



Narratives for Animal Freedom

Research Report

August 2023



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Introduction

Over the last 12 months, Animal Think Tank's Narrative Research project has been focused on carrying out studies to uncover the most persuasive narratives for animal freedom.

The results of this research, synthesised with that of other organisations, informed the creation of our [Narrative Architecture for Animal Freedom](#), a tool for all of us in the movement to craft unified messaging.

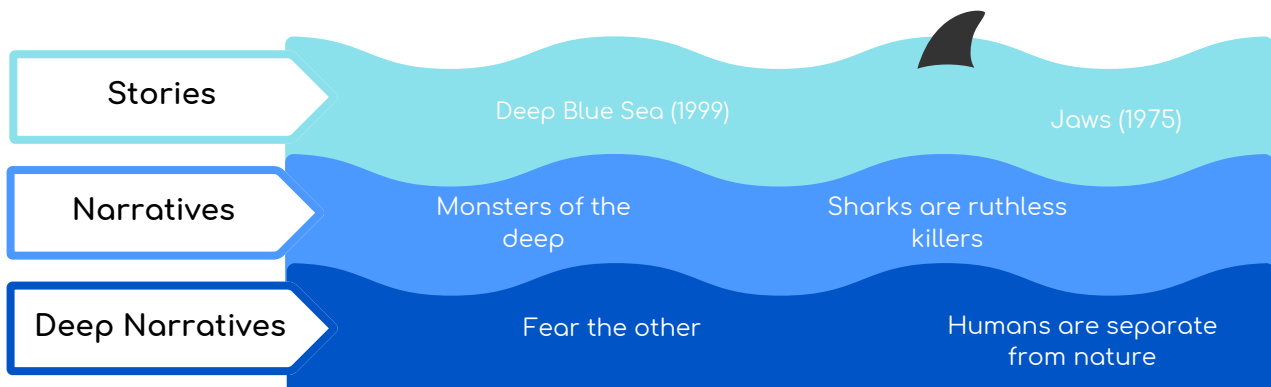
Use this Research Report to dive deeper into our Narrative Architecture. Learn how our narrative research project identified persuasive narratives that have the power to make a difference.

The narratives outlined here are tried and tested for their power to change hearts and minds, but our research is always evolving, so watch this space for updated advice.

What is narrative?

A narrative is [a shared understanding of how things work](#).

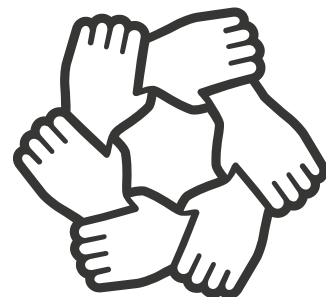
They are ideas and themes that connect collections of [stories](#). They form a lens through which we view the world and interpret information. A [deep narrative](#) goes further, forming what seems 'natural' or 'common sense'. We need to reach people at every narrative level in our communications.



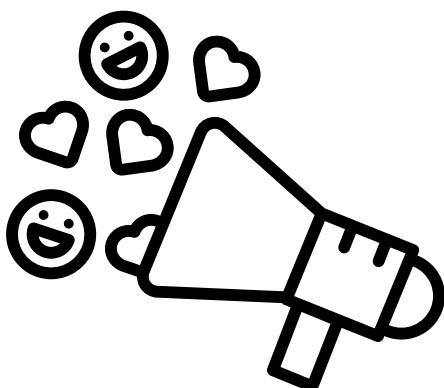
The importance of narrative unity

We believe that narrative unity across the animal freedom movement is [vital](#)...

The purpose of our Narrative Architecture is to **unite and empower** the animal freedom movement by equipping advocates with the most persuasive narratives and messaging advice based on our latest research.



...But that doesn't mean we all have to say exactly the same thing.



Our narratives can fit any story or message you need to tell. When we can all draw on the same highly effective narratives, we can speak to society's most deeply held values and aspirations, even when we're concentrating on our individual campaigns and focus areas.

Narrative in other social movements

Part of our research is looking at how other social movements communicate - the language they use, how they frame the issue, as well as the narratives they're reinforcing or challenging.



