

Nonprofits & NGOs

Using Story to Change Systems

We need to develop new processes of collective storytelling across sectors to navigate turbulent times and foster systems change.

By [Ella Saltmarshe](#) | Feb. 20, 2018

In Liverpool, an exhausted homeless shelter worker puts her head in her hands at the end of another long day. The system she works in is failing the people it is supposed to serve, and she feels powerless to change it.

In Qatar, a group of migrant workers toil under a blazing sun, building the new stadium for the World Cup. Soon they will return to a filthy, overcrowded labor camp for a few hours rest. Subjected to forced labor, they are dying in record numbers.

In Singapore, a group of scientists, policymakers, and NGOs try to understand how to build a resilient agricultural system. They struggle to agree on anything.

Each of these bleak scenarios illustrates the role of story in changing a system. Stories make, prop up, and bring down systems. Stories shape how we understand the world, our place in it, and our ability to change it.

Humans **have always used stories** to make sense out of our chaotic world. When our ancestors had to kill animals they felt were kindred spirits to survive, they created myths to help them come to terms with it. When they invented agriculture, they created myths that glorified graft and highlighted the seasonal nature of existence. When they began to settle, humans created myths imbuing cities with transcendence. As Yuval Noah Harari describes in his book ***Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind***, story went on to play a vital role in building all subsequent civilizations.

Fast-forward to the volatile times we live in today, where people increasingly recognize that tackling problems like climate change, inequality, and health care **requires a systems approach**. The work of systems change involves *seeing* systemically—looking at the elements, interconnections, and wider

purposes of systems—and *acting* systemically. Story plays a vital role in helping us do both of these things.

Story has many different qualities that make it useful for the work of systems change. It's a direct route to our emotions, and therefore important to decision-making. It creates meaning out of patterns. It coheres communities. It engenders empathy across difference. It enables the possible to feel probable in ways our rational minds can't comprehend. When it comes to changing the values, mindsets, rules, and goals of a system, story is foundational.



STORY AS LIGHT



STORY AS GLUE



STORY AS WEB

This article is a field guide to three qualities of story and narrative that all sectors can use to change systems: story as light, as glue, and as web.

All sectors can use these qualities of story and narrative to change systems. (Images by Irene Palacio)

STORY AS LIGHT

Story helps illuminate the past, present, and future, thus lighting up the paths of change. Specifically, it:

1. Highlights the fault lines in a system and makes visceral cases for change.
2. Illuminates outliers and builds a cohering narrative around their work.
3. Shines a light on visions of the future that change the way people act in the present.

Highlighting the fault lines

“So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war.”

—Abraham Lincoln to Harriet Beecher Stowe

When *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was first published in 1854, it outsold that year's Bible sales. Printing presses stayed open 24 hours a day to keep up with public demand for the book that is often called “the first bestseller.” Written by abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, its emotional portrayal of the cruelty of slavery in the United States roused abolitionist support in the North and galvanized the South to fiercely defend it, leading to Lincoln's legendary (if unverified) comment in the midst of the Civil War. While the book's treatment of race has *since come under fire*, its systemic significance is incontrovertible.

Today, initiatives like *The Guardian's* **Modern-day Slavery in Focus** project use personal stories to communicate systemic issues to mass audiences, often leading directly to change. Take the story they broke in September 2013 about **the role of slave labor in World Cup construction** in Qatar. Journalists revealed how migrant workers, trapped into forced labor, were dying in unprecedented numbers. They were working long hours in temperatures of up to 122 degrees Fahrenheit, without access to drinking water, and then being crammed into filthy, overcrowded labor camps.



The Guardian's Modern-day Slavery in Focus project communicates systemic issues to mass audiences, often leading directly to change. (Flickr)

After the story broke, FIFA Chief Sepp Blatter raised the issue with the Emir of Qatar, and the country promised to reform its labor laws. The Modern-day Slavery team stayed on the story, a wider campaign developed, and in March 2016, the United Nations issued a warning that gave Qatar 12 months to end migrant worker slavery. In late 2017, the Qatari government committed to amending the law to help stop labor exploitation. Although there is still a long way to go when it comes to ending slave labor in Qatar,

it is clear that the illuminating power of stories can galvanize movements for systemic change.

The Modern-day Slavery Project is systemic in that its stories connect individual experiences to the factors responsible for the problems and proposed solutions. All too often, in an effort to humanize issues, advocates use only close-up portraits when telling stories. While these highly personal stories are often compelling, they don't encourage people to think systemically about public solutions. The **FrameWorks Institute** has produced **a comprehensive guide** on using a wide-angle lens to tell stories for social change. The systems approach means connecting personal stories with the answers to questions like: What are the conditions responsible for the problem? What is the impact on wider society? Is there a need to change laws, policies, and programs? Who is working to change this? What are the opportunities for collective engagement?

