Engaging with Narratives for Peace[1]

Julia Roig

Executive Summary

How do peacebuilding organisations communicate about peace online and offline? *Narrative competency* must be a fundamental aspect of our work as peacebuilders in the modern age, as we confront the challenges posed by social media, divided on-line communities, growing political polarisation globally and more easily-ready manipulation tactics within public discourse.

The term *narrative* is ubiquitous today and commonly used interchangeably with *story*. Indeed, storytelling is widely recognised now as an important skill within the social sector, a needed tool for social change that is woven into traditional conceptions of strategic communications, fundraising and awareness-raising on important societal issues. There is currently a lack of understanding within the peacebuilding field, however, of the concept of *narrative* fundamentally as a cognitive framework that resides at the level of our unconscious minds, which allows human beings to make meaning of the world.

Several powerful philanthropies like Ford Foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies and the Open Society Foundation have recognised this deficit of understanding and are investing in *narrative change* platforms and resources for social justice and equality.[2] Narratives are clearly much more than a passing fad.

Our current strategic communications practices are siloed; organisational-level storytelling is no longer enough to confront these evolving conflict dynamics. Instead, the field of peacebuilding must commit to a more profound understanding and engagement at the level of societal narratives (*meta-narratives* or *dominant* narratives) that get to the heart of underlying attitudes, beliefs and actions that affect a peacebuilding agenda. While much has been

---

[1] This policy brief has been cross-published with the Alliance for Peacebuilding and PartnersGlobal.
[2] The Ford Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropies *Narrative Initiative* at https://www.narrativeinitiative.org/ http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ and *Working Narratives* at https://workingnarratives.org/

written about how activists can address *narrative change*, peacebuilders have a special calling to *engage with narratives* in a way that is self-reflective, curious, seeks complexity and constructs meaning with others.

The Relevance of Narratives to Peacebuilding

While the term *narratives* may be enjoying a resurgence, the study of narrative is not new. There is a rich body of interdisciplinary research from the cognitive sciences, anthropology, sociology, psychology, communications and more. The peacebuilding field has decades of academic study on narratives as a tool to transform conflict and to re-establish a culture of peace. Many practitioners will therefore feel comfortable with the concept of narrative practice *as applied to others* to identify, tap into and transform individual narratives to foster reconciliation and healing in contexts of conflict and violence. Beyond peacebuilding practice, however, societal narratives about peace also affect: (1) our advocacy efforts on foreign policy; (2) our ability to broker new partnerships with other sectors; (3) our convening of coalitions and movement building; (4) how we build support and raise funds for our work; and (5) how we achieve broad-based culture change that reflects peacebuilding values. These represent *collective goals* of peacebuilders no matter where we are working. So, effective *narrative engagement* will take place as a community, in dialogue with our peacebuilding colleagues and then together with others.

The implications for policy and practice of *narrative engagement* must incorporate this reflection on our own deeply held beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that are tied to our individual and collective identities and lived experience as peacebuilders. Instead of presenting fixed recommendations or specific guidance, therefore, the following discussion of *narrative engagement* includes a brief overview of basic concepts and provides a series of questions peacebuilders can ask themselves. My hope is that this exploration will allow the peacebuilding field to move beyond instrumentalised concepts of strategic communications to *jointly construct meaning* about peace within our field and with the many others we are trying to bring into our efforts.

This is not an article about how to effectively change or combat a *toxic narrative*. Rather, it is a call for the peacebuilding community to conscientiously analyse our own narratives and reflect on how we better incorporate different world views into a jointly constructed, more complex *dominant societal narrative of peace*.

Definitions

So, what are we talking about when we use the word "narrative"? And what's the difference between "narratives" and "stories?"

1.   **Frames:** A good starting place is to first describe the concept of *frames*. The Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) and **Partners**Global have been partnering with Frameworks Institute[3] to begin to understand "framing" as applied to how we discuss peace and peacebuilding. Cognitive science tells us that our brains rely on subconscious internal schemas (or frames) that help us to make sense of the information we receive, interpreted by our own

---

[3] http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ and *Working Narratives* at https://workingnarratives.org/

experiences. The brain has to decide what information is important and what is not important - we do this by identifying patterns, creating categories and relying on stereotypes. Messages are delivered to our brains not only through language, but also through images and symbols. Frames are therefore an important concept to carefully consider whenever we are communicating about peace, because frames fundamentally shape the way we see the world and how others' frames will generate unconscious, emotional responses to information. Think for example about an "illegal alien" as opposed to an "undocumented worker." The slight shift in framing makes a huge difference in our reactions and our understanding of the social problem and policy implications.

