



Narrative Justice

Ethnographic Approaches
to Communications for
Social Good

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the
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Communications practices within nonprofits and for-profit communications are regularly tailored more closely to an organization's industry than the aspirations or vision of the people they seek to serve. This is one legacy of our society's origins in colonial expansion, coercion and expropriation of resources. So much of business as usual naturally centers institutions—both nonprofits and companies—as the experts that define the problems and their solutions.

For instance, this shows up in the execution of a strategy by a nonprofit working on poverty reduction which lacks active collaboration with people coming from low-income backgrounds. It is also at the root of company communications that use race-neutral messaging to communicate to a general audience (understood as race-neutral), or that use communications that are US-centric for an international audience. In those cases, the stories we tell are framed in terms of how the organization and industry have historically understood their field (and progress in it), rather than defined proactively with people who are experiencing precarity, are racialized, based in locations outside of the United States or have been excluded in other ways from conceptions of the general audience as traditionally defined. No matter how well-intentioned the organization or company is, without a foundation and practice of true collaboration, it is guaranteed to perpetuate historic dynamics of injustice through its communications.

As a communications firm with expertise in storytelling for systems change, The Wakeman Agency strategically tackles challenges like these by applying the framework of Narrative Justice. Specifically, an ethnographically informed approach to storytelling that recognizes the commonly exploitative and extractive nature of traditional media narratives and reaches instead for language, frames and messaging that depicts the full humanity of people who have been historically excluded. This means working with people personally familiar with exploitation, precarity and othering of all kinds. It means actively collaborating with them as protagonists and prioritizing their lived experiences as we co-define the problems we seek to resolve and the solutions considered. We see Narrative Justice as the goal for the nonprofit sector and for companies framing communications through the lens of justice, diversity, equity and inclusion (JEDI).

This stance is informed by community-centered practices. It propels us to ensure that our work affirms the challenges faced by historically excluded groups and focuses our energy on combating those challenges in ways defined as relevant by those communities and individuals.

Practicing Narrative Justice through a Culture of Ethnography

We are pleased to see examples of work aligned with Narrative Justice beginning to show up in the philanthropic world.¹ Through this white paper, we hope to provide a framework that can be used to catalyze adoption of this type of work to an even greater extent.

Communications ethnography allows us to action the grounding principle of Narrative Justice. Ethnography is a social scientific method that emerged from anthropology. It emphasizes the meaning-making of people in their environments, prioritizing their own language to articulate their realities. Social scientists—and specifically anthropologists—have had to grapple with their field's historic complicity with colonial empire-building which impacted their work as a whole. This required a certain amount of self-reflection. As a result, many social scientists have reoriented their methods and incorporated intentional self-critique, in order to use ethnography in ways that prioritize the insight, knowledge and agency of communities that were formerly studied and which are now thought of as partners in participatory action research (PAR).²

However, well before the field as a whole began asking these questions, visionary cultural practitioner and literary icon, Zora Neale Hurston, used ethnographic techniques to poke holes in dominant narratives concerning race, class, gender and power.³ Hurston's training as an anthropologist and boundary-pushing style demonstrates the ways that this method can be used to inform a range of communicative endeavors for cultural critique—endeavors meant to spark social change.⁴

The following pages provide further discussion of Narrative Justice, including:

- A framework for how it can be practiced.
- Examples of its application.
- A reiteration of how ethnographic principles at its heart can be used to guide work in any arena.

¹ For a recent example of these themes in practice, see "Smoked Salmon for Amelia: A Native Perspective on Homelessness", and for complementary work being carried out on economic injustice see "Building Narrative Power for Economic Justice by Telling Better Stories."

² PAR is one of a variety of methods that developed out of the reflexive movement in anthropology. It emphasizes working with people, rather than studying or helping them and using the encounter to better understand the world through new ways of seeing, interpreting and building infrastructure based on the outcomes. Bradbury, Hillary and Peter Reason. 2003. "Action Research: An Opportunity for Revitalizing Research Purpose and Practices" *Qualitative Social Work*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, p. 156.

³ For a recent discussion of Hurston's properly recognized role in pushing the boundaries of ethnographic writing and research, see "Zora Neale Hurston's Anthropological Legacy", discussing Dr. Jennifer L. Freeman's new book *Ain't I an Anthropologist? Zora Neale Hurston Beyond the Literary Icon*, 2023, University of Illinois Press.

⁴ Meehan, Kevin, 'Decolonizing Ethnography: Zora Neale Hurston in the Caribbean', in *People Get Ready: African American and Caribbean Cultural Exchange* (Jackson, MS, 2009; online edn, Mississippi Scholarship Online, 20 Mar. 2014), accessed 27 Apr. 2023.

