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Changing the Story: Story-Based Strategies for Direct Action Design

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Direct Action as Storytelling

Direct action is an age-old, common sense method of communal problem solving. Direct action is (quite simply) people organizing ourselves to make the changes we want to see in the world – whether it's a community putting up their own radio transmitter to give voice to local residents, or mass civil disobedience to shut down a corporate war profiteer. Direct action is a good catch all term for any action where people step out of their scripted roles (be it as consumers, "good citizens" or apathetic spectators) and challenge the dominant expectation of obedience. When a direct action intervention is effective, it shifts power relationships in the moment it is happening, as well as builds lasting movement by leaving an imprint in our imaginations of new possibilities.

Every direct action is indeed part of the larger story that people powered movements are collectively (re)telling ourselves – and those whom we are inviting to join us -- about the ability of ordinary people to organize, to govern ourselves, and to create change. Mass actions that are mobilizing large numbers of people to engage in direct action are an attempt to build a collaborative power for change that is compelling enough to confront and transform the coercive power of oppressive systems. Effective mass actions can build movement through alliances and organization, as well as reframe possibilities by effectively employing story-based strategies that can shift the assumptions underpinning our political status quo.

Narrative Power Analysis

A narrative analysis of power is the simple (but radical) recognition that humans understand the world (and our role in it) through stories, and thus all power relations have a narrative dimension. 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.

Although the coercive aspects of physical, brute-force power are often more familiar and visible (police brutality, military occupation, economic intimidation etc.) narrative power can be equally coercive. The mythologies of Plymouth Rock, Manifest Destiny, Ellis

Island and the American Dream are the pop-cultural histories that still haunt much of the political discourse today. Powerful interests routinely use propaganda, information warfare and the alluring buzz of the global advertising and marketing complex to demobilize social movements. When we are working to change the dominant stories about race, immigration, war and protecting the planet, these narratives are already in people's heads acting as filters to our social change messages and often times limiting people's sense of what is possible.

Telling a good story can provide new information, but more importantly it can also help change attitudes and assumptions by reframing an issue or engaging people's values to mobilize them to take action. 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. This means critically applying a narrative power analysis to identify the underlying assumptions that need to shift, and then telling a story that can challenge and change those assumptions.

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 come 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 changes they need.

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. Business as usual is a product of an elite world-view that defines the norms and priorities of the system and the parameters of the possible. Beyond the economic and political connections of the global system, business as usual is a dominant story told by the power holders that justifies their actions. A story-based strategy ensures that as we are intervening at a physical point of intervention (say the carefully stage managed spectacle of a modern political parties' national convention) that 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 power holder's story. As such they are the vulnerable spots in a story – the glue that holds the narrative together. Action planners can ask themselves, "How will our action change people's understanding of the issue, its impacts and the possible alternatives?" This could mean exposing hypocrisy or lies, reframing the issue, amplifying the voices of previously unheard impacted communities, or revealing that the powerholder's story is based on pathological assumptions.

Story-Based Strategy

Storytelling has always been central to the work of organizers and movement builders. In many ways the defining manifestation of a movement is the emergence of a common story that allows people to express their shared values and create a common vision of the change they want to see. A simple way to create a *story-based strategy* is by applying the basic elements of good story telling to your action or campaign narrative.

SmartMeme's story-based strategy model uses four main elements of a good story to help design a campaign strategy: 1) Frame the conflict 2) Amplify sympathetic/unheard 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 political conflicts they embody.

A frame is the over arching perspective or larger story that shapes the understanding of a message or action. Our frames invoke our story: who we are, what we want, and what values we share. You can think of framing literally as the edges of the television screen or the rims of the eyeglasses that define what and who is in the story and how they are presented. What is left out of the frame is as important as what you choose to put inside the frame. Effectively framing the action means that the change agents set the terms of the debate, and shift who has power in the story (i.e. the protagonists of the new story become the impacted constituencies who are mobilizing for change).

Action Logic is the way the action embodies the narrative and speaks for itself as a story. Good action logic creates the type of powerful stories that move hearts and change minds. Not only is it true that actions and images speak louder than words but particularly in a hostile media climate where many times activists are denied the right to speak its important that our actions can communicate for themselves.

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.

For instance, shutting something down or stopping business as usual can communicate a very clear action logic – that a given institution or situation is illegitimate, unjust or causing harm. Unfortunately shutting something down in the face of a militarized police response (now almost inevitable in the U.S.) can be quite a tactical hurdle. In terms of organizing large public actions it is clearest when the meta-verb embodies the action logic. For instance, in recent years there have been actions against US mega-retailer Walmart using the action logic of “quarantine” to represent big box corporate stores as a virulent disease. Hundreds of activists have attracted mass attention to the campaign by surrounded the stores in toxic waste suites and attempting to cordon them off. This is an

example where a little creative framing re-defines the action away from the high bar of shutting something down a store to a physically more ambiguous goal but one that still packs the full narrative punch.

