

Building narrative power for social justice: interview with Shanelle Matthews

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Abstract

Talking about shifting narratives has become almost commonplace in the field of communication for rights. But what does this mean and how can it really be in the service of social justice? For Shanelle Matthews, it is imperative that social movements produce “narrative power”, so that they can “expand the collective perception of what is socially, economically and politically possible”. The interviewee is an activist, communicator and teacher, dedicated to collaborating with social justice activists, organizations and campaigns to inspire action and build narrative power. She is the communications director for the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), founder of the Radical Communicators Network, and a faculty member at The New School, a university located in New York. Her ideas bring some important clues to face the communicational challenges of progressive social movements, towards the building of “a robust narrative scaffolding for a more liberatory future”.

Keywords: Narrative; Media; Social Justice; Racism; Social Movements.

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Presentation

Talking about shifting narratives has become almost commonplace in the field of communication for rights. But what does this mean and how can it really be in the service of social justice? Social justice is the view that all people deserve the same opportunities and economic, political and social opportunities. This means reducing inequalities, transforming and rebalancing power relations and promoting historic reparations.

To tackle such a complex challenge, we need to "expand the collective perception of what is socially, economically and politically possible", as Shanelle Matthews, our interviewee, explains. She conceptualizes this possibility of expanding collective perception as narrative power. In her words, "Narrative power for social justice is a framework for social movements to take advantage of political opportunities, construct narrative interventions, disrupt hegemonic thinking." It's about freeing the imagination - ours and other people's - to "build a robust narrative scaffolding for a more liberatory future".

Narratives are made up of collections of stories - that we tell, that we hear, that we repeat and believe many times without realizing or thinking about it. As social creatures in search of patterns, we gather collections of mutually reinforcing stories, establishing shared common sense and building collective imaginaries about people, places, communities, cultures, ideologies and institutions.

These central narratives, fundamental to our understanding of the world and to nurturing feelings of belonging and marginalization, provide us with frames of reference that define the boundaries between what we imagine is possible, probable or practical. They facilitate the interpretation of the past, the understanding of the present and a vision for the future (KIM; HYNES; SHIRAZI, 2017).

The activist, communicator and teacher Shanelle Matthews invites us to navigate narrative possibilities and opportunities for social justice. Assuming



that every system of power has a narrative dimension, and radical social movements use narratives to reimagine and reform the world, Shanelle is dedicated to collaborating with social justice activists, organizations and campaigns to inspire action and build narrative power.

She is the communications director for the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL³), an ecosystem of 150 organizations working for racial justice in the United States. In 2016, she founded the Radical Communicators Network (RacComms⁴) to strengthen the field of strategic communications, as well as Channel Black, a program that trains progressive spokespeople to deliver critical, real-time interventions through the media. Since 2017, she has also been a faculty member at The New School, a university located in New York, teaching critical theory and social justice with an emphasis on Black resistance.

In the following interview, Shanelle Matthews shares her experience from the US context, but there are many issues in common and opportunities for exchanges with communicators from the Global South and Brazil in particular⁵. Shanelle is working, for example, on the international anthology “Framing New Worlds: Resistance Narratives from 21st Century Social Movements”, which brings together articles on how activists and communicators from different countries are building narrative power for an inclusive vision of society.

Interview

D. COTTA & R. SAAVEDRA: *Shanelle, you’ve been working with several activists, social movements, organizations and universities with a*

³ See <https://m4bl.org/>

⁴ See <https://radcommsnetwork.org/>

⁵ An example of a relevant exchange in this sense was the translation carried out by the Narrativas network, which brings together professionals in the communication of causes in Brazil, of the document “Messaging this Moment: a Handbook for Progressive Communicators”, by Anat Schenker-Osorio. The original publication was launched in the United States in August 2017, about six months after Donald Trump's election, and remains extremely current. Portuguese version available at: <https://narrativas.org.br/webinario-de-lancamento-da-publicacao-comunicacao-no-contexto-atual-um-guia-para-comunicadores-progressistas/> . Accessed on: 15 jul. 2022.



focus on building narrative power. What is narrative power, and what is it like to work on this theme in the most varied spaces?

S. MATTHEWS: Narrative power for social justice is a framework for social movements to take advantage of political opportunities, construct narrative interventions, disrupt hegemonic thinking, and intervene to expand the collective perception of what is socially, economically, and politically possible. A narrative power framework includes narrative analysis, possibilities, opportunities, interventions, and principles.

A narrative power framework begins with an analysis of the narrative we're organizing to change because fundamental to every oppressive system is an ideology through which dehumanization is rationalized, leading to suffering, violence, and death. A narrative analysis of power is "a systematic line of inquiry for examining the stories that abet the powers that be in order to better challenge them." If you have ever done a power analysis, this is in the same family, but we focus on the stories that prop up power structures. A narrative analysis of power encourages us to ask: "Which stories define cultural norms, where did these stories come from, whose stories were ignored or erased to create these norms, and most urgently, what new stories can we tell to help create the world we desire?"⁶

Narrative possibilities are liminal spaces—transitional spaces between narratives—where we conceive an infinite combination of narrative interventions and outcomes. While a possibility is not a certainty, possibilities widen the dimensions of what we think and believe, behave, and interact with others.

A narrative possibility is not the same as a narrative opportunity. Narrative opportunities materialize from the socio-political conditions around us, including how political agendas are made, how resources are distributed, when and to whom, and the relationships and interactions between the people

⁶ Available at: <https://www.newtactics.org/conversation/change-story-harnessing-power-narrative-social-change> Accessed on: 6 aug. 2022.



and the state. We can take advantage of socio-political disruption and weaken dominant narratives or insert a new narrative.