FREEDOM TO MARRY

By conducting interviews, focus groups and message testing, the Freedom to Marry campaign identified key messaging shifts to get over people's barriers to supporting marriage equality:

- **Stop talking about rights, justice and discrimination** - people understood it as a legal issue, believing gay people wanted to marry for tax breaks.
- **Start talking about love, family, commitment and dignity** - by helping people understand the issue in terms of emotionally resonant shared values.
- **Reframe marriage equality as affecting all of US society** - by sharing stories of religious and conservative parents, friends, and colleagues who wanted to see their gay loved ones celebrate their love and commitment.
- **Frame marriage equality as part of America's moral progress.**

After this shift in narrative, the campaign achieved the freedom to marry in all 50 US states within just 11 years.



TOGETHER FOR YES

The Together for Yes campaign, to repeal the Irish abortion ban, found they needed to make these shifts to persuade people:

- **Stop talking about women's rights and personal choice** - this framed it as an individual issue that only affected certain women.
- **Start talking about values like care, compassion and change** - framing it as a social issue that affected everyone.



PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM

The movement for people seeking refuge found they needed to make these shifts to persuade people:

- **Stop talking about human rights, laws and legal obligations** - talking about shared values like love, family, care and peace made it a moral issue.
- **Start showing people as individuals** - framing them as people to be identified with rather than victims in detention centres.
- **Using 'people-first' language** - (e.g. people forced to seek refuge/asylum, rather than 'refugees' or 'asylum-seekers').

Mapping Narratives

Understanding the problem is the first step in addressing it...

Our mapping narratives study aimed to identify the dominant cultural narratives in the UK about other animals.

By analysing them, we gained an understanding of society's beliefs and attitudes towards other animals.

We set out to quantify these narratives, and measure how widespread they are within the UK.

In doing so we can begin to test effective interventions that will challenge harmful narratives while amplifying helpful ones.

For in-depth analysis of all narratives tested, read this study's [full report](#).

500
participants

answered...

100
questions











revealing...

7
dominant cultural
narratives.*

*Participants representative of the UK population answered questions covering a whole range of possible cultural narratives. The narratives dominant in their responses were identified using factor analysis.

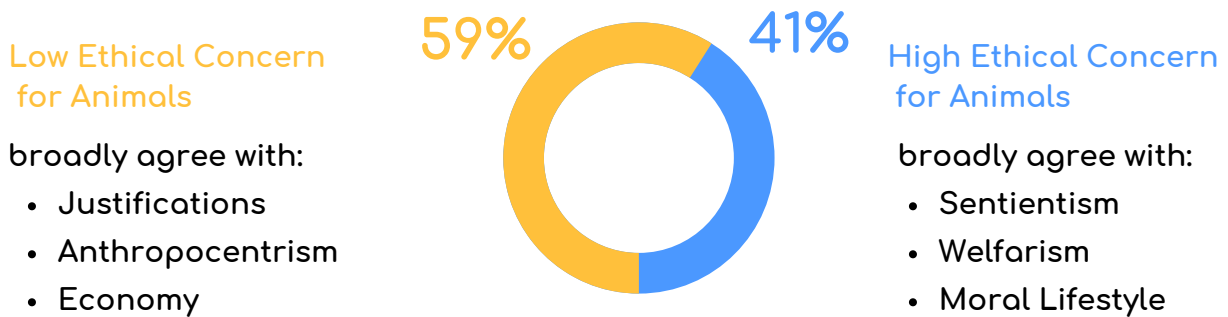
Dominant cultural narratives

These seven narratives about other animals, both harmful and helpful, were found to be dominant in the UK.

| Narratives | Agreement level | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| |  Agree |  Disagree |  Unsure |
|  01. Sentientism An attitude of respect and recognition for other animals' cognitive and emotional abilities, as well as their rights. | 92% | 1% | 7% |
|  02. Economy The perceived economic importance of the meat, dairy, and egg industries, especially for sustaining rural communities. | 87% | 5% | 9% |
|  03. Welfare Support for more compassionate treatment of animals and more regulations to ensure animal welfare in farming. | 86% | 3% | 11% |
|  04. Moral Lifestyle Endorsing veganism or vegetarianism as a beneficial and ethically preferable lifestyle. | 71% | 13% | 16% |
|  05. Justifications The belief that eating other animals is acceptable because it's normal, natural, necessary and nice. | 70% | 14% | 16% |
|  06. Anthropocentrism The view that humans are unique, more valuable, at the top of a hierarchy, and that animals can be owned and exploited. | 50% | 23% | 27% |
|  07. Manly Meat Cultural and gender-related stereotypes associating meat-eating with strength, power, and masculinity. | 19% | 56% | 25% |