The rise of interactive storytelling is enabling systemic storytelling. Medium's "**Ghost Boat**" story wove together the systemic and personal, involving readers in a quest to find out what happened to a boat carrying 243 refugees that went missing in the Mediterranean. *The New York Times'* "**10 Years After Katrina**" tells a rich, systemic story tracking the ways New Orleans has changed since the catastrophic storm. *ProPublica's* award-winning, interactive "**Insult to Injury**," which covered workers' compensation benefits, resulted in new legislation. Wide-angled approaches enable the public to attribute responsibility more accurately and to think more systemically about solutions.

Technology is enabling more and more participatory storytelling in this space. In New Zealand, the Facebook Group **We Are Beneficiaries** is shining a light on cracks in the welfare system. It offers a platform for artists who have received public benefits to draw a picture of themselves and write short stories about their experience with the welfare system. The online campaign went viral and spread to billboards across the country, sparking a national conversation.

Illuminating the outliers

“The future is already here—it’s just not very evenly distributed.”

—William Gibson

Supporting niches of innovation is another important part of systems change. This not only affects the elements in a system, but also can transform the nature of the relationships in a system and ultimately its purpose.

A core part of this work involves illuminating outliers: the mavericks, pioneers, and intrapreneurs who are already trying to make change happen. Story plays two important roles here. First, systems changers can increase the profile and impact of outliers by amplifying their stories. Second, they can use story to create unifying narratives of change, adding momentum to innovative movements.

At **The Comms Lab**, a systems change organization focused on the advertising industry, identifying and connecting niches of innovation is a core part of our strategy. We do this by **mapping the “green shoots” of change** happening across the industry, **producing briefings** with stories of how the industry is embracing purpose, **publishing reports** mapping stories of cause-related innovation, and **hosting events** where industry innovators share their stories of change. We use individual stories to build evidence of what we call “a wave of purpose disruption.” We explain how this wave is sweeping the industry, drawing analogies between it and previous waves of change like globalization and digitalization. This work of connecting the dots and creating a bigger narrative around them is critical to building a movement of change within the industry.

Illuminating and amplifying outliers is central to many other systemic initiatives. The **Finance Innovation Lab**, for example, states that it builds awareness of alternative models and ideas emerging in finance, while **Tech for Good Global** shines a spotlight on technology used for social impact.

Shining a light on the future

“It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves.”

—William Shakespeare

Systems change can involve painting compelling visions of alternative futures. We can use story to create immersive scenarios of the future that engage people on an emotional and intellectual level. This work can make the possible feel more probable, bring new perspectives that challenge the goals and mindsets of a system, and enable the transformation of rules and processes.

Stories of the future—*Utopia*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, *Blade Runner*, and others—have entertained us for hundreds of years. Increasingly, people are trying to use this imaginative capacity of story to create visions of the future that change how people act in the present. Take *Carnage*, a recent, feature-length, BBC mockumentary about veganism by comedian Simon Amstell. It is set in 2067, in a world where meat, eggs, and dairy are outlawed, and teenagers weep at the thought of their grandparents’ “carnist” pasts. *The Independent* newspaper’s TV reviewer wrote, “I’m not a vegan, but after watching *Carnage*, I’m even more certain that I should be,” while another critic wrote that the show made “veganism seem more optimistic than sanctimonious.”

Within the field of systems change, practitioners are increasingly inspired by such examples. Charlene Collinson from the sustainability nonprofit *Forum for the Future* has spent years thinking about story’s role in helping people realize that their present actions will shape the future. “A lot of scenarios are dry and normative,” Collinson said in an interview. “I’m interested in how we can use robust futures data to create more immersive experiences. Something happens when people connect emotionally and suddenly realize that this is about their children.”

Borrowing techniques from theater, Collinson uses components of story, such as archetypes and imagery, to help participants create visceral futures. For example, she worked with theater pioneer Annette Mees, who created an immersive experience for an agriculture conference in Singapore, simulating a scenario where attendees were on the 2030 Nobel Prize Committee. Collinson explained how the playfulness of the process enabled people to lose the inhibitions that could stop them from imagining.

Combining futures thinking and creativity is a growing area; the 2017 *Oxford Futures Forum* focused on marrying the theory and practice of scenario planning with art, literature, design, and transmedia. Organizers felt this would both bring new audiences to scenario work and galvanize them to act in new ways.