Narrative Justice

Narrative Justice requires adopting a more proactive position vis-à-vis our communications practices, while actively responding to the reprehensible and damaging depictions of historically marginalized groups in narratives within our society. For example, tropes representing Black people as unintelligent, violent or hypersexualized,⁵ which continue to surface in media accounts on topics as wide-ranging as cannabis legalization to public school curriculum; popular media representations of Arab or Muslim people as radicals⁶ and terrorists; and depictions of Asian people vacillating between the model minority and a global public health risk.⁷ Othering of this kind is not reserved only for racial or ethnic groups, but is regularly embedded in the stories in our society told about what *normal* bodies or families look like, or how *normal* brains function.

As political and social theorists have shown, dominant narratives of any given moment reflect the particular power at play which has been normed as neutral.⁸ Our political, economic and social system in the United States was built on the legacy of enslavement, colonialist expansion and White dominance. From that, the hegemonic stories of how the world works that are told by our industries include racist myths and colonial assumptions. These harmful narratives are perpetuated by the telling of “monovocal stories,” those that reflect one—usually dominant—perspective.⁹ This can happen even when nonprofits are attempting to tell the right story, if there is not a framework in place for learning from communities that are negatively impacted.

For example, some nonprofits working in global health continue to rely on messaging about “third-world” poverty and donors who are depicted largely as White Western saviors. Or, messaging by a company whose philanthropic work aimed to help the recent influx of asylum seekers which predominantly focused its attention and resources on Ukrainian asylum seekers, but in the process showed it is glaringly unaware—or unsympathetic—to the plight of non-European asylum seekers such as Afghans or Latin Americans who are also fleeing violence.

⁵ Bogle, Donald. 1973. *Toms, Coons, Mamies, Mulatos and Bucks*, Viking Press. See also <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/popular-and-pervasive-stereotypes-african-americans>

⁶ Sheehan, Jack. 2012. *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*; Alsultany, Evelyn. 2012. *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*, NYU Press.

⁷ Media connections between Chinese Americans and the COVID-19 pandemic is one acute example. More routine framings abound. For example, narratives about climate change as fueled by overpopulation in India and China rather than being driven by over consumption, appropriation and exploitation of resources by Western economies, many of which off-shore labor to developing Asian nations.

⁸ For example, the writing of Antonio Gramsci, Edward Said, Stuart Hall, Judith Butler and James Baldwin. For an expert telling of these dynamics as exemplified through law, race and indigeneity in the United States, see Harris, Cheryl L. 1993. “Whiteness as Property” *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 106, 1715.

⁹ Montecinos, C.1995. “Culture as an ongoing dialog: Implications for multicultural teacher education” p. 291-308, in *Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy, and the Politics of Difference*. United States: State University of New York Press.

Organizations of all kinds need to embrace the responsibility of our reality as actors that can influence dominant stories—through the flow of information, frames of reference and narratives implying who is deserving, humanized and centered—at a more systemic level. This needs to include interrogation of who is the protagonist in these stories, and who is absent. This positions us to proactively combat harmful stereotypes and actively build a more just society through our stories.

But how do we do this practically?

Commitments for Practice

Narrative Justice can be the heart of communications in any form of storytelling. To effectively incorporate it, organizations and individuals can adopt the following five commitments in how they approach their work.

Commitment #1 | Awareness

Increase organizational awareness of dominant and oppressive narratives as they are reflected in the stories told in industries and arenas. Growth in awareness allows us to intercept—and eventually reorient—subordinating communicative trends.

Commitment #2 | Engagement

Engage with the people most intimately aware of and experiencing inequity and commit to centering their insights and priorities in organizational interventions. Incorporate practices into your organization's work that allow learning about people's experiences, the language they use to speak about them, the way they make sense of their environments, hierarchies of power, and finally, the opportunities that proximate actors see for solutions.

Commitment #3 | Confrontation

Actively confront the ways that your organization orients toward the stories depicting diverse and multicultural audiences in contemporary discourse.

Commitment #4 | Incorporation

Incorporate findings from engagement with historically excluded communities as the driving elements that orient the stories you tell. Ethical engagement around differences based in culture, experience or positioning means elevating the elements of culture or identity highlighted by people themselves. In this way, by grounding the stories we tell in a Narrative Justice approach, we can contribute to resilience, pride and human flourishing through industry storytelling—no matter what arena we may work in.