2.   **Narratives and Storytelling:** "Narratives" and "stories" are often used interchangeably. Storytelling is more than sharing vignettes and messages. Stories have characters; they have a beginning, middle and end; there is a plot, conflict and resolution. A narrative on the other hand is a system of stories that fit together and provide a coherent view of the world based on our lived experience, our culture, or our education. "Narratives contain patterns that fit the data of everyday life (events, people, actions, sequences of actions, messages, and so on), explaining how events unfold over time and how one thing causes another."[4] For example, the narrative of the U.S. consists of countless stories, values, and themes. This narrative centres on a rugged individualism, in which the American spirit enables citizens to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and achieve the American dream. This narrative then allows us to interpret the everyday stories that we experience in particular ways. When we read about a successful CEO's humble beginnings and journey to the top of a corporation, we innately recognise the themes of hard work and hustle as central to the American experience.

Some academics further explain that narrative frames are largely unconscious, as a way for us to make sense of information (like soil). Stories are manifestations of those unconscious narratives (like trees that grow from the soil).[5] And many different stories can grow from a shared narrative frame. Another example of a deeply-held narrative might understand human nature as mostly self-interested, egotistical and based on competitive instincts[6]. Within this narrative soil, human interactions are thought of as battles or competitions where individuals or groups pursue divergent interests, a zero-sum game of trying to secure scarce resources. The stories we tell that spring from this soil include clear winners and losers, and use the language of war (""war on drugs" "battle of the sexes" etc.) or sports analogies. Winners are rewarded for truth, excellence and hard work and a positive outcome is achieved.

In the peacebuilding field, we often tell stories of individual peacebuilders to promote our work and our values. We point to heroic figures like Martin Luther King Jr. as inspiration for non-violence, or we highlight grassroots activists from conflict-affected countries who have overcome personal tragedies and are reaching out to bridge divides in their communities. These stories grow from our own narrative soil, the way we see the world from our lived experience and beliefs about social justice, restored relationships and interdependence. The

---

[4] Ruston, S. W., (2009, September 03). *Understand What Narrative Is and Does*.

[5] "Complete Target Audience Analysis" Ajit Maan, Narrative Strategies Journal, November 13, 2018
https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/bcc8cc_0097d2f7d51c481eb4997dcbd8b6d395.pdf

[6] See Michael Karlberg, *Reframing Public Discourse*, in Forming a Culture of Peace 2012. p. 24

challenge we face with *engaging at the level of narratives* is to consider the unconscious soil of others who may not understand or process our stories in the same way.

3.   **Meta-Narratives:** The concept of a *Meta-Narrative* is the idea that there are some narratives that are so pervasive that they manifest in an entire society's world view and are often experienced so unconsciously to be identified more as "common sense." These are narratives that are repeated over and over and provide a foundation for how we understand both our shared history and current events. Also described as *Dominant Narratives,* these narrative frames affect our beliefs about identity, community and how we either belong or consider others as outsiders. Many of the dominant narratives around peacebuilding are therefore deeply tied to the identity of who considers themselves to be a *peacebuilder* and who is outside of that definition as "other." For example, professional peacebuilders often think of the corporate sector as "other"—those actors who are outside our identity as *peace-builder* because of our own dominant narratives about selfish capitalists.

4.   **Metaphors:** Another concept important in understanding narrative engagement is the fact that humans also make sense of the world using *metaphors*. Engaging with narratives, therefore, is to be in tune with the metaphors that structure how we perceive, how we think and what we do.[7] Metaphors are a part of our everyday life, not just how we talk with each other, but they penetrate our deeply held perceptions and our actions. Professors Lakoff and Johnson give an example that is pertinent to the prevalence of *war* metaphors in how we argue with each other. They give examples of how *argument is war*:

Your claims are *indefensible*.
He attacked *every weak point* in my argument.
His criticisms were *right on target*.
I *demolished* his argument.
I've never *won* an argument with him.
You disagree? Okay, *shoot*!
If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.
He *shot down* all of my arguments.