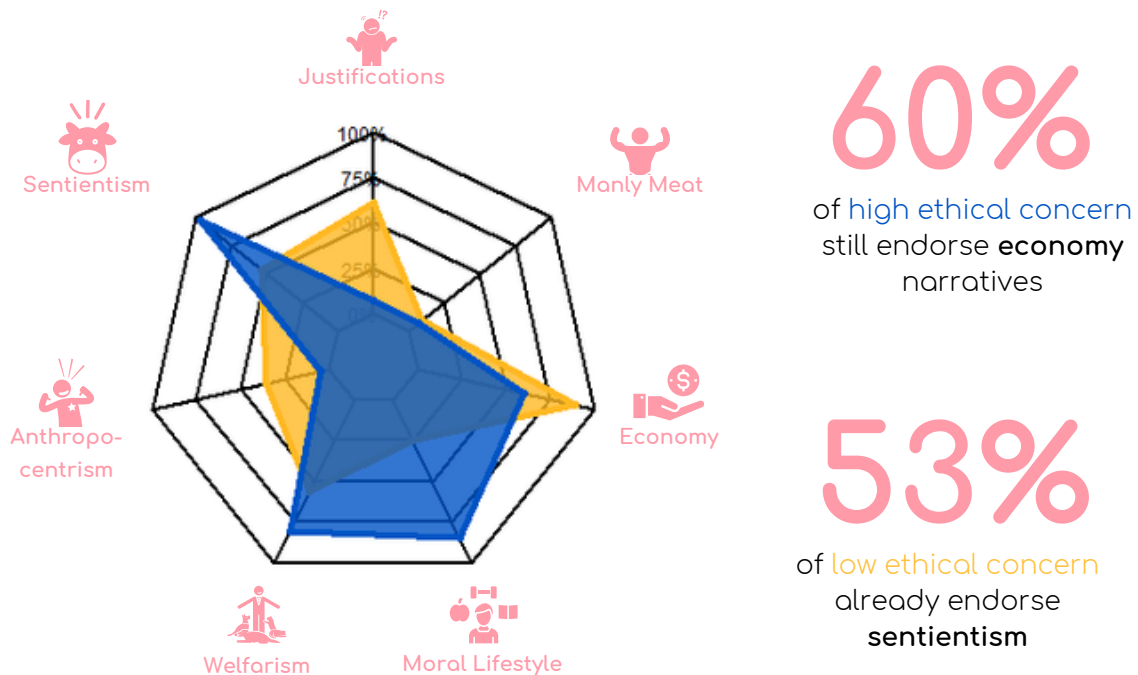
Two narrative groupings...

Based on the ways participants generally answered questions, we found two distinct clusters and profiles of narrative agreement within our data...



We then plotted their level of agreement with the dominant narratives we uncovered. The results show us which narratives are most and least present in both groups, as well as where they agree and disagree.

Agreement, split by ethical concern for animals:



While the underlying values recognising animal sentience and their deservingness of rights are almost universally present, these sentiments are often overshadowed by pervasive narratives of anthropocentrism, economic considerations, and justifications for 'meat' consumption.

But the existence of these beneficial narratives indicates potential pathways for transformation. By directly addressing and challenging the entrenched narratives that perpetuate harmful practices, we could tip the balance towards more empathetic and responsible perspectives.

Message Testing

The way we frame information can have a huge influence on the way it's received and, in turn, influence people's attitudes and behaviours. In collaboration with Rhetorical Impact Lab and Lancaster University, we carried out experiments to test which narratives have the power to measurably shift attitudes towards animal freedom.



We recruited almost **14,500** participants over **5 studies** to take part in online surveys. Before filling them in, they were each shown a video or text-based message making pro-animal arguments.