Commitment #5 | Sharing

Share industry knowledge in order to equip people experiencing injustice with further skills to increase and sustain their ability to navigate the field you are working in.

How to Build Narrative Justice into Your Organization's Practices

The following questions can be used as a guide for the five commitments, as a means to lay a Narrative Justice foundation in your organizational communications.

Commitment #1 | Awareness

- What are the main stories told about the big problems of your field of work and the solutions to those problems?
- Who participates in telling those stories? Whose point of view are they told from? Whose values, priorities, and experiences helped build those narratives?
- Whose voices are missing or have been missing historically? Which perspectives are absent or assumed?
- Who is contesting the main stories told in your field of work?

Commitment #2 | Engagement

- Drawing on the questions above, how can your organization collaborate with people whose voices are missing from those narratives, or who have been historically excluded?
- How can you structure those engagements as true partnerships between peers, to avoid exploitation and perpetuation of historic power dynamics?
- How can you commit to documenting the insights and perspectives of these individuals, groups or organizations, and prioritizing them in how you conceptualize the problems and solutions in your field?
- What would a successful partnership look like from the perspective of these proximate actors?

Commitment #3 | Confrontation

- What assumptions are embedded within your current stories, structure of work and theory of change?
- How does the privilege of those who work at, volunteer for and lead your organization impact or orient the ways problems and solutions are conceptualized or defined?
- What power relations exist in your industry and how is your organization positioned within them?
- How do actors differently positioned than you and your organization see those power relations?

Delving deeper into Commitment #3, confrontation is often the most challenging of the five commitments because it requires self-reflection and critique. One way to start the confrontation process is through mapping your organization's positioning. Each of us is situated within the current overlapping structures of local, national and global power and privilege. Organizations are no different. We must work to understand how our positioning influences our perspective. Among social scientists, this ongoing practice is called reflexivity: considering the way that our own situatedness positions us in relation to the topics we engage on, while working to understand more fully how it impacts what we see and what we miss.

This process should include locating the influence of colonial thinking and White Supremacy Culture within our own work and that of stakeholders we engage with, in order to collectively choose a better way. What do we mean by this? Colonial ways of thinking are those driven by appropriation, oppression and cultural chauvinism. They exhibit a dismissal of indigenous and traditional ways of knowing and orienting to the world as backward, unreliable or lacking value. Related to this, White Supremacy Culture is not simply "the self-conscious racism of White supremacist hate groups." Rather, it refers instead to systems, whether they be political, economic or cultural, in which White people have control of power and material resources to such an extent that ideas of White superiority and entitlement are ubiquitous and often subconscious, amongst people of all races. Relations typified by this ethos are widespread, producing the subordination of people of color in myriad ways across institutions and social contexts.¹⁰

Identifying these dynamics, and discussing and understanding them more fully as an organization, can allow for the effective disruption of ongoing harmful narratives that uphold hierarchies of power and asymmetrical contributions to knowledge production in your field.

Part of this confrontation work occurs when engaging across cultural, identity or experience differences with internal and external audiences. In these contexts, we must honor the sacredness of those differences as deeply tied to identity, while also recognizing that cultural dynamics have been historically used by colonial and capitalist actors as a justification for oppression, appropriation, extraction and silencing. This means treading carefully and with humility, while confronting within ourselves, and our organizations, dynamics that contribute to harm.

¹⁰ Ansley, Frances L. 1989. "Stirring the Ashes: Race, Class and the Future of Civil Rights Scholarship", 74 CORNELL L. REV. 993, 1024 n.129.. Note: There is ongoing debate about whether the 'W' in the racial category of White should be capitalized. See a discussion of various arguments here: <https://cssp.org/2020/03/recognizing-race-in-language-why-we-capitalize-black-and-white/>

Commitment #4 | Incorporation

- What language is used by proximate actors that humanizes and dignifies them as central agents in your work?
- What stories can you tell in doing your work that humanize and prioritize the people and communities that have been historically excluded?
- How can you make this a regular part of your organization's communications processes?
- What practices can you adopt to continue your learning and foster authentic engagement over the long term with communities and people who have been excluded or silenced in your industry?

Commitment #5 | Sharing

- What does your organization have to offer in partnership with communities and groups that have been historically excluded in your field?
- What dynamics do you need to be careful not to perpetuate in your engagements?
- While still valuing the skillsets you bring, how can you work to decenter yourselves as the experts in order to prioritize the knowledge that stems from the lived experiences of the communities and people you seek to engage with, in order to build better stories?

