences and needs of women of all backgrounds’. Yet, a look at their social media channels and the actions that they have been involved in organising or amplifying, go far beyond that of domestic violence. They have an acute understanding of the common cause narratives that sit beneath their own work and that of partner groups campaigning for diverse issues such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller rights, police abolition and immigration reform.

Where common cause narratives are identified - be they supportive of the future we want, or destructive to it - advocates should be encouraged and supported to work together to bring about a shift.

Designing deep narrative immersion through culture

We know from current research into how deep narratives become embedded in culture, that immersion is of vital importance. In other words, people have to *experience* a new deep narrative in numerous ways in their day to day lives before it begins to ‘feel right’ and they begin to draw on it to help make sense of the world around them.

Similarly to finding common cause, this approach seems to exist in relatively small pockets of the UK progressive sector. A full analysis into the activity of the culture sector at large fell outside the scope of this particular project, but this could bring to light other interesting examples of deep narrative immersion in practice.

New Brave World

1 A [recent report](#) written by Alice Sachrajda and Marzena Zukowska, supported by Unbound Philanthropy, makes the case for investing in pop culture for social change, as a key vehicle for building narrative salience. We know from historical examples that

television, music and film, as well as more modern mediums such as podcasting and gaming, have huge potential to rebalance societal values and shift norms. This report showcases a number of organisations bridging the gap between activism and pop culture in order to bring about greater narrative and deep narrative change.

Global Action Plan

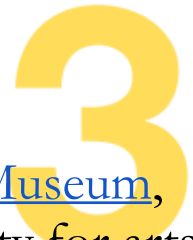
GAP is an environmental charity based in the UK, that recently published a [report](#) exploring the ways in which young people perceive the values of their fellow citizens. Their work has been heavily influenced by research conducted by the Common Cause Foundation into the social phenomenon known as the ‘perception gap’ - the gap between what UK citizens *actually* value and what UK citizens *believe* that a typical British person values - and how our own behaviours and attitudes are affected due to the assumptions we make about the values of others. GAP’s research has found that the majority of young people significantly underestimate the care that their peers feel

11. More about the ‘perception gap’ can be found in this Common Cause Foundation report from 2016: <https://bit.ly/330kX4P>

for the environment, and that this subsequently influences them to reduce their engagement with environmental action. GAP are now working with schools and educators to create opportunities for students to discuss and act on their values publicly, helping to tackle the deep narrative that human beings are typically self-interested and replace this, through experience, with a deep narrative of care and compassion.

Common Cause Foundation

In a year-long collaboration with [Manchester Museum](#) and [Happy Museum](#), CCF brought to life the opportunity for arts and cultural organisations to engage intrinsic, shared values in their community in order to help evoke positive social and environmental action. It is now working with Greater Manchester Combined Authority and a cohort of 14 arts and cultural organisations across the city region to magnify this approach further. As key sites of cultural production and immersion, physical spaces such as museums, libraries, galleries and other arts venues, can enliven new narratives through the experience they offer their audiences.



The examples shared here offer a glimpse into the ways in which deep narrative change could be said to be active in the UK currently. Now let us turn to considering the barriers which prevent this practice from growing further.