There were multiple possible messages, subtly differing in the way the information was framed, and the narrative which was emphasised. Participants were shown one of these or a neutral control message.

“

"Society is evolving and becoming fairer all the time...Recognising the rights of animals is the next stage in our progress towards a fairer world."

OR

"All animals can suffer in a similar way and to a similar degree that humans do...We are morally obligated to take them into account."

”

Participants then filled in the questionnaire, which asked them about their attitudes towards other animals, or their acceptance of existing practices, such as factory farming.



The results of the questionnaire allowed us to quantify which narratives were most linked to a pro-animal shift in attitudes, when compared to the baseline provided by the neutral control message.

Message testing phases

Though all our message testing experiments had the same basic design, outlined on the previous page, we performed studies over 3 different phases...

01.

Animal Rights
vs.
Animal Freedom

AIM: Determine if 'animal rights' or 'animal freedom' was more persuasive.

WE FOUND: These framings were equally effective. We intend to do more testing of this over time to see if this changes.

Read the full report... 



02.

Exploratory
Message Testing

AIM: Explore alternative narratives and framings for messages.

WE FOUND: Some framings were more effective than others. See summary on the next page.

Read the full report... 



03.

Appeals to
Identity

AIM: Discover whether using identity labels like 'animal lover' can change people's perception.

WE FOUND: Specific identities didn't have an effect. We intend to do further testing on values and identity.

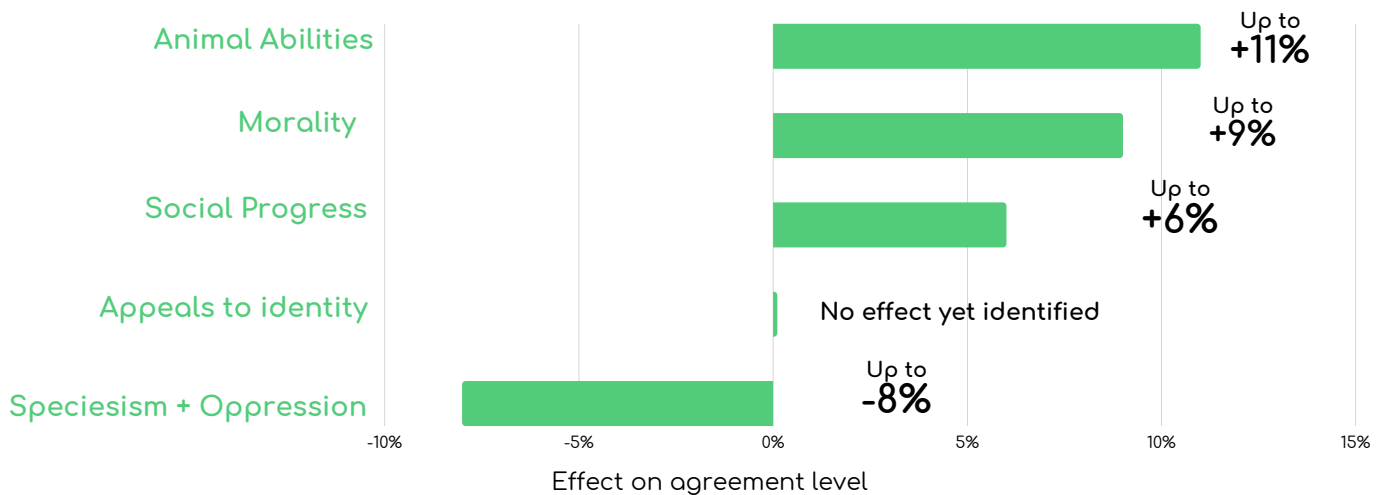
Read the full report... 



Our results

Analysing the data across different test phases, we found that certain message framings significantly increased agreement levels, while others had no effect or even a negative effect.

Types of framing and their effect on agreement vs a control message.



What worked?



The **Animal Abilities** narrative highlighted animals' rich inner lives, unique abilities, feelings and interests.

Participants who saw this message agreed with pro-animal statements up to 11% more than the control group.



The **Morality** narrative argued that causing harm is fundamentally wrong, and we have an ethical obligation to treat other animals as we would wish to be treated.

Participants who saw this message agreed with pro-animal statements up to 9% more than the control group.