We talk about arguments in this way because that is how we perceive them, especially in the English-speaking US culture. What if there was a different cultural metaphor for arguing? A peacebuilding-oriented metaphor? "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another."[8] If we want to build understanding and experience of peace narratives, our conscientious use of metaphor will be an important tool. The authors of *Metaphors to Live By* pose the possibility that instead of a war, *argument* could be considered as a dance. Participants would be seen as performers, and the goal of arguing could be to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. Using the language of dance, participants would experience arguing differently.

---

[7] See *Metaphors We Live By,* George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, 1980.
[8] Ibid. p. 5

When we are advocating strategy within our peacebuilding coalitions, when we are lobbying governments or corporations for reforms, are we using and living the language of war to argue our points? How does this affect our ability to partner and build coalitions?

Communicating about Peace

In 2018, AfP and PartnersGlobal conducted a brief study of the social media campaigns of AfP members and several companies. This effort fitted into a broader effort to begin to catalogue and analyse existing peace messaging frameworks both within our community and in peace-adjacent cause-marketing campaigns within the private sector. We found that many peacebuilding organisations use the metaphor of "light" to describe our work in the world, using images of candles, and "illumination" of a path forward to a "brighter" future; campaigns that show all humans are *Created to "Shine."* This is often combined with religious messages and imagery to inspire and offer hope. In this overview, we found several themes woven throughout the campaigns:

5.   **Love and Togetherness:** The most common occurrence across this theme is the message that we need to build bridges and partnerships to work towards peace. Some subcategories within this theme include: neighbourly love; familial love; sense of community and connection; collective strength through unity; and, overall togetherness. Notable examples of campaigns include *Build Bridges Not Walls*, *Partnering for Peace*, and *Sanctuary Everywhere*.

6.   **Diversity and Inclusion:** These messages incorporate ethnic and racial diversity, religious diversity, and innovation through diversity. There is a big focus on gender diversity, connected with messages about empowerment to lift up marginalised groups in society. For example: *Inspiring Women with Soul* and *When Women Rise, We All Do.*

7.   **Overcoming Differences:** These campaigns acknowledge differences and seek to overcome them with messages that stress overcoming stereotypes and casting off labels. Examples include #FacingDifference, #OvercomingLabels.

8.   **Creating Change***:* Creating change is the largest theme we found throughout the AfP membership with a focus on the transformation of conflict towards peace, making the world a better place and working for a better tomorrow. Examples include #RipplesOfChange, Conflict Reimagined, #wagepeace100, Voices for Peace and #NourishChange.

9.   **Fighting Injustice:** Within issues of justice, most organisations focus on specific injustices, for examples, #SaveTPS regarding immigration, and #HealingIsJustice regarding gun violence. The general message of #HumanitarianAid is also promoted within an overarching international development message.

10.   **Global Responsibility:** These campaigns communicate the importance of bringing together all people to help create a better world for all. The messages promote concepts such as: what happens in other countries affects all of us; One World; linking people from around the world to build understanding. Examples include #peacehacks, Peace is Within Our Power and #WorldAidsDay.

11.   **Personal Responsibility:** These messages highlight the idea that we all have an individual ability to make an impact. Some of these sub-themes include: kindness and good

deeds; the Golden Rule; individual empowerment through small actions individuals can take; and, we can all make a difference. For example, *Shine Bright,* #ChooseKindness, #WeAreAllPeacebuilders.

12. **Economic Effectiveness**: These campaigns are more focused on facts and data to show that peacebuilding programmes and conflict prevention are more cost effective. Campaigns with statistics and indexes like the Global Peace Index describe the economic loss of conflict and war on the global economy.

The question about these diverse campaigns is how they may be collectively penetrating through to our audiences to engage with a deeper narrative of peace. The messaging campaigns mentioned above will appear to be "common sense" for those working within peacebuilding organisations and our allies because they comfortably fit within our collective identity and our master frames of how we experience the world. To what extent do we take into account other narrative frames when formulating these kinds of campaigns? If our audience lives with a different dominant narrative, some might find our campaigns naïve, annoying, refutable or perhaps just irrelevant and meaningless.

