



Narrative Change

Mini Guide

Mini Guide Series

This guide is part of Animal Think Tank's series on **persuasive communications** for animal freedom.

Each guide draws on the **latest research** in psychology, public opinion and movement strategy.

This edition is about narrative change:

how the narratives that dominate our culture both reflect and shape how society thinks and acts.

Helpful narratives can shift what people believe is right and what they think is possible. **Harmful narratives** can make the status quo feel natural and inevitable — even to people who know something is wrong.

Building **narrative unity** as a movement can amplify helpful narratives and, over time, overshadow harmful ones.

This guide explores how to identify and **reinforce helpful** narratives that can build public support for animal freedom — and how to **challenge harmful** narratives that stand in the way of change.



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What You'll Learn From This Guide



Why narratives matter

Discover how dominant narratives shape public understanding – and why changing them is essential for achieving animal freedom.



How to shift public perception

Learn how to reinforce helpful narratives and crowd out harmful ones to help change what society sees as normal, acceptable or possible.



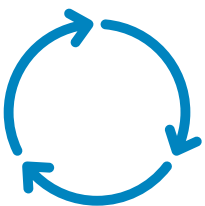
What makes a narrative persuasive

Explore the key elements that can help narratives resonate and can build public support for animal freedom.



How to challenge harmful narratives

Find out how to identify and respond to common strategies used to justify animal exploitation – and what to communicate instead.



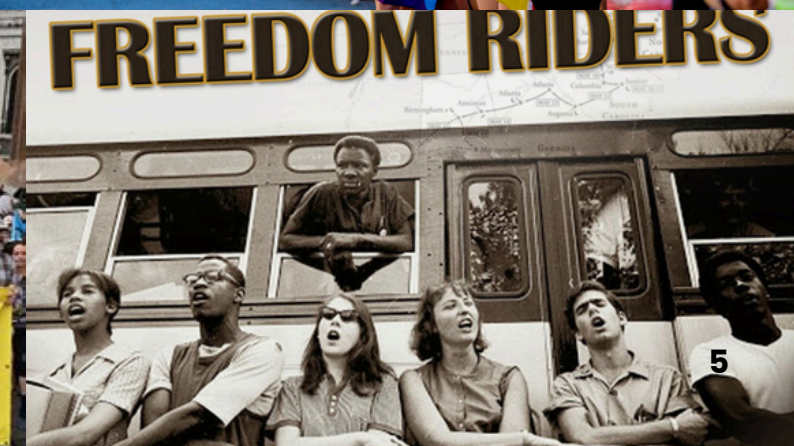
How we can create lasting change

Understand how narrative strategy can move people from pity to empathy, from individual to systemic thinking, and from awareness to action.