The **Social Progress** narrative presented animal freedom as the next step in society's trajectory towards greater justice and empathy for all.

Participants who saw this message agreed with pro-animal statements up to 6% more than the control group.

What didn't?

Some messages framed the problem using words like **speciesism** or **oppression** of animals.

Participants who saw this message agreed with pro-animal statements up to 8% less than the control group.

Language like this may feel like jargon that confuses or alienates readers - more testing is needed.



We tested whether **appealing to identities** such as 'vegan-hearted' or 'animal lovers' had an effect on participants.

We found this to have no effect on agreement with pro-animal statements.

Further testing will examine this more, and also focus on the shared values people hold, regardless of how they see their identity.



Our questionnaire after message testing also asked participants about **changing specific laws** to benefit animals. 74% agreed that the government should impose laws to protect animals, but...

We found that our framing manipulations had no effect on desire to change specific laws.

Future research will explore the level of intervention needed to shift attitudes relating to laws.



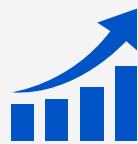
Research and Our Narratives

Our persuasive narratives included in the [Narrative Messaging Architecture](#) were evidenced by both the findings of our own research and that of other research organisations.



Animal Abilities

- We found that messages highlighting animals' unique abilities increased pro-animal disposition by **up to 11%**.
- We found that the sentience narrative already has **92% agreement** in the current narrative landscape.



Social Progress

- Our participants agreed with pro-animal sentiments up to **6% more** when exposed to social progress messaging.
- [Pax Fauna](#) also found that participants responded well to this narrative, particularly in combatting a sense of futility around whether individual change makes a difference.



Morality

- We found that messages emphasising morality increased pro-animal disposition by **up to 9%**.
- **71%** of our respondents agreed a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle is a more moral choice.

Our research is constantly evolving! As we uncover more insights, these narratives may be adapted or replaced altogether if we discover ones that are even more compelling and persuasive. For now, they are the most effective we have tested.

Other Winning Narratives

Our research project still has a lot to uncover, but there are other successful narratives for social movements, tested by Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC), that can also be used for animal freedom communications.



Unequal by
Design

Society has deep-rooted power imbalances that benefit a select few. By understanding that the system is intentionally constructed that way, we can choose to redesign it for a fairer future that benefits all of us, not just a few.



A Bigger Us

We have more commonalities than differences, and drawing strict lines between 'us' and 'them' can narrow our focus. Society's circle of concern should include other animals as part of our collective solidarity.



Citizens

Our role in social change is through collective action, rather than individual choices. This is useful to counter the current dominant narrative that a fairer world can only be achieved through individual consumer choices.

[SOURCE: PublicInterest.org](https://PublicInterest.org), [The Narratives We Need](#)

Summary

This report outlines the research that contributed to our first Narrative Architecture for Animal Freedom. We hope you'll be able to use these narratives in your own communications.

What have we discovered?

Our research has identified three persuasive narratives so far:

- Animal Abilities
- Social Progress
- Morality

What's next?

We intend to...

- Carry out further testing on values and aspirational identities
- Test framings of other animals and our relationship with them
- Conduct focus groups to understand opportunities and barriers.

An evolving research project

This is a long-term research project that will continue to adapt, iterate and refine our findings, especially as UK society becomes more supportive of animal freedom.

We believe that narrative unity across the animal freedom movement is vital. When we can all draw on the same highly effective narratives, we can speak to society's most deeply held values and aspirations, even when we're concentrating on our individual campaigns and focus areas.

Acknowledgements

The Narrative team at Animal Think Tank would like to acknowledge those whose work, research and support has contributed to the creation of our Narrative Architecture for Animal Freedom:

- Ben Tappin and Luke Hewitt @ Rhetorical Impact Lab
- Beth Malory @ University College London
- Rebecca Gregson and Chloe Crawshaw @ Lancaster University
- Arran Stibbe @ University of Gloucestershire
- Phauna Foundation
- Greenbaum Foundation
- Solberga Foundation
- Woodleigh Impact Foundation
- Everyone who attended our Messaging Event in February 2023.

Thank you for your continued support in our efforts to promote narrative change for animal freedom.

Find out more:
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