Narrative Identities

13. **Interpellation:** Inviting others to consider themselves as peacebuilders is to engage with their worldviews and identities. *Interpellation* is an academic concept that means calling on a person to acknowledge and act on a particular identity.[9] Some calls to assume an identity have more force than others. For example, someone called to "come on back" in a doctor's office easily assumes the identity of a patient. Interpellation occurs in storytelling when the reader or listener is called to recognise themselves in particular characters. A common strategy of peacebuilding organisations is to tell stories that include characters who are positioned as heroic - or humble - bridge-builders (metaphor!) with an intent to inspire others and call on our audience to also assume that identity. However, we cannot assume that interpellation from our stories is always successful, and we have to acknowledge when and how our audiences may experience barriers to assuming that identity, based on their own life experience and dominant narratives.

When we are looking to partner with other sectors, are we inviting them to join us in our identity as a peacebuilder or are they considered "other"? How do those working in the private sector, security sector, journalists, scientists or others identify with an identity and master narrative of peacebuilding? What prevents them from recognising that identity in themselves, either in their personal or private lives? What other aspects of our storytelling, i.e. the context or the difficulty faced by the characters, prevent interpellation?

14. **Negative and Positive Peace:** One on-going challenge we face with peace narratives and interpellation is determining when and how our storytelling focuses on a frame of *negative peace* versus *positive peace[10].* Depending on our audience of potential supporters, are the characters in our stories individual peacebuilders who are operating within a con-

---

[9] Arthur Frank, *Letting Stories Breath*, page 49.
[10] See Norwegian pioneer of peace research, Johan Galtung.

flict-affected country and working to end violence? Or do we tell stories that highlight characters working in another country (not at war) on social good activities that will keep their communities peaceful? Which call is the most compelling for our audience to identify with those characters, based on the audience's lived experiences and existing understanding of "peace?" What is the action we want the audience to take after hearing or reading about an individual living in a conflict context, if they cannot relate through their own lived experience? Will interpellation take place for that audience to acknowledge and act on the invitation to join a movement and assume a new identity as a *peacebuilder?*

Our work is not to convince our audience to change their identity, but to construct and reinforce a newly-shared and expansive narrative of peacebuilding that builds a common understanding that peace is possible, and that individuals can play a part in achieving and sustaining peace. These new narratives need to be shared - over and over with repetition - so that they contain much more complexity, depth and meaning for those we want to secure as allies and supporters. By opening up the conversation, elevating the new narrative and repeating it from multiple places with those new partners, the narrative of peace can become a part of the consciousness in our societies over time.

Beyond Sender-Receiver Communication and Counter-Narratives

15.   **Beyond the Sender-Receiver Communication Model:** There is debate among academics about whether it is feasible to truly "counter" a narrative. An outdated model of communication that still permeates our understanding of how to communicate about peacebuilding includes the "sender-receiver" model. It looks like this:

Message

Sender --→ Receiver

Beginning with Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone, this model requires the sender to ensure that their message arrives "intact" to the receiver. We carefully craft the message to convey our intended meaning, trying to protect the communication from being distorted during the relay of our message to our audience. For example: "Be the change you want to see in the world!" The problem with this out-of-date model is that research shows that the making of meaning happens not in the message itself, but in the mind of the receiver.

In our communications about peacebuilding, we often start with our own message – *what do we want* to convey about peace? This is complicated in the peacebuilding field by the diversity of our work and the narratives we may feel we need to "counter." For example, peacebuilders see a direct line between inner peace, peace in the family, peace in the community, peace in the nation and therefore peace in the world. Small acts of kindness have a butterfly effect to lead to a more peaceful society. We want peace education in schools; more equality, inclusion, tolerance, empathy; we want restorative justice in our courts; we want less gun deaths; we want a foreign policy that invests in conflict prevention, supports diplomacy and does not rely on militarised solutions. We want to end violence; and, we want to invest in peace.

16.   **The Other's Narrative Frames:** Whoever may be our target audience, however, they are not a blank canvas ready to receive our messages intact. Our target audience comes with their own narrative frames that will make meaning out of our message. They may support a strong military, be wary of "internationalists" who threaten national sovereignty, or associate "peace" with a left-leaning progressive political movement that does not reflect their own identity. It's not a matter of *countering* a narrative, so much as it might be to *shift* a new narrative to come to the foreground. Changing the language used in a particular context can help to accomplish this goal. When considering the refugee crises, words like *invasion*, *flood*, and *wave* dominate the discourse. This activates a dehumanizing frame that compares refugees and migrants to dangerous weather events, denying their individual humanity. Adjusting the terms of reference to better emphasise that refugees and migrants are people too, simply looking for a better life, can bring a different narrative frame to the foreground. We have to find a way to further elaborate the narrative, and by doing so, seek to understand where there may be *gaps* that can be filled together.