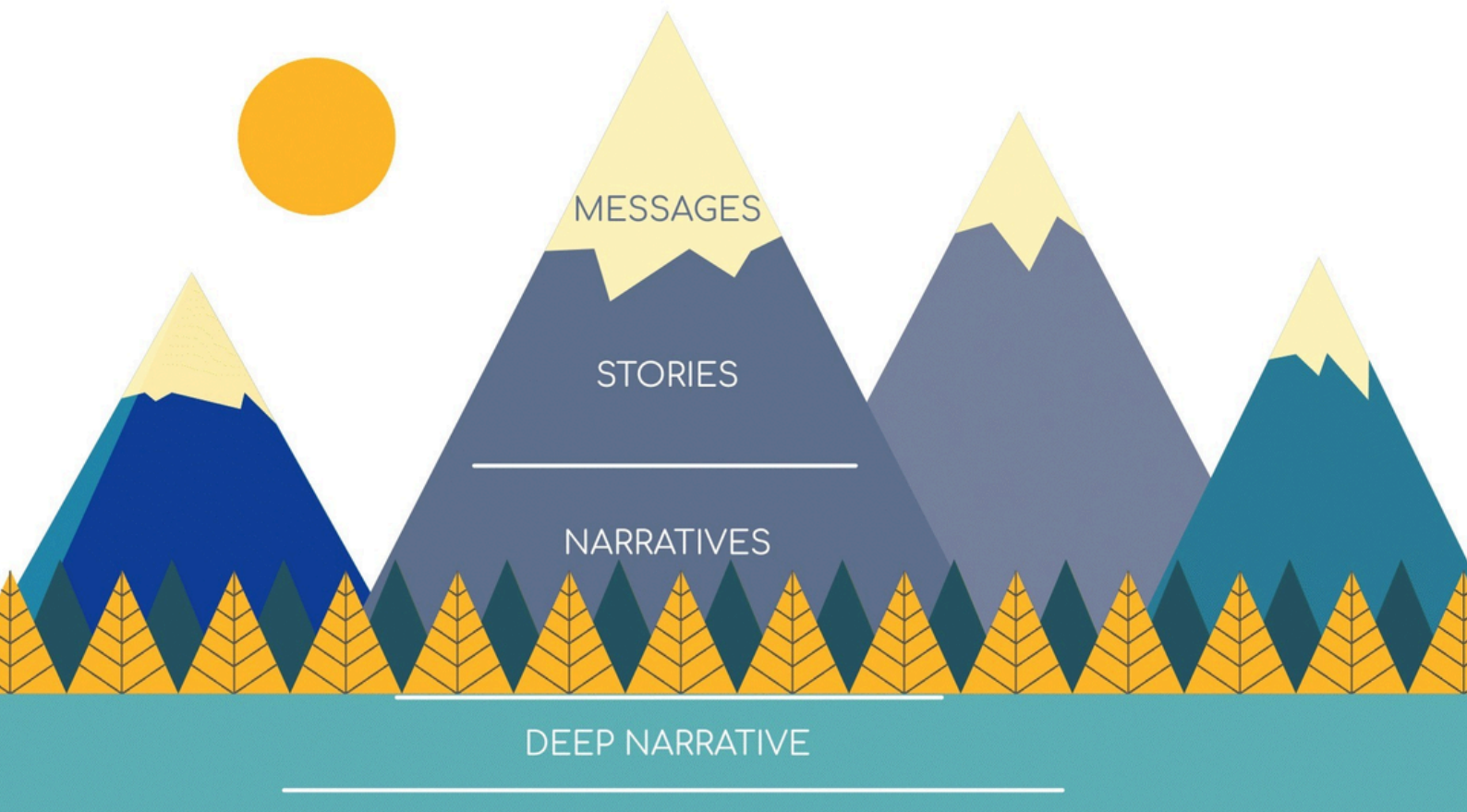


Narrative change has always been foundational to social change.

We can only bring into existence what society can imagine and believes is possible...



Changing the Narrative Landscape



The slow, hard work of any social justice movement is to change the narrative landscape that society is immersed in.

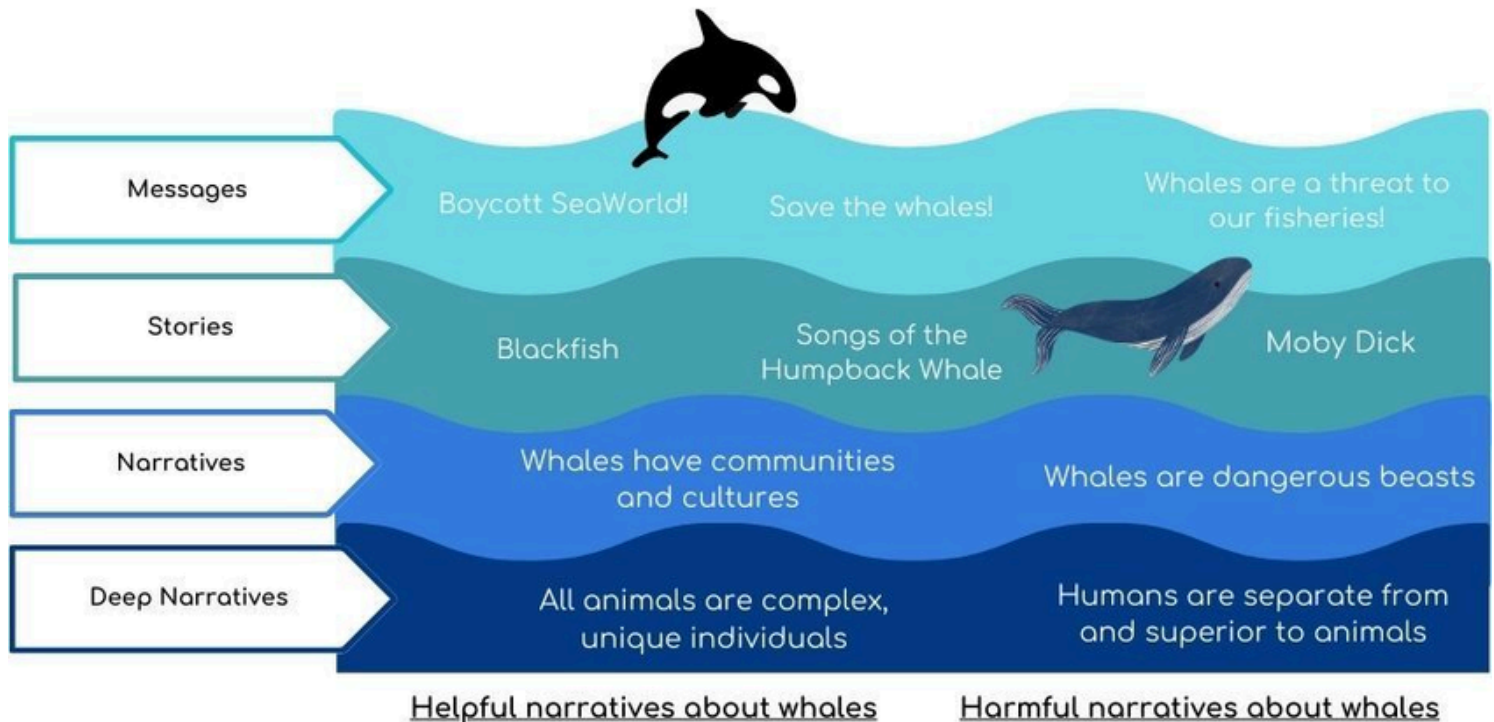
This involves reinforcing and spreading helpful narratives about an issue, while challenging and crowding out harmful narratives.

