



Changing the Story: Story Based Strategies for Direct Action Planning

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Author's Intro

This article is a brief effort to share some of the lessons that our strategy collective has gleaned from our involvement in organizing mass actions over the past decade largely (but not exclusively) inside the United States. Specifically the work of the *smartMeme* project has focused on strategies to build movements with the power to change the stories that shape popular culture. The article below is an overview of some of the story-based strategy concepts we use in campaign and mass action design. We apologize in advance for the geeky jargon but we'll rely on the wisdom of the reader to choose what to apply and how to adapt it to the Australian context.

The Power of Story

SmartMeme's work is based in a *narrative power analysis* – this means that as part of mapping how power operates we believe in analyzing how specific narratives work to maintain the current state of affairs. Stories are embedded with power– the power to explain and justify the status quo as well as the power to make change imaginable and necessary. Which stories define the cultural norms? Which stories are used to make meaning and shape our world? Who is portrayed as the main character, and whose story is ignored or erased? These questions are the narrative components of the physical relationships of power and privilege, the unequal access to resources, and denials of self-determination that define much of the global system.

Story-Based Strategy

Narrative is a lens through which humans process the information we encounter. Thus one of the most effective ways to change attitudes and provide new information is by telling a good story. Movements and campaigns that are pushing for sweeping changes in current policies must first and foremost win in the realm of ideas by changing the story that the public has around an issue.

SmartMeme's primary work is to combine an understanding of narrative power with traditional movement building skills to create *story-based strategies*. This is a method for using the power of story to develop an integrated strategy with the goal of changing a dominant cultural narrative. By placing story at the center of a campaign or action, the organizers can amplify their effectiveness by articulating their political vision through a common narrative that ties together messaging, media, advocacy and organizing strategy.

There is nothing particularly new about story-based strategy, in fact storytelling has always been central to the work of movement building. However, given the role of sophisticated propaganda, information warfare and the alluring buzz of the global advertising/marketing complex in maintain the current system, *smartMeme* believes that narrative power analysis is more timely than ever.

Direct Action at the Point of Assumption

Across the planet people from all walks of life are taking action to intervene in the systems of domination and control. These interventions occur at many places – from the *point of destruction* where resource extraction is devastating intact ecosystems, indigenous lands and local communities to the *point of production* where workers are organizing in the sweatshops and factories of the world. Solidarity actions spring up at the *point of consumption* where the products that are made from unjust processes are sold and inevitably communities of all types take direct actions at the *point of decision* to confront the decision makers who have the power to make the desired changes.

All of these physical points of intervention (and many more) are essential. However, our direct actions must do more than just temporarily disrupt business as usual because business as usual is a lot more than any one corporate meeting, event or specific destructive policy. Beyond the economic and political connections of the global system, business as usual is a dominant story told by the power holders that normalizes and justifies their actions. A story-based strategy reminds us that as we are intervening at a physical point of intervention (a global finance summit for instance) we must be intervening in the power holder's story as well.

One way to think of this story-based component of action planning is as targeting our actions at the *point of assumption*. Assumptions are the unstated parts of the story that you have to believe in order to believe the larger story. Thus assumptions are the vulnerable spots in a story – the glue that holds the narrative together. When we think of direct action as story telling we must ask ourselves how the action will change people's understanding of the issue, its impacts and the possible alternatives? This could mean exposing hypocrisy or lies, re-framing the issue, amplifying the voices of previously silenced impacted communities or even revealing that the power holder's story is based on pathological assumptions.

Using Story-Based Strategies

A simple way to create a story-based strategy is by applying the basic elements of good storytelling to an action or campaign narrative. At *smartMeme* we use four main elements of a

good story to help design a story-based strategy: 1) Frame the conflict 2) Speak through sympathetic characters 3) Show don't tell 4) Foreshadow your desired future.

1. Framing: Meta-Verbs and Action Logic

Mass mobilizations provide the conflict, drama and sensationalism necessary to attract attention. But, in order to avoid becoming mere tabloid TV and background noise, mass mobilizations must effectively frame the conflicts they embody. A frame is the over-arching perspective or parameters of the larger story (oftentimes literally the edges of the TV screen) that shapes the understanding of a message or action. Effectively framing the action means that the organizers set the terms of the debate.