17.   **Narrative Gaps:** A starting point for this engagement, however, is to first interrogate ourselves about what peacebuilders decide not to include in our own narratives. Where are our gaps? For example, we all remember the narrative that the Boston Tea party was a political protest against Britain's authority to tax the colonies without parliamentary representation. However, the story that has been mostly disregarded is that the additional taxation of tea imports cut into prominent colonists' tea smuggling operations—but that wasn't the story the colonists wanted to tell.[11]

We can only work to shift narratives if we know that they exist both in ourselves and in our audience.

Narrative Analysis

The following section is largely taken from the work of Jerome Bruner's The Narrative Construction of Reality.[12]

By better understanding the features of narrative, it is possible to engage more intentionally with the narratives we create, both in the story we tell ourselves and the stories we share with others. Two features of narrative include: *interpretation* (the telling and understanding of a story is predicated on humans' capacity to interpret) and *referentiality* (a narrative is made up of specific points of reference that influence the overall sense of the story). Here are a few ways to engage with these features of narrative:

17. **Consider why you are telling a story the way that you are:** What you are choosing to omit and include, what language and framing are you using. For example: When reflecting upon your own story about a project you are planning or already engaged in, think deeply about what elements are present to the exclusion of others (your motivations, who has a

---

[11] Dr. Scott Ruston, Center for Strategic Communications, Arizona State University, Comments
[12] Bruner, J. (1991). The Narrative Construction of Reality. *Critical Inquiry, 18*(1), 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1086/448619

role in the story, etc.), consider the framing you are using and the perspective(s) it represents (that of your organisation, that of the specific project, that of your role in the project, and so on).

18. Reflect on what lived experience and knowledge you are bringing to the moment as compared with your audience or the storyteller. What are the filters you have, based on your experience, that colour your interpretation? For example: In collecting testimonies of people's experiences of violence, consider how the storyteller's experience as a victim/survivor interacts with your training and experience as a peacebuilder/advocate/etc.

19. Select a new sequence of events or different perspective upon which your story is based. For example: When reflecting on a project with a given community, contextualise the project within the historical narrative of the community, your programme, your organisation, etc. How does the story about the project change when different events are highlighted as points of reference from different perspectives?

To the extent that our perceptions of reality are reinforced by the stories we tell, relating to our own narratives with greater intention and attention to the components of the narrative process provides an opportunity to consciously shift our own reality—how we engage with ourselves and others, our work and our external audiences.

Moral Frames and Narrative Engagement

20. Liberal and Conservative Worldviews: Cognitive scientists describe physical differences in our neural circuitry based on the narrative frameworks that have built up over time by our experiences, what we've read and been told etc. Research done on politically progressive and conservative brains offers some insight into how we may identify and engage with those narrative frameworks as it applies to peacebuilding. George Lakoff in *Don't Think of An Elephant!* describes a person's relationship to the nation and politics in the US through the lens of *family dynamics* which reflects our moral logic, or deeply held values. For example, the *neural mind* of progressives is described as "nurturant parent family," a framework of empathy with a focus on the importance of the collective good. On the other hand, the moral logic of conservatives has been described as "strict father family" with a framework of authority, individual responsibility and discipline. In addition, Jonathan Haidt popularised *moral foundations theory* in his 2012 book *The Righteous Mind* that describes five spectrums of *moralities*:

- harm/care (strong empathy for those that are suffering and care for the most vulnerable);
- fairness/reciprocity (life liberty and justice for all);
- ingroup/loyalty (tribalism, patriotism, nationalism);
- authority/respect (mechanisms for managing social rank, tempered by the obligation of superiors to protect and provide for subordinates); and

- purity/sanctity (related to the evolution of disgust, that makes us see carnality as degrading and renunciation as noble)[13]

This theory has been applied to cross-cultural differences in morality and also to explain political differences. According to Haidt, liberals tend to give priority to only the first two, harm/care and fairness/reciprocity, while conservatives give roughly equal weight to all five. He has described the moral mind as being like an audio equaliser, with five slider switches for different parts of the moral spectrum. Progressives generally use a much smaller part of the spectrum than do Conservatives. Haidt further describes that our cognitive morality foundations make humans naturally self-righteous and reminds people to respect and even learn from those whose morality differs from our own.