In essence, narrative change is about **shifting what's seen as 'common sense'**.

People can only see and imagine what's possible from within the landscape they're immersed in.

The biggest part of our role as communicators is understanding the values and narratives that resonate with persuadable people, and amplifying them until they become **the dominant ideas that society lives by.**

Changing the Narrative Landscape



Narratives are deeply embedded ideas that shape how people view an issue and interpret information about it. Narratives are brought to life by words, images, messages and stories.

Narrative change involves challenging and crowding out **harmful narratives**, while reinforcing and seeding **helpful narratives**.

To persuade people, we need to **engage them at every narrative level in our communications** – through the words and images we use, and the messages and stories we tell.

Great work has been done to meaningfully change the narrative about whales over many decades, so that they are no longer seen as 'monsters of the deep', but as **unique individuals with intelligence, emotions and culture**. This has been done through reinforcing helpful narratives about whales through albums of whale songs, natural history shows, films like *Free Willy* and documentaries like *Blackfish*. **This change in narrative has also increased public support for organisations that work to protect whales.**

Persuasives

Animal Freedom

Animal Abilities

Share that other animals feel complex emotions and have unique abilities, personalities, desires, interests, intelligence and cultures.

Social Progress

Communicate that we're continually evolving, and animal freedom is a step forward in our progress to becoming a fairer, kinder society.

Values & Morality

Reinforce that as caring people who want to live in a fairer, kinder society, supporting animal freedom is the right thing for us to do.

Bigger Us

Emphasise our shared experiences and similarities with other animals. Show that we're all part of a larger community that shares the same home.



How to Challenge Harmful Narratives

TO OVERCOME THESE NARRATIVES...

...USE THESE NARRATIVES

US/THEM

Humans are superior; hierarchy; animals aren't intelligent; animals are vastly different.



BIGGER US or ANIMAL ABILITIES

Shared experiences and similarities; everyone's dignity should be respected.

INDIVIDUALISM

Individual interests matter most; personal choice should be respected; taste and price.



BIGGER US or VALUES & MORALITY

Shared values, needs and interests; harming other animals harms who we are as a society.

THREAT

Humans/farmers/economy will suffer if we stop using animals; change is bad and a slippery slope.



SOCIAL PROGRESS

Benefits and opportunities offered by animal freedom and a plant-rich future.

ANIMALS' PURPOSE / WELFARE

As long as animals have decent living conditions and are treated well, it's OK to use and kill them.



ANIMAL ABILITIES or VALUES & MORALITY

Animal resistance; all animals want to live; a truly good life is the freedom to live, play and be with family.

