

## What Are Narratives?

Narratives direct our attention and understanding in a particular direction. Stories about government, climate, Covid-19, gender, race, and the economy all influence our sense of possibility, and how we see and address societal problems and each other. Narratives are always being contested and mobilised – whether to perpetuate and disguise dominant interests or to challenge and transform oppressive forces and beliefs.

Narratives are ...

- o Collections of stories, messages, and explanations about how our world operates, based on certain assumptions about who counts, what matters, what is normal, and what is to be feared.
- o Grounded in deep, internalised, and often unconscious beliefs, values, and norms (invisible power) and support the operating logic of our societal institutions and structures (systemic power).
- o Always contested and shifting, either in favour of dominant actors and systems of power over, or in support of resistance and social transformation.
- o Not the same as messages or communications.  
Narratives draw on the power of the beliefs and deeply embedded logic that shape our assumptions, feelings, lives, institutions, and societies.

### *Dominant narratives*

Now a popular buzzword, narratives are not new. We know about propaganda, socially coded advertising, ideological and cultural battles, the manipulation of prejudice, and the framing of news stories in ways that blame the victim or reinforce prejudices. The machinery and practice of dominant narratives have always been here, upholding values, norms, and systems of *power over*.

Powerful state and non-state actors are skilled at controlling narratives to mobilise certain beliefs and prejudices to create fear and a sense of scarcity, discredit opposition, close democratic space, disguise their interests, and legitimise their actions – polarising and inflaming politics to divide people and consolidate political and economic power.

Digital technology and social media have greatly amplified and accelerated the ability to promote misinformation, distort facts, incite fear and hate, plant seeds of doubt, and delegitimise certain groups and agendas.

### *Transformational narratives*

Activists and social movements can contest 'official truths', unmask the destructive

interests behind dominant narratives, crack open the status quo, and elevate new narratives. Transformational narratives are more than 'counter-narratives' – they tell a different story about what's wrong, what's possible, and who we are, grounded in values and practices of equity, care, inclusion, and justice.

Transformational narratives play an important role in cultural strategies to enlarge a sense of possibility, build shared vision and understandings, and create the collective will and courage needed to challenge and shift power in all arenas of struggle. Digital and social media strategies can also be mobilised around transformational narratives.