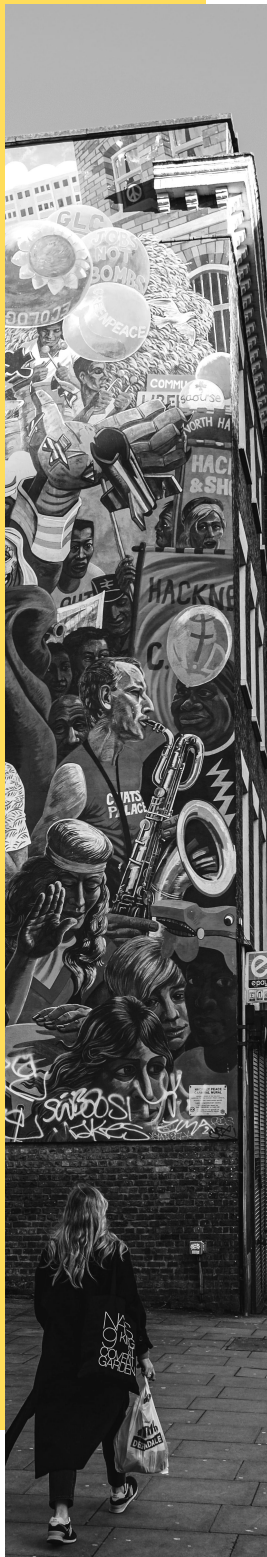


Barriers to deep narrative change practice

In my reading and conversations with practitioners, a number of challenges to the practice of deep narrative change were highlighted. I have captured them below, although I am sure with further research more would come to light.

1. The space for deep narrative change work in the UK is largely occupied by white, middle-class, university educated, professionalised NGO staff.

The deep narrative change work taking place in the US by comparison is truly embedded in movements for liberation. For example, Color of Change, the Pop Culture Collaborative, Narrative Initiative and ReFrame, four of the major narrative actors in the US, are all led by people of colour and their work cannot be separated from the energy, activism and wisdom found in the Black Lives Matter movement, the anti-gun movement and



other movements for change.

In the UK, narrative work often operates outside of movements, occasionally consulting people with direct experience of the issues being discussed, but rarely adequately resourcing these groups for them to lead. One interviewee commented that this barrier is “a massive failing and flaw in the whole project, because, as we know, narrative is not a project of ‘words’. It’s a project of meaning, culture and resonance, and is impossible to achieve authentically without changing who holds the strategic power in the space”.

We cannot hope to discover, develop or effectively build salience for alternative deep narratives, should the majority of practitioners around the table be those least likely to have had direct experience of the damage caused by current toxic deep narratives, and in some instances to have actually benefited from them. With this in mind, a key question going forward in growing the practice of deep narrative change is who is getting resourced to do this work and how does this affect the deep narratives being championed?

2. Organisations are not currently set up to invest in deep narrative change - a reality reinforced by our current funding model.

Deep narrative change requires investment of resources over a sustained period of time. However, current funding mechanisms tend to favour more incremental policy change work, supporting an initiative as a one-off or over a relatively short period of time before requiring the organisation to re-apply for resourcing.

One of the main concerns expressed with regards to investing in narrative change practice is that it is not an adequate response to the very urgent challenges that we face in the here and now. In other words it is not a quick enough fix. However, I would argue that the consistent funding that has been poured into more incremental campaigning approaches over the last thirty years has likewise not resulted in the rapid, meaningful and durable change we require, despite intermittent wins. If it had, we would be substantially closer to solving challenges such as inequality and climate change.

One interviewee articulated this as civil society becoming “locked in a system where futile but tangible change is rated above that of meaningful change”. Additionally, I would dispute the claim that narrative and deep narrative change practice do not elicit short term effects, as it *can* help to reshape opinions that are ultimately beneficial to more immediate campaigning efforts. Due to the current limitations of securing sustainable investment in deep narrative change work, where it is conducted in the UK today, it is often snuck into other bits of funded work, most notably that of framing.

Another implication of funders being geared more towards supporting immediate, measurable activity is that organisations find it difficult to set aside time to think about the possible narrative inflection moments on the horizon that they may be able to influence in partnership with others. For example, the death of the Duke of Edinburgh was an event the progressive sector knew would happen at some point in the near future and that it would be a cultural moment to influence dominant narratives. However, little to no preparation was done by narrative change practitioners

to consider how best to utilise the moment to strengthen deep narratives of care, compassion and unity. Not being able to invest in future narrative strategy means that the opportunity is left open for current dominant narratives to under-sit the sense-making of a particular moment.