FUTILITY

Humans are selfish, change is impossible, so there's no point trying to change anything.



SOCIAL PROGRESS

Change is possible, it's inevitable and it's already happening (existing solutions).

Antidotes to Harmful Narrative Strategies

The **harmful narrative strategies** used to legitimise exploiting other animals are the same used to justify oppressing certain human groups.

'**Antidote**' narratives can be used to inoculate people against these and nudge them further along their journey, and in turn build greater support for all freedoms...

1

DISTANCING & ELEVATING 'IN GROUP' FROM 'OUT GROUP'

Narrative strategy:

Distancing humans from other animals to create a sense of separation and superiority.

The same strategy has been used to distance and elevate men from women, white people from people of colour, straight cis people from LGBT+ people etc.

Antidote narrative: A Bigger Us

When 'difference' is weaponised to enable oppression, reinforcing similarities has been the counter-strategy for successful social justice movements.

We can reinforce similarities with other animals, and between vegans/activists and other animal lovers.

2

DENIAL OF MIND OF 'OUT GROUP'

Narrative strategy:

Denying that other animals have complex minds, emotions and experiences reduces their perceived capacity to suffer and their desire to live fulfilling lives.

A similar strategy has been used to frame women and people of colour as intelligently inferior, and LGBT+ people as confused/corrupted.

Antidote narrative: Animal Abilities

Research has found that the less people attribute mental abilities to farmed animals, the less conflict they feel about eating them.

Showing other animals' emotional and cognitive abilities, as well as their personalities, interests and cultures, can help people feel more conflicted and questioning about eating other animals - nudging them further along their hearts, mindsets and actions journey.

Antidotes to Harmful Narrative Strategies

3

PROTECTING 'IN-GROUP' IDENTITY (CULTURES & TRADITIONS)

Narrative strategy:

When exploitation is framed as 'traditional', it becomes easier to justify. Change is framed as a threat to social customs and is often used to resist progress.

Examples: bull fighting, farming animals, female genital mutilation, environmental protections...

Antidote narrative: Values & Morality

Values and morality underpin our individual and collective identities. Animal freedom can be framed as a way of living in line with our values, and part of traditional cultures.

Exploiting other animals can be framed as a violation of our values, and of life itself. And we can reinforce how traditions naturally evolve as society evolves.

4

DENIAL OF ALTERNATIVES

Narrative strategy:

Denying there are practical alternatives is usually the last weapon in the opposition's arsenal. So even if people agree that an oppressed group are similar in all the ways that matter, and change is seen as the right thing to do, the opposition frame change as impractical.

This strategy was used in an attempt to prevent the abolition of slavery.

Antidote narrative: Social Progress

Showing that change is desirable and beneficial is crucial, but it's not enough. Futility is often the final barrier to change.

People need to see that change is possible. That it's already starting to happen in a meaningful way. That alternatives are working, and that further change is inevitable. People need to understand that the real harm comes from resisting change, not from embracing it.

"We need to recognise that our opposition is not just the opposition; it is also cynicism."

— Anat Shenker-Osorio —

Narrative Strategy

To effectively change the narrative about an issue, we need a narrative strategy.

When developing a narrative strategy for a campaign, some of the questions we might want to answer are:

- What are the core **values** we're trying to reinforce?
- How do we want to frame the **animals** who are affected by this issue?
- How do we want to frame **those responsible** and/or those we want to change?
- How do we want to frame the people we want to **support our issue** or even take action?
- What **message(s)** do we want our audiences to remember and repeat?
- What **stories** do we want to tell?
- What trusted **messengers** do we want to use?
- What **vision** of the world do we want to reinforce?
- What **emotions** do we want our audiences to feel?

Narrative Strategy

NARRATIVE CHANGE CAN INVOLVE:	
CREATING	<p>an original narrative e.g. animal cousins and neighbours; shared struggle for freedom; all animals should have the freedom to live and thrive; harming other animals harms society.</p>
CHALLENGING	<p>an existing harmful narrative e.g. human supremacy; high welfare; 4Ns (normal, natural, necessary and nice); animals are vastly different; animal freedom will cause harm; futility (change is impossible).</p>
AMPLIFYING	<p>an existing helpful narrative to new audiences e.g. one health (that the health of humans, other animals and the planet is interconnected); most young animals like to play like puppies; animal freedom is a global movement.</p>
REFRAMING	<p>or changing the logic of an existing narrative e.g. plant-based farming is the only way to feed the nation, protect the planet and farmers' livelihoods; plant-based diets are essential for human health.</p>
BRIDGING	<p>or connecting an existing narrative to our issue e.g. linking climate change and pandemics to farming animals; linking corporate deceit to Big Animal Ag; showing how many cultures are plant-based and/or rooted in a culture of kinship with other animals.</p>

Narrative Unity

Building narrative unity is central to narrative change



Narratives become dominant over time through repetition.