STORY AS GLUE

Story is also a tool for building community through empathy and coherence. It enables people to connect across difference and to generate narratives that hold together groups, organizations, and movements.

Building community through empathy

“We are lonesome animals. We spend all of our life trying to be less lonesome. One of our ancient methods is to tell a story begging the listener to say—and to feel—‘yes, that is the way it is, or at least that’s the way I feel it. You’re not as alone as you thought.’”

—John Steinbeck

Story engenders empathy. It is the best tool we have for understanding what it must feel like to be someone else. Systems change frequently involves collaboration across difference, bringing together actors with very different positions to re-envision the goals of a system and to change it. The empathetic quality of story is vital here, when bringing together groups such as commercial fisheries executives and environmental activists, or bankers and fair-finance campaigners. It enables very different people to discover their shared values and connect to each other as humans, rather than as professionals. “Systems change is deeply personal and involves thinking about the glasses you’re given when born,” says Rachel Sinha, founder of **Systems Studio**, a systems change consultancy. “To change systems, you need to change your glasses and see the world from other people’s perspectives. Story helps you do this.”

Sharing individual stories about a system can help people develop new perspectives on the system they share, as veteran systems practitioner David Stroh said in an interview. “It’s like the story of the blind men and the elephant. Everyone only sees their part of an elephant. They see the individual stories they tell themselves about what’s true. Sharing these helps them create a more expanded and accurate collective narrative. It enables them to develop a shared picture of reality.”

There **is a deep craft** to this work, for which there are many different methodologies. Common principles include creating safe physical and emotional spaces, where people who are usually marginalized will feel comfortable sharing their stories; listening and ensuring people are heard and respected; and using different creative processes or story prompts that will draw stories out of different kinds of people.

Using story to build empathy doesn't have to involve bringing people into the same room. Sometimes the role of the systems changer is to serve as an intermediary. "In stuck systems people have very set narratives about each other," says Julian Corner, chief executive of the **Lankelly Chase Foundation**. In one community where the foundation works, social services and families were at loggerheads. Parents saw social workers as the people who took children away while social workers viewed parents as uncooperative, hostile people who slammed doors in their faces. "It was very stuck," Corner says. One of his grantees interviewed both families and social workers, and discovered that they wanted the same kind of outcomes. Sharing these stories across the divide helped the two groups come together and co-create a new service. However, as Corner warns, "Most of the rest of system still holds equivalent narratives, so this brokering of conflicting narratives has to happen at every level."

Building community through coherence

"Any large-scale human cooperation—whether a modern state, a medieval church, an ancient city or an archaic tribe—is rooted in common myths that only exist in people's collective imagination."

—Yuval Noah Harari

Story plays an important cohering role in building the groups and movements so essential for systems change. It helps disparate people form communities.

The **Systems Changers** program run by the Point People, which I co-founded, and Lankelly Chase illustrates this on a micro scale. The program enables frontline workers focusing on issues like homelessness, addiction, mental health, and domestic violence, to contribute to and create systems change. After we took the program's first cohort to the People's Museum in Manchester, one of the participants reacted by saying, "Although I knew about movements like the suffragettes, it really brought home to me that change is possible." Hearing the stories of other movements enabled her to see the new group she was part of as a movement, which in turn was part of a long history of movements.

The **New Economic Organisers Network** has also used this kind of insight to create **Stories of Struggle**, a program that helps people fighting for social justice situate their work within the wider historical context of movements for change in the United Kingdom.



Stories of past social movements can help people working toward systemic change situate their work within a wider historical context.

Enabling individuals to connect their personal stories to stories of community is at the heart of the public narrative work **pioneered by veteran organizer Marshall Ganz**. Charlotte Millar described in an interview how Ganz's work has been integral to her own leadership development work as co-founder of the Finance Innovation Lab and Head of Training with the New Economic Organisers Network (NEON): "This work of authoring a compelling story about yourself, your community, and the need for urgent action, is

integral to creating movements. Without a common story, movements lack a narrative about why they exist and will fail to generate a sense of belonging amongst their members."

The Ayni Institute, a movement strategy and research organization, talks about the DNA of movements, of which story is a central component. It describes the importance of developing a structure that is both tight and enabling, allowing both coherence and distributed leadership. Tech for Good Global is grappling with this process; its London meet-ups now have 6,000 members and are spreading across the United Kingdom to Manchester, Cambridge, Birmingham, Bath, Bristol, and Glasgow. Co-founder Cassie Robinson says her group wants "to foster shared language and a common understanding." For that to happen, she asks, "What's the minimum viable story that creates enough coherence and also allows for different places to have their own version?"