3. Narrative change is often understood as ‘presence’ not ‘power’.

Borrowing a term from Rashad Robinson, our understanding of narrative needs to be expanded from thinking solely about building ‘presence’ (getting our stories heard in more places) to building ‘power’ (bringing to life our values in the real world). As discussed in the initial section of this paper, currently the popular interpretation of narrative change in the UK is one based on communication tactics - trying to get our frames, campaigns and stories to create impact in the short term in the hope that this will add up to greater change. These tactics are rarely situated in longer-term narrative strategy, which means that although they may lead to ‘awakenings’ for a small number of people, they can’t generate durable shifts in the values and norms which define our culture and

and subsequently the narratives through which we make sense of the world. This reflects a fundamental difference in theories of change - one sees change as achieved via incremental actions that add up to something larger, whilst the other places priority in deep rooted culture change to lead to the scale of transformation we seek. This difference in understanding as to what amounts to narrative change causes challenges in terms of alignment, collaboration and seeking long-term funding. It leads practitioners to often be pulling in opposite directions.

4. The siloed nature in which NGOs operate.

Erin Potts, a cultural strategist based in the US, writes that we need to “stop talking about issues in order to win on issues”, which at first glance appears to be an oxymoron.¹² The point she is making relates to the approach of finding common cause; that toxic narratives, based on deeply rooted values and norms, are fundamental to a whole swathe of social and environmental

12. Erin published a blog on medium entitled “Five Ideas on Strategies and Tactics for Cultural Change”, which can be read here: <https://bit.ly/3eKUZyq>

issues and that in order to progress change in the singular, we need to shift the foundations on which they sit. In practice this is made extremely difficult due to the way in which we have structured civil society, with different organisations focusing on a defined issue area. Despite the people who make up organisations usually feeling motivated across broad causes, our institutions themselves are confined to only ever working or commenting on issues which sit firmly within their charitable objectives. This separation has made cross-cause collaboration difficult to achieve, due to competition for funding, influence and airtime. Interviewees with extensive experience of narrative research commented that when framing or narrative guidance is developed, it tends to only attract the attention of organisations with an interest in the specific issue being spotlighted. This means we, as a progressive movement, rarely get to identify and consider the underlying deep narratives which span different causes and appear again and again in the narrative literature. We're not able to 'stop talking about issues', as this is really all we are set up to explore at the moment.

5. Two competing interpretations of values-led change.

Over the past ten years there has been recognition that research into human values coming out of the field of social psychology can play a hugely important role in shaping and strengthening social and environmental interventions. However, two different ideas of what values-led change entails, both drawing on the work of psychologist Shalom Schwartz, have developed in the UK. One interpretation (advocated most prominently by the Common Cause Foundation and PIRC) offers that, through our communications and campaigns, we should appeal to people's intrinsic values (things like equality, environmental protection, community etc) in order to motivate them to engage in a particular pro-environmental or pro-social behaviour. The idea being that values act like muscles and so the more you engage intrinsic values, the stronger they become and the more likely they are to be drawn on by an individual in future when making decisions. The second interpretation (advocated most prominently by the campaign consultant, Chris Rose, and marketing strategist, Pat Dade) argues that

you should segment your audience by the values they are considered to hold and thus appeal to those values directly in your communications, even if those values are more extrinsic in nature (such as public image, wealth or social power).

A key source of disagreement between the two approaches is that the first understands human beings as being able to draw on all the values available to us - both intrinsic and extrinsic - whereas the second approach understands human beings as situating in a particular group of values depending on their needs. Much has been written about the distinction between the two approaches, including a briefing paper interviewing leading social psychologists from across the world, of which Shalom Schwartz himself was one.¹³ The peer-reviewed literature on the subject falls heavily in favour of the Common Cause approach and yet, we do continue to see strategic communications resources which advocate for the adoption of a 'values-matching' strategy, whereby practitioners are encouraged to message in such a way as to affirm and engage the