This is why **industries spend billions on advertising**: repeated exposure is what embeds narratives in culture, until they feel like common sense.

We might not have the resources of these industries, but we can be just as **strategic about building narrative unity** to create narrative change.

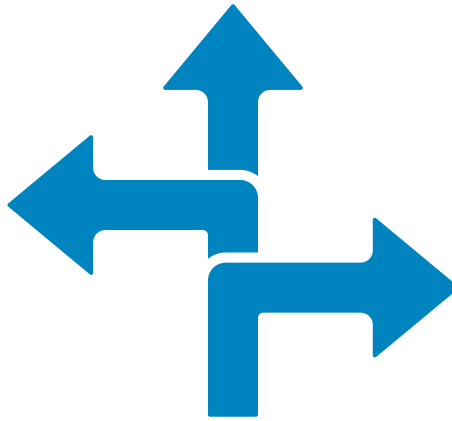
Narrative unity doesn't mean every organisation using the same messages or telling the same stories. It means that across creatively diverse communications, we can be **activating the same narrative frames** to shape how people interpret an issue.

Every time an organisation, campaigner or advocate communicates in ways that reinforce our shared narratives, it creates a cumulative effect that **no single campaign could achieve alone**.

The more our movement communicates in ways that build narrative unity, the more we **amplify each other and our issue**. And the faster we can shift what society sees as normal, acceptable and possible.

Narrative Fragmentation

Reinforcing conflicting narratives risks slowing us down



Every movement faces the risk of narrative fragmentation — where different parts of the movement, often unintentionally, **communicate in ways that pull against each other**. The narratives we reinforce — even in service of genuine progress — can sometimes make bigger change harder to achieve.

Fragmentation often arises from different views about how change happens. Awareness of this can be the first step towards **communicating together more strategically as a movement**.

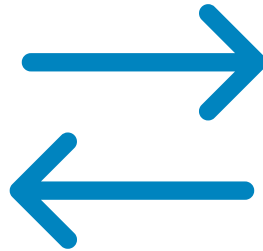
Welfare and freedom narratives

The tension between animal welfare and animal freedom narratives is perhaps our **biggest narrative fragmentation challenge** as a movement.

Welfare narratives can increase public concern about how animals are treated. But they can also reinforce the narrative that the problem is *how* animals are used and killed, rather than that they are used and killed at all. And they can make 'higher welfare' farming seem like the solution, **making the status quo more acceptable, and the goal of animal freedom feel more distant — or even invisible**.

Narrative Fragmentation

How can we strengthen rather than undermine?



How can we frame progress in welfare as a stepping stone towards animal freedom, rather than the destination?

Narrative frames that risk undermining freedom:

- Ending the cage age would be a victory for animals.
- We need slower-growing breeds of chickens to reduce suffering.
- Gassing pigs with CO2 is cruel and we must move to better methods.

Narrative frames that could point towards freedom:

- Getting animals out of cages is an important step towards a world where they can live free.
- No animal should be in pain from birth, all so an industry can profit from them.
- Ending gas chambers is long overdue, and an important step towards getting animals out of factory farms and slaughterhouses.

Freedom and abolitionist narratives that imply we must get there immediately can **also risk undermining progress**, alienating people further back in their journey, and making animal freedom seem like an unrealistic ideal rather than an inevitable destination.

Showing an incremental pathway (whether it's supporting farmers through transition, institutions supporting plant-rich norms, drastically reducing the number of animals farmed, ending factory farming etc.) can make animal freedom feel like a direction of travel rather than an impossible leap.

The intention isn't to water down our vision. It's to make it feel possible.

Moving people from an ANIMAL WELFARE mindset to an ANIMAL FREEDOM mindset:

Our primary goal, as animal allies, is helping people to **understand, respect** and **empathise** with other animals.