Two related concepts that help with framing are *action logic* and *meta-verbs*. Action logic means that the action has an over-arching self-evident logic that speaks for itself and tells a story. Often times this logic or goal is summarized through the short hand of a single action-oriented meta-verb that is part of how the action is publicized. Usually these meta-verbs -- Shut down! Confront! Disrupt! Counter! Mobilize! Resist! -- are a challenge to the power holders. This meta-verb will likely become the benchmark of the action's success, not only to the participants but to the media observers and general public. Thus its helpful for organizers to be intentional about using their meta-verb(s) to communicate a clear action logic that anchors a broader narrative about their intentions, demands and world-view.

SmartMeme helped design a mass direct action at the point of assumption that involved 5,000 people "turning their back" on George Bush's second inaugural parade. This may seem like a trite meta-verb given the scale of Bush's crimes against humanity but it was very effective at challenging his narrative that the election had provided him a mandate. Also it was such a clear action logic that thousands of people were able to self-organize and clandestinely infiltrate the parade route security checks to take part in the action.

2. Characters: The Messenger is the Message

Messengers are oftentimes just as important if not more important than the message. The messengers embody the message by putting human faces on the conflict, and putting the story in context. In order for our stories to resonate, people with whom the audience can identify and trust must tell them. (Most often, this does not mean merely 'activists') Articulate, passionate, well-briefed representatives from multiple constituencies should be the face of a mass action. Frequently power holders will claim their policies are intended to help whatever marginalized group is challenging them. Thus it essential that actions amplify the voices of those most impacted by the issue. If the action is about small farmers its is far more powerful for organizers to support a small group of farmers taking a direct action that for a larger group of non-farmers to act on their behalf (although that has a place). One of the key successes of the Turn Your Back on Bush action mentioned above was the way the action spoke through sympathetic characters. The action profiled key constituencies rejecting Bush's leadership – particularly Iraq war veterans, young people, faith leaders and representatives from different communities of color.

3. Show Don't Tell: Engage with Values

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As the writer's expression says a good storyteller doesn't just tell the story – they show the story. Inevitably a mass action has far more spectators than participants so make sure that the pictures and images the action generates capture the action logic and tell the story of your mobilization. However, beyond just using images the concept of show don't tell means avoiding the preachy self-righteous tone of spoon feeding people a world view. Our actions must communicate with values by connecting with what people already know and hold dear. Likewise speaking in terms of values doesn't mean merely using the dogmatic rhetoric of right and wrong, it means connecting our issues to the bigger concerns that shape people's lives.

4. Foreshadow: Tell The Future

In the advertising industry they say, "People can only go somewhere that they have already been to in their minds." This rings true for action organizing too. When using a story-based strategy, work to incorporate the aspect of "foreshadowing" into the action—How will this conflict come to resolution? In other words —What is our vision for a solution to this problem? When we forecast the future we desire through our messaging and our images, we help people embrace a visionary solution. Oftentimes the power holder's side of the debate relies on inertia – the belief that change can't happen. What better way to challenge this than by making alternatives real and visible. This is particularly powerful when the foreshadowing is included in the action logic – the occupation of the government office transforms it into a day care center, the empty lot becomes a guerilla garden, the site of the planned juvenile prison becomes a playground.

Towards New Stories

Across the planet, inspiring campaigns of resistance and transformative social movements are quite literally changing the stories that structure our lives. Our collective efforts are expanding the frame to make many injustices that have long been invisible visible at last. Organizing and direct action campaigns are changing the characters in the dominant narratives by amplifying new voices and showing the alternatives that lead us towards different futures. In the place of the failed universalized story of colonization, assimilation and corporate monoculture a multitude of new stories are appearing and taking root. Now it's up to all of us to nurture these new stories of a just, peaceful, ecologically sane future with our actions, our organizing and perhaps most importantly our imaginations.

About the Authors

Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning are grassroots organizers and direct action strategists who work with the U.S. based smartMeme Strategy and Training Project. SmartMeme works with a wide range of grassroots movements to build a culture of strategy and experiment with story-based strategies. They would love to come to Australia and learn from all the work happening down under but unfortunately Doyle was banned from Australia in 2000 by Phillip Rudduck for allegedly "inciting discord in the Australian community" due to her public role in mobilizing folks to demonstrate at the World Economic Forum on September 11, 2000. She misses her Oz friends and the stunning Tassie trees. To find about more about smartMeme's work or get more tools for changing the story check out www.smartmeme.com.