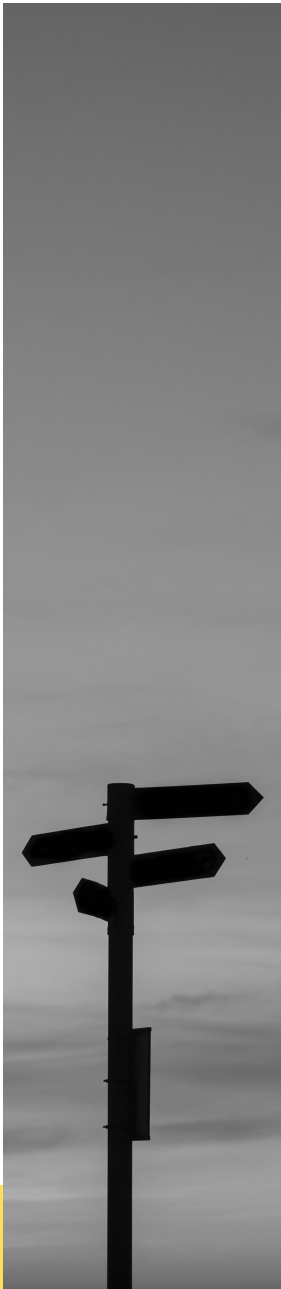
13. The Common Cause Foundation wrote and published the briefing paper in 2011, interviewing eight prominent psychologists about the difference of approach. The briefing paper can be read in full here: <https://bit.ly/3gQjPZy>

values deemed more important to their audience, even if they can be considered extrinsic.

We know that values are “ultimately expressed through narratives, messages and stories that we hear every day” and thus play a fundamental role in deep narrative creation.¹⁴ They are also closely linked with our understanding of human nature. These competing interpretations of how values should be primed in our communications and wider work pose a problem to collective narrative practice amongst progressive actors. If some practitioners are priming intrinsic values and others extrinsic they are also advocating for different deep narratives.



14. This quote is taken from the ‘Transforming the Transition’ report released by the Culture Hack Labs in early 2021. The full report can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3t2E5JV>



Recommendations

So far throughout this paper, attention has been given to the understanding and practice of deep narrative change in the UK today. The case has been made for why deep narrative change as an approach is so important to helping to give rise to the equitable, just and sustainable world we so desperately seek. The final part of this paper, to which we now turn, presents a series of eight recommendations to help strengthen and grow the practice of deep narrative change over the coming years. These recommendations have been developed in conversation with narrative practitioners and in reflection of the existing literature on the topic.

- 1 Build diversity in the deep narrative space, by resourcing those introducing new transformative narratives.**

Alternative deep narratives are very often born out of political struggle, developed

and fought for by marginalised communities with firsthand experience of the injustices that are fuelled by toxic, dominant narratives. It is vital that a fundamental aspect of narrative change work be to properly resource those already seeking the deep narrative shifts that the world requires in order to flourish. In the words of one interviewee, funders need to “divest from the usual suspects”, and actively encourage applications from people from different backgrounds, classes and movements. By offering training and leadership programmes, alongside proper resourcing, people and communities with direct experience of the harmful and complex repercussions of current deep narratives, are able to step into existing narrative space and lead. This is hugely important for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the very purpose of narrative change strategy is to build power for communities that have for so long been denied voice and influence, replacing the existing deep narratives that determine who is and is not valuable, with new models of thinking that centre equality. Narrative change as a practice lacks legitimacy if it does not centre

those most affected.

Secondly, the process of deep narrative change needs to model the power shift we are wanting to see at large across global society. If we are perpetuating existing power structures and hierarchies within our narrative work, we will not be able to ensure the richness of the new narratives we are creating.¹⁵

One example of a tangible way to begin investing in a more diverse narrative space is to make the foundational work of a narrative project more widely accessible. Methods such as framing, audience insight research and language analysis are currently extremely expensive, leading to the exclusion of many smaller, grassroots organisations. Larger NGOs and/or funders could create subsidised opportunities for grassroots groups to conduct their own narrative research, or convene a digital space whereby this research could be collated and made freely available.