Storytelling Through Narrative Justice

Narrative Justice, as applied through these five commitments, can be used as an approach to storytelling of all kinds and in any arena. For example, at The Wakeman Agency, we have used Narrative Justice to guide client engagements for nonprofits working on climate change. In that context, Narrative Justice practices were adopted to learn about:

- The ways that climate change as a problem is conceptualized and defined.
- Who is understood to have expert knowledge on the environment and climate.
- The timeframe and urgency of the problem in relation to who is experiencing it and how it impacts their lives.
- The solutions that are focused on and who they help.
- Which type of problems are targeted by specific solutions.
- What kind of problems are defined by default as outside of the focus of the organization.

In other instances, we have used Narrative Justice to support companies interested in improving messaging geared toward multicultural and diverse audiences. In those engagements, we have used the approach to explore:

- How the conventional definition of the client's general audience is skewed, based on the company's culture, history and industry, toward stories that consistently center the same actors, perpetuating exclusion and othering of racialized groups and communities.
- How data collection and analysis practices can be structured to more accurately reflect a general industry audience that is racially and ethnically diverse.
- How strengths in communication toward one population can cloud understandings of the dynamics regarding messaging for another community.

These examples shed light on the genre of questions that can be explored through Narrative Justice work in both nonprofits and companies. Now that you are familiar with the framework of the five commitments and how your organization might start adopting them, the following section provides a practical case study that can help clarify how Narrative Justice can be put into practice and the fruits that this work can bear.

Case Study: The Narrative Justice Project 2020 and Learning About Trust

The Narrative Justice Project 2020 (NJP) demonstrates more concretely what Narrative Justice practices can look like in action. This "tactical response to structural racism in popular media representations and landscapes" was created by The Wakeman Agency.¹¹ In partnership with the University of Florida, we worked with Dr. Rachel Grant to train participants in media literacy practices, while measuring attitudes about media perceptions. Essentially, it can be understood as an effort to increase racial equity within the Wakeman Agency's communications and media environments. As a response to the nationwide protests against racial violence in 2020, we initiated a five-week "community-based storytelling initiative" for Black and brown individuals.¹² Facilitators met with focus groups, taught media engagement techniques and conducted ethnographically inspired research to facilitate deep listening. The learning that occurred in this exchange has informed communication strategies for systems change and impacted equity in media encounters for those who participated. This is illustrated through the framework of the five commitments mentioned earlier.

¹¹ Grant, Rachel & Wakeman, Vanessa. 2023. "'City by City:' Reclaiming People of Color Voices Through the Narrative Justice Project" Human Communication Research Vol. 49, Issue 2, p.218-226 Accessed 4/24/2023

¹² Grant & Wakeman. 2023, p. 222.

Commitment #1 | Awareness

- The NJP was structured to build on experiential knowledge, to increase awareness and understanding of how the industry impacts people of color.
- Individuals who identified as people of color were invited to participate.
- Some themes considered throughout this process were:
 - What are the main stories told in the traditional media about the big problems in Black and brown communities? What solutions are traditionally proposed?
 - Whose point of view are these stories told from? Who participates in telling the stories and defining the problems and solutions?
 - What stories do you want to see told about your community? What solutions do you believe need to be highlighted?

Commitment #2 | Engagement

- By working with historically marginalized people and discussing their lived experiences in relation to the media environments they encounter, we learned about the particular ways in which their knowledge and realities have been historically excluded and silenced within the stories told in the media and by communications professionals more broadly.

Commitment #3 | Confrontation

- Conventional PR and messaging for nonprofits and progressive companies rarely incorporate the direct insights and lived experiences of the people meant to be impacted by philanthropic work. This is a byproduct of the industry's imperial history.
- The Wakeman Agency's work in this arena over the last two decades prompts us to continually identify innovative communications tactics to more directly partner with communities in order to produce narratives that reflect their realities and engage their collaboration.
- Specifically, the NJP produced insights about trust in media that were counterintuitive, given widely held assumptions within the communications field.¹³

¹³ This is one of many learnings that the NJP produced. See the full article for more information, cited in footnote 11.