We want to get people to a place where they **feel moral outrage** that other animals are being farmed/raced/tested on, **rather than merely feeling pity** about their conditions or mistreatment.

As a society, **we are deeply rooted in a welfare worldview**. While it has **increased public concern** about the ways other animals are mistreated, it's a narrative that has been **co-opted by animal exploitation industries**, to the point that 'animal welfare' has become **synonymous with 'farming animals'**. It's also used by the racing, zoo and pharmaceutical industries to legitimise their businesses.

'Animal welfare', as a narrative, **doesn't accelerate progress towards animal freedom** – it **maintains a status quo where using other animals is acceptable**, as long as they're treated 'well'. *

To move people further along their 'hearts, mindsets and actions' journey, as well as change the narrative context that we're living in, we can **emphasise other animals' abilities** (their intelligence, complex emotions, personalities, desires, interests, communities, cultures, awe-inspiring abilities, and their similarities to humans). We can also communicate what **animal freedom** looks like.

* NB. when we're referring to animal welfare in this context, we mean as a 'public' narrative, rather than the necessary 'inside game' strategy to improve the conditions of farmed animals trapped in the system.

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Narrative Change in Practice



ANIMAL WELFARE

Highlights the **nightmare** – how other animals **suffer** and are **killed**.

Frames other animals as **vulnerable victims**.

E.g. messages/stories that show farmed animals as a mass of **anonymous victims**; how they attack each other; how they live in their own excrement; how they suffer and die.

Highlights experiences that most **humans can't identify with** (or don't want to identify with).

Provokes **pity** and **sympathy** (**distancing** emotions).

ANIMAL FREEDOM

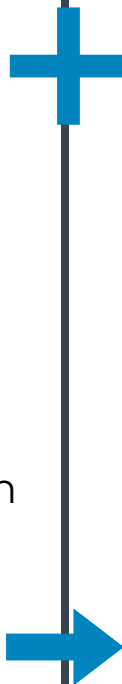
Highlights the **dream** – how fellow animals should be **free** and **thriving**.

Frames other animals as **unique individuals**.

E.g. messages/stories that show how mother chickens sing to their babies in the egg; how farmed animals **care** for and **love their families**; how they **resist their exploitation** and try to escape.

Highlights experiences that **humans can identify with** (and are happy to identify with).

Provokes **empathy** (a **connecting** emotion).



1

Narrative Change in Practice



Most **people care about dogs and cats** not only because they see them as **family members**, but also as **unique individuals** with **personalities** and **preferences**.

Most Brits would never eat a dog or cat, and are morally outraged by cruelty towards them because they already **empathise** and connect with them.



Most **people empathise with primates** because they recognise their **similarities** to humans, their **intelligence**, and how they are part of an **extended family**.

While their similarities to humans has been a justification for testing on them, it is also the reason many countries are moving away from testing on them.



This 1970 album **changed the narrative about whales as 'monsters of the deep'**, helping people to see them as **intelligent, emotional** and **cultural** beings, with language, music and communities.

It became one of the most listened-to 'animal music' albums and **increased public support for banning 'whaling'**, because people now empathised with them.



As a movement, we're great at **exposing the nightmare** of how farmed animals suffer, **yet we focus less on the dream** of how they can thrive and how they are **emotional, intelligent and unique individuals**. We expect people to feel moral outrage at how they are mistreated, yet **most people are far back on their empathy journey** when it comes to farmed animals.

1

Narrative Change in Practice

Moving people from an ANIMAL WELFARE mindset to an ANIMAL FREEDOM mindset:

We absolutely should **expose the reality** of how other animals are suffering due to **oppressive systems** and **cruel industries**.

But to ensure that people feel **empathy**, and not just pity/sympathy, we can also show how other animals **can thrive if they are free**.

To provoke **moral outrage** about what is happening, and not just pity, people first have to **connect** and **empathise** with other animals.

They also need to be able to understand and **imagine what the future looks like** where other animals are free and their dignity is respected.



People **remember** Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* speech for **the dream** (**how African Americans should be thriving alongside white Americans**), not for the nightmare (of how they're currently suffering).

We **need both the nightmare** and the **dream** as part of our story. But we also need to remember that it's the **vision of a better future that most inspires and motivates people**.

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Narrative Change in Practice



FREEDOM TO MARRY

Shifted away from talking about gay people being denied marriage and missing out on tax breaks to communicating what the **future would look like if everyone was able to celebrate their love and commitment** in front of friends and family.