15. See PIRC staff member Elena Blackmore's blog called 'Narrative is Fractal' for more exploration of this requirement: <https://publicinterest.org.uk/narrative-is-fractal/>

One example of current practice to increase accessibility can be seen in PIRC's policy to pay participants from grassroots groups to be involved in framing projects.

2 Build allegiance and trust amongst narrative practitioners.

We know that collaboration and alignment are strengthened within a group should those involved feel connected to others through positive and affirming interactions. A key principle within community organising is the building of allegiance and trust between actors, which I believe also applies to the narrative space. Narrative as an approach is multi-dimensional and so the spaces we create should include a diverse range of people, drawing on different experiences, knowledge bases and expertise. In order to ensure effective aligned work, space needs to be dedicated for those involved to get to know one another and co-create shared language and vision. Creating trust between practitioners can also allow for exploration of differing views as they arise. For example, opportunities for

open discussion could help to overcome the competing interpretations of values engagement.

This collectivity, in and of itself, is a way of bringing to life a new deep narrative of altruism, reciprocity and solidarity, in the face of our current deep narrative that affirms people are inherently self interested. A recent project, funded by Unbound Philanthropy and delivered by myself, Alice Sachrajda and Thomas Coombes looked at ways of building greater reciprocity amongst organisations in the migration sector. It recognised that in order to build narrative salience, supportive partners must share each other's stories and content, but that this is made more likely should those partners feel a sense of affinity to one another. The Narrative Avengers group, convened by Phoebe Tickell, is also a great space for building allegiance and trust. Increased, intentional support for growing these types of initiatives would help connect those involved in narratives, seeding the possibility for greater synergy in future.

Importantly, efforts to build trust must also

be coupled with opportunities to recognise and understand the power dynamics that exist amongst narrative practitioners. We are each affected differently by the systems sustained through the perpetuation of the deep narratives we are exploring, meaning that together we can surface a multitude of rich offerings, but *only* when those practitioners currently more likely to be resourced and have their efforts celebrated in the mainstream begin to take a step back. Trusting environments must be built whereby privilege can be spotlighted and held accountable, allowing those with direct experience to lead authentically. As one interviewee discerningly pointed out: “there is a false equivalence in the idea that we ‘all just need to support each other’ in the same way as there is in the statement ‘all lives matter’”. Trust alone is not enough. It must act as the foundation for a dynamic narrative landscape, whereby discussions of power and its tendency to replicate the status quo are not shied away from, but become seen as a vital element of deep narrative change.

3 Adjust our understanding of what is needed to measure impact.

As in any change work, monitoring and evaluation is important to assess whether the strategy and tactics being applied are leading to the desired outcomes. Deep narrative change practice, by its very nature, tends to be far more protracted than more traditional campaigning interventions. By investing in the development of frameworks to support practitioners to measure deep narrative change, in the short as well as the long term, we would not only encourage the capture of comparable data, but would build the confidence of other actors and funders in the necessity of this approach. We have a lot to learn from practitioners and researchers in the US who have a more established narrative change sector, considering the ways in which deep narratives both shift and sustain wider culture.

With this being said, the practice of deep narrative change could be propelled forward considerably through a fundamental change

in the way we understand success. George Lakoff, in his seminal book *‘Don’t Think of an Elephant’* discusses how neoconservatives in the US were able to change deep narratives over the course of only a few decades, leading to monumental and entrenched effects on our culture and systems. He writes about how right-wing think tanks and advocacy bodies are not just well-funded, but that they *know* they will continue to receive no-strings-attached funding year on year. This he compares to progressive funding models, that are more managerial in scope, investing thinly over a greater number of actors. He argues that this model requires organisations to adopt a very narrow focus in their activities, developing standalone ‘projects’ which are measurable, instead of investing in ‘areas of work’. Lakoff concludes that progressives would do well to “think in terms of large moral goals, not in terms of programs for their own sake”. In other words, we should revise our understanding of success away from measurable project aims and towards a more radical transformation of the rules of the game.