Another example of creative action logic was the Turn Your Back on Bush action which mobilized over 5,000 people to “turn their back” on George Bush’s second inaugural parade in 2005. This form of symbolic protest may seem a bit trite (given the scale of Bush’s crimes against humanity) but it was an action that was targeting a specific point of assumption: the Bush narrative that the election had provided him a mandate. Because it was such a clear action logic, thousands of people -- representing a diversity of constituencies that Bush was claiming to speak for such as veterans, military families, farmers, people of faith, etc -- were able to self-organize and clandestinely infiltrate the parade route’s security checks and take part in the action. This simple and unique action logic allowed the protest to go viral and reports of Bush being greeted with the turned backs of protest emerged from as far away as London, and even made it into pop culture in the form of a skit on the popular television show Saturday Night Live.

2. Characters: The Messenger is the Message

Messengers are often times just as important if not more important than the message, because they 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 other ‘activists’!) Articulate, passionate, well-briefed representatives from multiple constituencies should be the face of an action. Often times power holders will attempt to hijack the impacted characters of a story and claim their policies are intended to help whatever marginalized group is challenging them. Attacks on welfare are presented as benefiting working mothers, corporate tax cuts are undertaken on behalf of the unemployed and industrial clear cutting is presented as the way to protect forests from fire and disease. Time and time again, power holders employ Orwellian logic by claiming to speak for the sympathetic characters. Thus it’s essential that our 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 (all though that has a place).

In recent months we have seen several uprisings against repressive governments framed explicitly around specific characters. In Burma monks became the new face of the democracy movement replacing the students of the 1988 mobilizations as the core messengers. Obviously many factions of society supported the movement but with the monks at the front of the marches it was clear that the democracy movement spoke for the conscience of the nation. Similarly in Pakistan lawyers became the face of the fight against government repression. Who better to embody the message of a need to respect the rule of law than lawyers? In the U.S. the scale of our uprisings may be a little smaller (at least for now) but the strategy questions about who our social change narratives present as the characters is no less important.

3. Show Don't Tell: Engage with Values

As the writer's expression says a good storyteller doesn't just tell the story – they show you the story. A picture is worth a thousand words! Inevitably in our media saturated age a public 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 that power holders often project onto activism. Often activists assume that people are not taking action because they don't have all the facts about an issue. But in many instances it is not "the facts" that motivates people to act—it is how those facts touch their values. Our actions must communicate with values by connecting with what people already know and hold dear. 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 merely using the dogmatic rhetoric of right and wrong, it means connecting our issues to the bigger concerns that shape people's lives.

Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) did a series of actions call "Operation First Casualty" which powerfully demonstrated the show don't tell principle. The actions utilized street theater in which veterans in their combat uniforms went on patrol as if they were in Iraq. The actions were an effort to show the US public what occupation would look and feel like here at home using the setting of iconic places like Times Square in New York and the National Mall in Washington D.C. IVAW members wanted to change the terms of the debate from thinking of Iraq as a war to helping the U.S. public understand it as an occupation that was actually making the situation on the ground worse. The name of the actions invoked the common saying that truth is the first casualty in war time and re-enforced IVAW members expertise as veterans who had been to Iraq and could contrast their first hand experiences of the occupation with the propaganda of the Bush administration. They knew that simply telling people that the occupation is undemocratic and oppressive wasn't enough, so they wanted to give people an experience of occupation and offer a memorable image of the cognitive-dissonance of occupation for "liberation."

4. Foreshadow: Tell The Future

In the advertising industry they say, "People can only go somewhere that they have already been in their minds." This rings true for action organizing too. When using a story-based strategy, the aspect of "foreshadowing" is a key ingredient of a successful action. The action logic needs to answer the questions: "How will this conflict come to resolution? "What is our vision for a solution to this problem?"

When we forecast the future we desire through our messaging and our images, we bring people with us towards being able to imagine and embrace a visionary solution. Often times the power holder's side of the debate relies on inertia – the belief that change can't happen. Former British Prime Minister Margret Thatcher even coined an acronym to define this tactic: TINA meaning there is no alternative. What better way to challenge this myth than making alternatives real and visible? This is particularly powerful when the foreshadowing is incorporated into the action logic and design – the occupation of the government office transforms it into the day care center the community is demanding, the empty lot becomes a guerilla garden, the site of the planned juvenile prison becomes a playground.

Towards New Stories

Around the world, battle lines are drawn between forces that exploit, destroy and conquer versus those that stand for life, justice and hope. Inspiring campaigns of resistance and transformation are underway, and social movements are quite literally changing the stories that structure our lives, and changing the story of our future. In the place of the failed universalized stories of militarism, assimilation and corporate monoculture, a multitude of new stories are appearing and taking root. 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 destinies. 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. As the Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire once said "we must set our sight beyond the horizon and then make the road by walking".

About the Authors

Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning are organizers and strategists with the smartMeme Strategy and Training Project, a practioner's network that explores story-based strategies for movement building and fundamental social change. More tools and conversations on changing the story are at: www.smartmeme.org.