21. Creating a Culture of Peace Moral Frame: If a large part of our narrative work is creating a "culture of peace", is there room for other moral frames to reach that goal with people who have different moral frames than we do? To take just one example of our language in the field - Karina Korostelina writes that a culture of peace manifests as an "abiding consciousness of the *common identity of humanity* grounded in *justice* as the central organising principle of society with a framework of *collective well-being and shared prosperity*. As such a culture of peace celebrates *diversity, tolerance and solidarity*, and opens up ways that allow people to develop and exercise their unique talents and capacities and *contribute to their communities*."[14]

This definition appears to fit squarely within the progressive moral framework described as the *nurturant parent family*. Both describing the cultural change we are working for and engaging with other moral frames and values inherent in these differences requires peacebuilders to approach narratives with *curiosity* and less intent to win with a stronger narrative based on our own self-righteousness. In addition, people could have many different moral frameworks that apply in different areas of their life.

22. Narrative Braiding: The idea of engaging with moral frames to build a culture of peace is not necessarily to find commonalities with those that construct meaning in a different way, but rather to co-construct meaning with a new complex narrative (using all five sliders on the equaliser) with new actors and new threads in the story. "Narrative Braiding" is a concept that entails congregating with people who experience issues differently and, with the help of a trained facilitator, sharing their particular stories of a situation, engaging in active and meaningful listening and storytelling techniques to collectively develop a new story, that then constructs parts of a new narrative.[15]

We seek to move beyond one-dimensional narratives to shape a more complex picture, using different frames and new metaphors. We may believe that we understand the other side's narrative (strong security, moral father figure etc.), but how much have peacebuilders really explored our own narrative and the gaps in our stories? Sara Cobb refers to a "better-formed story" that incorporates various perspectives and the possibility that things are not

---

[13] Haidt, J. (2012). *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York:Pantheon Books

[14] Forming a Culture of Peace, edited by Karina V. Korostelina 2012 p.4

[15] Cobb, S. (2013) Narrative "Braiding" and the Role of Public Officials in Transforming the Public's Conflicts*. Narrative and Conflict: *Explorations in Theory and Practice*, https://doi.org/10.13021/G8TG65

as they seem. We have a tendency to be reductionist (Yes to military might – No to military might) but these are binary narratives that are not restorative in our relationships and inclusive of diversity.[16]

Engaging with Narratives for Systemic Change

23. A Wide-Angle Lens Story: To be effective in achieving sustainable peace, we know that peacebuilders must think and work in terms of systemic change. As change agents, we try to observe and act upon interconnections within a system and seek to illuminate needed changes and galvanise movements. Storytelling and narrative change is an important part of this work, requiring an understanding of when to use individual storytelling to inspire others and when to incorporate a *wide-angle lens* story to build understanding of the broader systemic change that is needed. A best practice of social change storytelling is to demonstrate the impact of a policy or social construct through the story of one individual; a *wide-angle lens* story also includes elements of the broader social context and systemic causes of the social ill we want to address.

A profile of one person or one issue does not build understanding of the underlying factors that cause problems within a system and does not encourage our audiences to think systemically about needed public solutions. Campaigns that highlight stories of only youth or women or indigenous people as peacebuilders, while important, will not lead our target audiences to also connect these actors to a broader narrative of systems change. For example, the story of Cesar Chavez and the movement that focused on the plight of farmworkers eventually grew into a broader discussion about the need for fair pay for all workers. Stories of peace must therefore seek to connect the dots and create a bigger narrative around them as key to using narratives for systemic change.

24. Pairing Storytelling with a System Frame: Frameworks Institute has developed a comprehensive guide on how to use individual storytelling in tandem with wider angle stories. To complement the individual story, we should also answer questions about the conditions responsible for the social problem and the wider impact on society; and, we can shine a light on other perspectives of those who are also working to change those conditions. We know that changing systems means we have to change behaviours of people working within those systems, which in turn depends on an understanding of their beliefs and attitudes. Often it is narrative frames rather than reality that affect behaviour so hard data and academic studies are of little help.