Moving away from an occupation with

tangible metrics and becoming more comfortable with investing in the success of the progressive moral system as a whole could initially be considered a radical change in funding practice. However, I would argue that the change inhabits a deep narrative shift in and of itself - moving from a Western-centric, capitalist intentness on rationality and assessment, towards a more human-centred, embodied perception. If we are serious about stimulating deep-rooted change at the level of culture, there seems to me to be a mindset shift needed within the thinking of practitioners and funders alike, regarding our overall ambitions and the steps we believe will get us there.

4 **Make the argument to funders that sustained investment is vital.**

Leading on closely from the previous recommendation, funders have a pivotal role to play in bringing about deep narrative change. We know that deep narrative change does not often happen quickly. It requires investment over a span of years to

truly take effect. This level of investment often feels very risky, especially when we feel the urgency of the challenges faced by the world everyday. However, it is important to reflect on the fact that our current focus on short-term, incremental action has not resulted in widespread change at the scale that we require despite being heavily invested in over the past few decades. Many are beginning to feel that a more culturally embedded approach would ultimately be more successful and long-lasting.

In terms of supporting sustained investment, we could take inspiration from the Pop Culture Collaborative in the US, which leads learning opportunities for funders on the practice of culture and narrative shift. They also bring funders together in order to pool resourcing and fund via coalition. This allows for bigger and more stable pots of funding for practitioners to draw on over sustained periods of time. As well as supporting new funder practices when it comes to deep narrative change, funders could also be supported to implement measures in their reporting processes with grantees to track narrative activities and movement-generous

behaviours. There are already a number of organisations active in the UK that could provide this type of support and facilitation to funders, including those already mentioned in this paper.

5 Support greater narrative literacy.

Throughout this paper the UK progressive sector's dual understanding of what narrative change comprises has been explored. By supporting the development of greater narrative literacy amongst practitioners (work that constitutes the core activity of PIRC) a new approach to change could take root, one where we can move beyond simply considering our communication outputs and messaging tactics, and instead develop a shared understanding of the challenges faced by society today, as well as the new narratives needed to nourish more life-affirming values and norms. Narrative literacy should be considered evolving as new frameworks and tools are developed and tested. We

should also not be afraid to look backwards and situate current narrative interventions in broader narrative history, learning from our recent activist-ancestors about the ways in which narratives and deep narratives have progressed and changed over time. This knowledge could help situate work today in the ever-expanding narrative trajectory, emphasising the achievability of deep narrative transformation in order to encourage more practitioners and funders to recognise the power that this approach holds.

As discussed in this paper's first recommendation, another key aspect of establishing greater narrative literacy would be to learn directly from communities and activist groups with direct experience of the injustices caused and sustained by toxic narratives. Only through their leadership can new, authentic deep narratives, which adequately address such injustices, be developed and made salient. In practical terms, and in reflection of an earlier recommendation to build allegiance and trust between practitioners, one way to build narrative literacy may be to invest in the creation of learning circles. In this

environment, which centres peer-to-peer sharing and learning, deeper relationships can form and innovation is encouraged and celebrated.

6 Design opportunities to identify and work on common cause.

Collaboration is somewhat of a buzzword in the social and environmental movements, but when it comes to narrative change we know that no one organisation is capable of shifting a narrative on their own, especially narratives deeply rooted in our culture. By working together we're able to build exponentially more power to affect narrative progression than by acting as singular organisations. As discussed elsewhere in this paper, numerous deep narratives can be said to underpin diverse social and environmental issues. Through creating spaces for people representing different causes to come together, energy, resources and influence can be pooled to both limit the influence of dangerous deep narratives and build the power of more progressive alternatives. Whether through further

research to identify common cause narratives, or a formalised programme of work embedded in an existing organisation, such as the New Economy Organisers Network or PIRC, advancing and normalising working in coalition will be vital to changing deep narratives over the long term.