TRUTH

The campaign to end youth smoking focused largely on the goal of **framing young people as the change-makers**. While it also focused on how smoking harmed young people, this wasn't the dominant message (unlike most anti-smoking campaigns).



TOGETHER FOR YES

The successful campaign to make abortion legal in Ireland moved away from the usual narrative strategy of focusing mainly on the harm caused to women, and instead pivoted to focusing on a **vision of Ireland that was centred on care, compassion and change**.

CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

It wasn't just MLK's speeches that centred on a **vision of a better America**. Demonstrations showed what America could and should look like – black, white, male, female, young and old Americans of all classes, coming together in **unity and solidarity**.



Want to find out more about what we can learn from these campaigns?
<<< Check out **Animal Think Tank's Substack**. >>>

Moving people from an **INDIVIDUAL** mindset to a **SYSTEMS** mindset:

Much of our movement's communications about **who's to blame** can unintentionally **frame 'non-vegans'** or **individual farms** as **the 'villain'**.

This framing **provokes either backlash** from pre-vegans (who will often double-down on unhelpful narratives around personal choice, 'vegans are militant', 'vegans are anti-farmers' etc.)...

...or unintentionally **reinforces the industry narrative of 'a few bad farms'**, rather than this being a systemic problem across whole industries.

While individual change is important, the reality is that in our current social context, **only a small percentage of people will go vegan and stay committed**, because of the perceived high social cost.

As a movement, by positioning veganism as our dominant solution narrative, we're **only resonating with a small segment of society** who are further along their journey. And we're **alienating the majority of people** who might find other narratives about change more persuasive.

We can foreground how the exploitation of other animals is a **systemic problem**. As with all other social justice issues, the problem isn't that people are racist, sexist, homophobic or speciesist. The problem is that **people are conditioned by their environment**, where our **systems are rigged** so that marginalised groups suffer and are treated as inferior. The same goes with farmers – they are conditioned by a cruel system/industry, and are not our movement's 'enemy'.

SYSTEM
CHANGE!
= NOT =
CLIMATE
CHANGE!

ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

Initially, environmental advocacy focused more on **personal responsibility**, such as recycling or reducing individual **'carbon footprints'** (a narrative pushed by the fossil fuel industry to shift responsibility from them).

Over time, there has been a significant **shift towards targeting systemic issues**, such as industrial pollution, fossil fuel dependency, and global environmental policies.

PUBLIC HEALTH

The campaigning approach to issues like smoking and obesity has evolved from focusing on individual behaviour to addressing broader social factors of health. Like pushing for a ban on tobacco and junk food advertising.

JUNK FOOD BRANDS ARE TARGETING CHILDREN
WITH 3 ADS EVERY 10 MINUTES ONLINE.
And it's working.

CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

While early efforts were focused on challenging individuals to change their racist attitudes, the movement shifted to focus on dismantling institutional racism through legislation.

ANIMAL FREEDOM MOVEMENT

Our movement is starting to focus less on individual change as the main solution and more on systemic change. E.g. pushing for an end to factory farming, banning advertising of factory farmed products, exposing the welfare-washing tactics of the industry, and pushing for a plant-rich food system.



Narratives

— Key Takeaways —



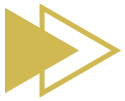
Narrative change is foundational to social change

We can only bring into existence what society can imagine and believes is possible. Changing the narrative has been crucial to the success of other social movement campaigns.



Persuasive narratives can build support for animal freedom

Four narratives that increase people's pro-animal attitudes and challenge harmful narratives are: Animal Abilities, Social Progress, A Bigger Us, and Values & Morality.



Moving people from a 'welfare' to a 'freedom' mindset...

...involves building empathy through highlighting: the abilities of other animals; how they are unique individuals with personalities, preferences, interests and cultures; and how similar they are to humans in all the ways that matter.



Focusing on the future vision/dream can be inspiring and motivating

While we need to expose the present nightmare, it is the vision of a better future that is more likely to inspire people and help them understand how this is a future that benefits them, therefore they have a stake in it too.



Focusing on systemic change can be key to lasting change

While individual change is important, focusing too much on it can distract from who's most responsible for bringing about change - industries, governments, institutions - who can then create the conditions for greater individual change.

Want to find out more about persuasive communications for animal freedom?



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