We no longer live in a world of passively inherited stories. We're increasingly creating and sharing our own on a daily basis. As movement-builders, our work is to get the right balance between structure and openness, creating stories that both build communities and encourage others to actively author their own, giving them a greater stake in the issue.

STORY AS WEB

Finally, we can use story to reauthor the web of narratives we live in. Specifically, we can use it to:

1. Change the personal narratives we have about our lives.
2. Change the cultural narratives that frame the issues we advocate for.
3. Change the mythic narratives that influence our worldview.

Changing personal narratives

“If you’re born into that situation, the nature of the trap is with your not even knowing it, acquiescing. You’ve been taught that you’re inferior so you act as though you’re inferior. And on the level that is very difficult to get at, you really believe it. And, of course, all the things you do to prove you’re not inferior only really prove you are. They boomerang ... You’re playing the game according to somebody else’s rules, and you can’t win until you understand the rules and step out of that particular game, which is not, after all, worth playing.”

—James Baldwin

We often fail to see the stories that govern our lives. If we want to change specific systems, we need mirrors to help us understand existing narratives and their impact, and the tools to author new ones.

Systems change practitioners **can learn from narrative therapists**, who work to bring the stories that govern individuals’ lives into the light and modify them as necessary. They do this by unpacking their current narratives, examining their origins and their impacts, and then helping people rewrite more positive stories by which to live their lives.

Recognizing the impact of dominant narratives and developing the skills to author new ones can catapult people from a place of acceptance (of the system and their role in it) to a place of action. Systems changers must enable people to find their agency and understand they are not passive recipients of history. Millar, of the Finance Innovation Lab, explains, “We invite people to reflect on the systems that shape their lives. This process is powerful in giving people a critical awareness of who they are and of the wider structural forces affecting their own personal story.”

Toronto-based **In With Forward** uses tools from narrative therapy to create **interventions** that get to the bottom of social challenges such as poverty, homelessness, and addiction. The organization works on multiple levels. At the micro level, it helps enable vulnerable people to reframe their personal stories and recognize their own internal resources. At a meso-level, it tweaks physical environments such as drop-in centers and shelters so that they reinforce these alternative narratives. And at a macro-level, it aims to influence narratives held by policymakers and the public, so that real structural opportunities meet the aspirations of vulnerable people.

Changing our cultural narratives

“Story is for a human as water is for a fish—all encompassing and not quite palpable.”

—Jonathan Gottschall

On a cultural level, the stories we live in justify the status quo, make institutions feel inevitable, legitimize certain kinds of solutions, and make our world feel preordained. These cultural narratives are foundational to our opinions on issues like immigration, security, and taxation; they affect our norms, who we think of as insiders and outsiders, who is deserving and undeserving, and why our world looks the way it does. As campaigners realize the power of cultural narratives, we have seen a surge in reframing issues, including **patient safety**, **poverty**, and **oceans**.

The FrameWorks Institute is a pioneer when it comes to shifting cultural narratives to bring about better social and environmental outcomes. To do this, **it has developed what it calls Strategic Frame Analysis**. This process starts with an analysis of how experts and news media report an issue, and the assumptions the public has around it. It then uses this analysis to develop new framing, metaphors, and examples before running usability trials where issue advocates test out the new frameworks to see how they work in practice. The resulting new frames can be transformational. FrameWorks’ term “toxic stress” has become central to describing the impact of childhood abuse and neglect on the brain. And the Environmental Protection Agency integrated its phrase “a heat trapping blanket,” which conveys the science behind global warming, into the way it described climate change.

Given that cultural narratives are so powerful and emotive, it makes sense to use the power and emotive force of culture to change them. On Road Media’s **All About Trans** campaign, for example, is changing how the media portrays transgender people in the United Kingdom by facilitating positive relationships between them and culture makers. The campaign resulted in a new BBC transgender drama, several trans storylines in long-running soap operas, and **new guidelines on reporting transgender stories**. In the United States, the **Pop Culture Collaborative** is a new hub that aims to accelerate this kind of work with grantees, using popular culture to change narratives around issues such as **race**, **immigration**, and **caregiving**.

All About Trans campaign is changing how the media portrays transgender people. (Image courtesy of All About Trans)">

Changing our mythic narratives



On Road Media's All About Trans campaign is changing how the media portrays transgender people. (Image courtesy of All About Trans)

“All cultures... are founded on myths. What these myths have given has been inspiration for aspiration.”