As mentioned above, the confrontation process is key. It is not uncommon that Narrative Justice work produces unconventional findings in relation to stories told within an industry. This is because the process fosters environments where people can more freely share experiences not commonly incorporated into mainstream discourse. For people whose identities and experiences place them on the margins of dominant narratives, this approach recognizes them as *those who know*, allowing for the introduction of counter-narratives. By counter-narratives, we mean those stories, experiences, truths, insights and reactions that “contest or bring under scrutiny hegemonic and privileged stories” about how the world works.¹⁴

Social change work that is grounded in the practices outlined above inserts complex, multidimensional and vibrant stories that counter the status quo in public discourse on the topics of importance to nonprofits and socially responsible companies. In the case of the NJP, one counterintuitive finding surfaced: most participants viewed social media as a highly trustworthy source of information.¹⁵ This goes against findings commonly and recently cited by top communications industry sources that posit social media as the least trusted source of information for US and global audiences, according to national and global survey data.¹⁶ How can we make sense of this finding? In the words of one NJP participant, for individuals who experience the traditional media and environment that regularly perpetuate stereotypes of their community, social media “can make people stick to one story.”¹⁷ In other words, information shared on social media that is locally proximate to the viewer stands out in contrast to inaccurate dominant media accounts because of the viewer’s ability to triangulate information from their lived experience.

¹⁴ Grant & Wakeman. 2023, p. 220.

¹⁵ Grant & Wakeman. 2023, p. 222.

¹⁶ Edelman Trust Barometer. 2022. P. 7.

¹⁷ Grant & Wakeman. 2023, p. 222.

Commitment #4 | Incorporation

- For participants considering how they can engage with a media landscape that often scapegoats their communities, social media can be a tool to document lived experiences and render their accounts more robust to dominant narratives that demonize and dehumanize those like them. In order to authentically partner with them in our industry's work, we choose to center these insights as real and valuable data.
- For example, as we engage in client work, we make the assumption that social media may be considered a trusted source of information for particular audiences, in contrast to what our wider industry says. This influences the type of questions we ask in further encounters with proximate actors and—ultimately—the stories we tell and how we tell them. This is but one instance of the incorporation of findings that emerged from the Narrative Justice process.

Commitment #5 | Sharing

- By sharing our industry knowledge about media engagement tactics with participants, the NJP increased the breadth of who can participate in public discourse. These engagements worked to “transform the communicative lives of” people of color by “providing media training to marginalized communities,” allowing them to reclaim their narratives.¹⁸ In concrete terms, when events occur that result in media intrusion into their lives—protests, a shooting, public health crises, but also community celebrations, historic moments or legal wins—NJP participants are now equipped to manage those scenarios on their own terms. This shifts the conversation in directions that are meaningful and relevant for their stories and positions participants as agents, highlighting their humanity and dignity.
- This shows how Narrative Justice interventions can help to redefine who is driving public discourse and who belongs to our conceptions of the public and our society. Through this intervention, the narratives *about* people and communities can become narratives driven *by* them.

¹⁸ Grant & Wakeman. 2023, p. 218. See the article for a complete review of how this was accomplished and success was defined.

The NJP 2020 represents a specific instance of ethnographically informed methods used to impact the communications industry. Although most organizations are unable to devote extensive time to ethnographic research, the heart of this approach can be done in your field of work. Specifically, by adopting the five commitments into your organizational practice, Narrative Justice can be used to increase your organization's authentic partnership with individuals and communities that have been historically excluded from your field of work.

For instance, as you are proactively incorporating it into your work conversations, workshops, meetings and facilitated interactions with proximate actors, you should:

- Pay attention to meaning-making and meaning of language, as held by individuals and their communities.
 - Consider whether the people you are collaborating with are using different words to talk about your work, or telling stories that are at odds with the way you understand your field.
 - Discuss how power dynamics are showing up or may be influencing engagement.
- Read silences and utterances in tandem, in addition to body language and group behavior. Approach these observations with curiosity, not defensiveness, to learn what they mean.
- Observe environments, social ecosystems and hierarchies of power, as defined in the ways that those you are engaging with see them.
 - Learn about positioning, power and language to build collaboratively toward stories that take historically excluded actors into consideration and advance equity.

These types of practices should then inform the narratives you employ in your organization and the stories you tell, as you speak to internal and external audiences about your work and equity in your arena.

Imagining a World of Narrative Justice

What would the world look like if the dominant narratives showing up in national and global conversations depicted the true realities of Black and brown people, individuals who are unhoused, people who do not have citizenship status or individuals who are incarcerated? How would we perceive the status quo if infrastructure were understood in terms of how well it serves disabled individuals, or if our cultural concepts of work, productivity and value were defined by the norming of neurodivergence?

The Wakeman Agency is a social change firm that deploys culturally competent, transformative communication practices to address the most pressing social issues of our time. We partner with socially responsible companies, nonprofits and foundations that aim to leverage strategic communications to advance society toward systemic equity and justice.

For more information about our Narrative Justice framework and how it can be leveraged to benefit your organization, please contact Jennifer Lynn at jlynn@thewakemanagency.com.

