



Winning the Battle of the Story

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The universe is made of stories, not atoms.
- **Muriel Rukeyser**

Electoral politics has long been the realm of "politics as perception." This ethos shapes each election cycle, as candidates jockey for moral authority over their adversaries, and position their political agenda to co-opt the values of strategic constituencies. "Image politics" emphasizes personality over policy. Rhetoric trumps real equations for change, and masks the mis-framing of important issues by all the candidates. At predictable intervals, electoral politics monopolizes the political imagination of mainstream American culture. Elections are the frame through which Americans are encouraged to direct our political attention span. But by being creative, proactive and strategic, we can make the election spectacle work for our communities. We can ensure that when the candidates espouse our values, they also commit to take action on our issues. We can use election years to generate more air time for our issues and to re-frame our efforts in new and compelling contexts.

Billionaires for Bush (or Gore)

In the 2000 election cycle, the "Billionaires for Bush (or Gore)" campaign used just such a formula to spotlight the destructive role of money in the two party system and the resulting economic inequities. The Billionaires for Bush (or Gore) was essentially just a framework to transmit an idea – that Big Money owns both candidates. The campaign was a "meme" – a contagious idea that spreads virally without losing its core meaning. The idea was embodied by some core messages, costuming tips, and an adaptable guerilla theater scenario involving activists dressed as Billionaires using satire to bring the issue of Big Money in politics to life. The oxymoron of depicting Billionaires protesting as well as the Bush OR Gore tagline was so at odds with the conventional framing of the election that it captured people's attention and organically delivered its political message. The campaign itself was a particularly effective meme because it was uniquely accessible --anyone could become a Billionaire. Hundreds of activists around the country tailored the tactic to their own needs throughout the election, spreading the meme with in character radio spots, stickers and actions bird-dogging candidates The Billionaires (which have already re-appeared in 2004) shows how an effective meme campaign can provide an opportunity to carry an issue beyond geographic or budgetary limitations

The Story of the Battle vs. The Battle of the Story

Architecting a successful campaign (meme or otherwise) requires analyzing and understanding the power of storytelling to structure information in a way that reaches and convinces people. Every campaign is inherently a conflict between the status quo power holders and change agents to control the framing of an issue. In this contest, we must make sure that we are not just telling the Story of the Battle, but truly fighting the Battle of the Story.

Since the facts are usually on our side, progressives often fall into the trap of believing that our issues are self-evident. Then we proceed to bombard an information-saturated public with more facts and figures without explaining why. This is merely telling the Story of the Battle, which fails to frame an issue in a way that challenges the spectator role of the general public. For instance, when the news covers a demonstration as “protester versus police”, the issue becomes framed as someone else’s fight. The Story of the Battle fails to challenge artificial dichotomies like jobs versus the environment or peace activists vs. patriots. The Story of the Battle relies heavily on empirical examples that our adversaries can unscrupulously distort and dismantle as exceptions rather than rules. Look at the current right wing strategy of labeling every criticism “hate speech”. Regardless of how preposterous it may be it has forced many progressives to use their limited air time defensively.

To succeed we must frame our campaigns around the Battle of the Story. The Battle of the Story challenges prevailing assumptions and frames an issue. On February 15, 2003, the largest global demonstration in history took place as an estimated 15 million people took to the streets around the world to oppose the US plans to illegally invade Iraq, While other demonstrations have fallen prey to quibbling over numbers or tactics, the front page of the New York Times the following day omitted the usual claims of skirmishes with police and instead proclaimed loudly that two superpowers remain in the world: President Bush and global Public Opinion. In that single headline, the anti-war movement shifted from being a contentious minority to representing the global majority. The article focused on the inherent diversity of the crowd, and opened the process of mainstreaming dissent. Stories in major dailies around the world were written in a way that compelled readers to see anti-war efforts as large scale common sense in action. This particular day marked a massive progressive offensive in winning the Battle of the Story.

Shaping Your Story

To win the Battle of the Story we need to understand how stories operate by breaking them down to key elements. There are many components to telling a good story -- at smartMeme – we use four main elements of story telling to plan messaging.

CONFLICT

Identify the conflict you want to highlight.. Like any Hollywood blockbuster, social change movements are fraught with seat-gripping conflict and drama. We must be certain we are defining these stakes in our terms with our language.

SYMPATHETIC CHARACTERS

Cast the sympathetic characters involved in your story. Pay close attention to who is receiving top billing as the messenger. Who are our heroes? Who are their villains? Frequently, the messenger is as compelling and powerful as the message, so choose carefully.

SHOW DON'T TELL

Nobody likes to be spoon-fed a worldview. People believe inherently in the right to make up their own minds. We need to become increasingly savvy about appealing to people’s values. A question is often times more powerful than a statement because it forces the audience to engage. Likewise speaking in terms of values doesn’t mean using the self-righteous political rhetoric of right and wrong, it means connecting our issues to the bigger concerns that shape people’s lives.

FORESHADOW (OFFER VISION)

Our stories must articulate an alternative and more compelling vision. We must be foreshadowing the compelling outcomes of the stories we tell. The visions articulated by progressives are too often steeped in the "sky's falling" metaphor. Problem is, the sky's still up there and people are tired of hearing that from us. People don't want to think problems are insolvable. Society's fear of a vacuum often leads us to choose familiar evils over unknowns. It is up to us to provide the vision that makes the unknown alternatives real. The good news is we know there are solutions that work -- not only technical solutions like anti-pollution scrubbers in smokestacks, but policy solutions like getting money out of politics, and systemic solutions like building grassroots movements for real democracy. It is not enough for our side just to criticize, people need to have tangible opportunities to engage not only their minds, but also their hearts and their hands in building alternatives. It isn't enough to tear down the world, we must offer up what we would build in its place.

Don't stop there, though! In order to win the Battle of the Story we must also understand and challenge the power holder's stories. The first step in re-taking control of the narrative is too diligently compare our story with the one we are battling. There are critical lessons inherent in this exercise.

Truth to Power

Frequently, when we stop to really look, we find that the power holders have framed their story using the same sympathetic characters as change agents. Attacks on welfare are presented as benefiting working mothers. We are told corporate tax cuts are undertaken on behalf of the unemployed. Giant agribusiness firms use family farmers in their TV ads. The timber industry uses public concern about forest fires as an excuse to clear cut our national forests. After the World Trade Organization talks collapsed in Seattle, the Economist magazine didn't put a sulking millionaire on the cover -- they featured a starving child and claimed the protests would hurt the world's poor. Time and time again, power holders employ Orwellian logic by hijacking the real people who are sympathetic characters.

There is a big difference between appropriating someone's story and actually magnifying their voice. That's why ultimately progressives can win the Battle of the Story. Everyday thousands of grassroots activists are fighting the Battle of the Story in their own communities as they work to build a more democratic, just and ecologically sane society from the ground up. With all of our compelling stories, sensational conflicts and infectious memes, community advocates will ultimately out do the multi-million dollar PR campaigns and crack the media monopolies. Because the truth -- at least when well told -- is stronger than lies.

About *smartMeme*

The *smartMeme* Strategy and Training Project was founded in 2002, to support struggles for justice, peace, democracy and ecological sanity. *SmartMeme* is a non-profit collective of long-term organizers, strategists, trainers and communications professionals who work to build a *culture of strategy* in grassroots social change movements. Visit us online at www.smartmeme.org.