For example, a Los Angeles based foundation recognised sexual trafficking of young girls of colour as a growing problem. These girls were often as young as 12, but public narrative described them as "child prostitutes," which affected police decisions to routinely arrest them. As a part of reframing this issue and identifying the need for reform of the judicial system, the foundation focused instead on the fact that underage children cannot legally consent to sex, arguing that there is no such thing as a "child prostitute." They successfully

---

[16] Cobb, S. B. (2013). *Speaking of Violence: The Politics and Poetics of Narrative in Conflict Resolution*. OUP USA.

ran a campaign to push the Associated Press to ban the phrase from its style guide and engaged with many levels of the criminal system and social services to stop arresting these girls, instead referring them to health services.[17]

Recommendations

We are experiencing such a rapid pace of change and deluge of information in the modern world, with increased polarisation and a variety of new, online communication channels that further entrench our narrative frameworks. This compels a better understanding and resources for the peacebuilding field to place *narrative engagement* at the top of our priorities. Now is the time more than ever for peacebuilders to question our own thinking, language, and assumptions in order to break down our own bubbles of meaning to co-construct new narratives for peace with others. We cannot hire consultants to do this for us. This is not a matter of partnering with better communications specialists or creative agencies. This is work we have to do ourselves through deep self-reflection and awareness of our own sense-making. Only then can we partner with others who may think differently or have complementary talents to begin to design strategies for disseminating our collective narrative for peace.

As Abby Disney reminded peacebuilders during her keynote address at PeaceCon 2018, creativity is not a transferrable skill and she opined that "peace would benefit from a better publicist." She also advised the audience not to forget the creative energy of young people as this generation intuitively operates in this new milieu of storytelling and content creation.[18]

Here are some policy recommendations for the future.

A.   Remember narrative engagement is an act of making meaning *together.* It is best done through dialogue with our intended audiences and not alone in a conference room with those who already think like we do. Awareness-raising about peacebuilding is no longer sufficient, and we can't just focus on messaging for our fundraising needs. We are co-constructing a "normative" common sense meta-narrative of peace for the future!

B.   Take the time to define why you are telling a story, what you seek to accomplish and reflect on the master narratives you may be feeding into or seeking to shift in others.

C.   Seek to create narrative complexity. While strategic communications often rely on elegant, simple messaging, engagement with peace narratives cannot be simplistic where one view is always right, where there is a simple cause and effect and a stable, static context. We also cannot be over-reliant on policy arguments alone and wonky discourses.

D.   We need to continue to fund social-science research and partner with academic institutions to explore effective frames for peacebuilding; once we understand those frames,

---

[17] "Systems Change in a Polarized Country" Mark Kramer, SSIR, April 11, 2017

[18] Watch Abigail Disney's full keynote presentation "Can the Story of Peace Be Told?" at the 2018 PeaceCon at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkNY3TMevtw&list=PLlzZxC3rZMnVdFFsFry7cdXbP4EEmd9lW&index=3&t=0s

we need to build a broader coalition to repeat, repeat through many different channels with many different voices.

E.   Partnerships with professional storytellers and the creative industry will be the key to our success. Platforms that help to maintain those ongoing collaborations to reproduce and disseminate peace narratives will also be necessary.

The Author

Julia Roig is the President of **Partners**Global, an international non-profit based in Washington DC that works through a global network to create partnerships with local change leaders to transform conflict, strengthen democratic institutions, and achieve sustainable development. Julia has been spearheading a new *Narratives for Peace* initiative at **Partners**Global, in partnerships with the Alliance for Peacebuilding to bridge theory and practice; conduct research on framing peacebuilding for a US audience; and, build partnerships with the creative industry to improve delivery of a meta-narrative for peace. The research conducted for this article was funded by a grant from the U.S. Institute of Peace. Special thanks to the amazing research team, Daphne Assimakopoulos, Sam Danello and Laura Webber.

Toda Peace Institute

The **Toda Peace Institute** is an independent, nonpartisan institute committed to advancing a more just and peaceful world through policy-oriented peace research and practice. The Institute commissions evidence-based research, convenes multi-track and multi-disciplinary problem-solving workshops and seminars, and promotes dialogue across ethnic, cultural, religious and political divides. It catalyses practical, policy-oriented conversations between theoretical experts, practitioners, policymakers and civil society leaders in order to discern innovative and creative solutions to the major problems confronting the world in the twenty-first century (see www.toda.org for more information).

Contact Us
Toda Peace Institute
Samon Eleven Bldg. 5th Floor
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0017, Japan
Email: contact@toda.org