7 Build the technological infrastructure necessary to identify opportunities for deep narrative change

Narrative change does not exist in a vacuum and as such is not in the full control of practitioners. In order to be effective, coalitions of organisations need to be able to recognise moments where narrative influence is possible. Technological methods such as Big Listening can provide quantitative monitoring of key words and phrases in public communications over a set period of time. This helps practitioners to identify shifts in cultural narratives and identify possible trends in order to plan strategic interventions. The Narrative

Initiative in the US, as well as documenting some of the existing technological platforms available to narrative practitioners, also offers a robust definition of narrative technology:

“Narrative Technology encompasses the tools, platforms, and infrastructure that can be used to assist and accelerate the shifting and/or maintenance of dominant narratives. This includes technologies that can baseline, listen to, test, and respond to media and online discourse at scale.”¹⁶

When considering the possibilities of narrative tech it is important to bear in mind that many of the existing tools are highly expensive and are often run by companies that do not themselves prioritise the values on which we wish to build new deep narratives. It may sit more comfortably with our wider work to invest in bringing these skills in-house, ensuring a narrative organisation is able to offer services, such as Big Listening, to partners across the sector. If resourcing allowed, pooling insight and

16. More on narrative infrastructure can be found in this blog, called ‘Narrative Tech: Categories, needs and what’s next’ published by the Narrative Initiative in 2019: <https://bit.ly/3eGnEhx>

knowledge in an accessible narrative digital dashboard would create the possibility of more organisations and movements being able to increase their impact at the same time without the need for duplicate platforms and processes harvesting the same data.


8 **Develop the capacity and confidence of cultural leaders to lead narrative interventions.**

In a medium article about cultural strategy, the team at [A More Perfect Story](#) point out the obvious, but easily forgotten truth, that “the nonprofit world does not have an exclusive relationship with justice”.¹⁷ When we think about what is needed in order to durably shift deep narratives, it is clear that we need everyone who works to shape and sustain the culture in which we live to be engaged.


17. Erin Potts offers this astute observation in a medium blog called ‘A Conversation about Cultural Strategy’, which can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3aObf9S>

As discussed at the beginning of this paper, as well as developing a coherent deep narrative that is built on intrinsic values, we must invest in ensuring this narrative can be internalised and made ‘common sense’ by as many people as possible. To do this is to create deep and immersive experiences that bring a narrative to life, ensuring that people are able to encounter this living narrative in multiple places and in multiple ways throughout their day to day. Although NGOs and other progressive actors can definitely play an important role in generating narrative immersion, other culture makers tend to have far greater reach amongst the public. In *New Brave World*, the recent report by Alice Sachrajda and Marzena Zukowska analysing the potential of pop culture to generate social change, a cultural narratives fellowship scheme was recommended to offer cultural strategists an opportunity to “explore and research how narratives shape and influence culture”. Participants I interviewed for the purposes of this project wholeheartedly agreed with this suggestion.

In addition, a similar scheme offered to those working in more traditional cultural



settings that situate around a physical space (libraries, theatres, museums, galleries, community centres etc) could be developed. The Common Cause Foundation has found particular success working with cultural partners based in a specific region of the UK, leading to work not only tapping into national deep narratives, but also more localised values and norms. The combination of focusing both on pop culture and more traditional forms of cultural immersion would extend narrative reach even further.



Concluding thoughts

When we reflect on the monumental challenges that exist in today's world, it is clear that we must go beyond our single-issue campaigns and dig into the very heart of how human beings understand themselves and their relationship with our living world. To imagine a new way of being requires us to dispatch with the old narratives that anchor us to deep-rooted ideas of individualism, separatism and domination over the natural world, and to listen to and amplify alternative deep narratives that have often long been upheld by indigenous and marginalised communities. It is only through a cultural rebirth that champions our intrinsic values that human beings will have a chance of reshaping the systems that define our lives, the lives of all other living beings on our shared planet and the wellbeing of future generations.



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