—Joseph Campbell

Myths are the meta-stories we use to explain the universe and our place in it. As Harari describes in his book, to be human is to live in myth; our civilizations have always been based in them. Working with myth is integral to the work of changing the values, mindsets, rules, and goals of a system. These stories have a deep effect on our psyche and collective direction of travel.

Today, the systemic power of myth is brutally visible in extremist groups, from the heady theology of Islamic State’s tweets, videos, and essays, to the underpinnings of contemporary Neo-Nazism. Some argue that alongside these potent uses of myth, liberal democracies are facing a “myth gap.” As FSG managing director Mark Kramer [wrote in an *SSIR* article](#), “The challenge today is not merely that we have dysfunctional systems nor that we lack innovative solutions to our society’s problems. Instead, it’s that our country has no unifying narrative that binds us all to a common fate.”

There are an increasing number of initiatives designed to stimulate new meta-narratives. One of these was the [New Story Summit](#) in 2014, which brought together hundreds of people from across the globe to “support the emergence of a coherent new story for humanity.” The event didn’t result in a singular new story, but rather highlighted common themes in different story traditions, such as interdependence with the natural world. It left Robin Alfred, one of the lead facilitators, asking in an interview whether it’s even possible to engineer new myths: “Can stories of the magnitude and potency that we need be written in the same way as, say, a novel or short story? Or do they emerge from the zeitgeist, from the culture, from the ethic of the time?” The summit showed both the problems that emerge in a search for a single narrative and the value in exploring the common themes in diverse mythic narratives.

In *The Myth Gap: What Happens When Evidence and Arguments Aren’t Enough*, author Alex Evans develops this idea of the principles that need to underlie new myths. He believes we can use “our powers of collective storytelling to imagine a future in which it all goes right, creating a myth about redemption and restoration that adds up, if you like, to an Eden 2.0.” But rather than try and create

this story himself, he outlines three principles for 21st-century myths: a larger us, a longer now, and a better good life.

Jane Riddiford demonstrates these mythic principles in practical ways. Her charity **Global Generation** works on community integration in central London, bringing together residents with businesses, developers, and the natural world. The charity's headquarters is the iconic Skip Garden—a mobile urban food garden in the middle of the King's Cross development site. Into this work Riddiford weaves stories connecting the personal with the cosmic using **the I, We and the Planet framework**, which enables people to increase self-awareness, and to connect to each other and the natural world. Sometimes she introduces the concept of “a longer now” when as part of Global Generation's community integration work, she brings together construction workers and local school children for bread-making sessions. As they bake, they share stories that link the flour they are kneading to the birth of grain cultivation and to the Big Bang. At Global Generation's **Junior Chef Club**, school children reflect on their interconnectedness with nature through the ingredients they pick, chop, and cook. When employees from local businesses like Eurostar, The Guardian, and Kier come to the Skip Garden for leadership development, they are encouraged to think beyond their work to a bigger “we.”

Global Generation works on community integration in central London, bringing together residents with businesses, developers, and the natural world. (Image courtesy of Global Generation) ">



The nonprofit **Global Generation** works on community integration in central London, bringing together residents with businesses, developers, and the natural world. (Image courtesy of Global Generation)

STORIES ABOUT STORIES

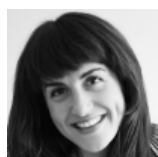
“Stories matter. So do stories about stories”

—Clifford Geertz

A tension between orchestration and openness runs through all this work. We no longer live in a broadcast era, where we passively receive stories *en masse*. Instead, growing numbers of people have the means to be storytellers as well as story listeners. As systems changers, we should seek the minimum structure needed for people to illuminate the past, present and future; build communities through empathy and coherence; and reauthor the web of narratives we live in. How can we empower generations of storytellers to use this most ancient of technologies to change systems for the better?

We need to develop new processes of collective storytelling to help us navigate these turbulent and polarizing times. As such, we need more stories about stories in the field of systems change. There are many more examples, tools, and ways of using of stories to share. It is time for systems change practitioners and storytellers to work together in new ways to build a better world so that “living happily ever after” exists off the page, as well as on it.

Read more stories by [Ella Saltmarshe](#).



Ella Saltmarshe has a deep, practical grounding in both narrative and systems change. She writes drama for stage and screen, and is represented by [The Agency](#). She co-founded [The Point People](#), which works on systems change across sectors; [The Comms Lab](#), a systems change lab focused on the advertising industry; and a range of creative campaigning initiatives, including [SHEvotes](#) and [Time To Vote](#). Her work on creativity and innovation has been published in *The Guardian*, *Fast Company*, *The Financial Times*, *Creative Review*, and *i-D Magazine*.

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