For example, as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and work norms quickly changed for millions of Americans (working from home, masking, and distancing), disability justice advocates took advantage of that disruption to proliferate messages that weakened dominant narratives about normative work culture, which privileges people without disabilities.

Long-time social justice strategists Doyle Canning and Patrick Reinsborough remind us that “truly effective interventions go beyond simply disrupting a system to pose a deeper challenge to its underlying assumptions and basic legitimacy.” Advocates poked holes in and delegitimized ableist arguments by illustrating how quickly companies pivoted to remote work policies and practices when profits were threatened compared to the slow or non-response when disabled people made the same demands.

Narrative power principles are values-based and provide guardrails for how to communicate about people, places, and ideas in inclusive and humanizing ways. For example, using counternarratives—narratives derived from the most marginalized individuals and communities—reimagine our existence and expand narrative possibilities. In doing so, we define the problems and solutions from people directly impacted by systems of oppression and marginalized by those systems.

They “have experience and perspective that is crucial for clearly seeing and understanding the impact of problems that threaten all our humanity, and for leading the whole of humanity toward solutions and alternative futures⁷.” It illustrates the connectedness of our fates and rejects zero-sum solutions when articulating what humans need to thrive and the steps we need to take to get there.

⁷ See http://movetoendviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Practice-Guide_Margins-to-Center.pdf Accessed on: 6 Aug. 2022.



By ideologically struggling to radically shape the social norms and rules that influence our lives, we remain worthy competitors in the fight for the interests of future generations.

D. COTTA & R. SAAVEDRA: *In practical terms, what is the role of Communication in strategies to guarantee social justice?*

S. MATTHEWS: Communications is a practice and set of tools that help us first conceive of a more just society and then incite meaningful action towards building it. We use communications to define what that future society looks, feels, smells, and tastes like; how we treat one another; what we believe and don't believe; and how we understand each individual's value and our collective value in relationship to the social structures around us. Social justice is a universe of possibilities because what we believe is socially just is distinct.

Social justice is a popular catchphrase and has even become jargon as revolutionary ideas spread. It is co-opted by corporations and insincere policymakers and warped until it isn't recognizable to the people who demanded it. Justice itself has been theorized into oblivion by the academy and the activist class alike, taking many meanings and forms. A communications framework to advance social justice—whatever that means to you—frees the imagination and provides tools to build robust narrative scaffolding for a more liberatory future.

It is common for people to apply a marketing framework or borrow marketing elements in pursuit of social justice. However, it is essential to remember that the origins of modern-day marketing are entrenched in social control. The capitalist class created market-based strategies to coerce ordinary people to act against their better interests or the interests of the common good. Marketing locates the solution to social and economic stratification inside capitalism by positioning consumption as the answer to all material and social needs and compels us to overconsume and overspend to meet those needs.



D. COTTA & R. SAAVEDRA: *Intersectionality has been an increasingly widespread concept and practice in academic and political spaces. How is it reflected in Communication spaces in which you work and organize?*

S. MATTHEWS: Intersectional communications strategies are essential to building true narrative power for social justice. Intersectionality concedes that categories of difference intersect to shape the experiences of individuals and that identity is multidimensional. It is precisely because most people hold multiple identities that we must explore and understand how the stories and narratives of those identities impact how we experience the world and how the world experiences and understands us.

One example of intersectional narrative power building within the Black liberation movement is advancing a Black queer feminist liberatory paradigm. Toward the goal of abolishing Black state-sanctioned deaths, in this paradigm stories and narratives that lead to and justify the deaths of Black women or Black transgender people by the state are seen and understood as equally crucial to the stories and narratives that lead to and justify the deaths of Black men by the state.

Historically, stories about Black women treat us as scapegoats or problematize our communities and us as a justification for our oppression and are overwhelmingly lacking in human dignity and compassion. This antipathy toward Black women has manifested into well-established and documented tropes, myths, and stereotypes over time. Coupled with hegemonic, anti-Black systems and structures, this leads to violent interpersonal interactions, anti-Black legislation, and systemic institutional discrimination. That is because stories have a robust cultural power: they are the backbone of an inclusive society but can also act as central social control, dehumanization, and regulation mechanisms.

Unfortunately, when Black women are executed by a state that exists inside of—and is a product of—white supremacist culture, there is often a ready-



made justification for her death that fits neatly into pre-determined archetypes through which Black women are perceived and understood. Appreciating and deconstructing these archetypes—even at a cursory level—helps us understand how some people rationalize Breonna’s death⁸ and why others call for justice.

An intersectional narrative power analysis provides a fundamental understanding of stories told about Black women's social and economic stratification and policing in America that organize and clarify the relationship and interactions between them. Historical context is a prerequisite for today's social justice strategies. We have to tell the truth about the past to understand our present and construct our future justly.

D. COTTA & R. SAAVEDRA: *Your work and activism includes collaborating with influencers and change agents to transform complex ideas into persuasive political messages. Can we understand Movement for Black Lives as a movement in this direction? How does it build itself?*

S. MATTHEWS: For more than seven years, the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) has continued the legacy of Black liberation organizing. Formed in the wake of the Ferguson uprisings, galvanized after the brutal death of Mike Brown, and forged through collective trauma, rage, and power, M4BL is an ecosystem of Black-led organizations and formations nationwide that organize around a shared purpose to reduce state violence, including police terror significantly. We are organizing to amass significant political power to influence national and local agendas in the direction of our shared [Vision for Black Lives](#)⁹ policy platform—a comprehensive framework for a society that values Black lives, repairs past harms, and invests in Black communities.

⁸ Breonna Taylor, 26, was shot dead on March 13, 2020 by police officers who entered her apartment in Louisville, Kentucky. Her death, along with that of George Floyd, sparked protests across the world in support of Black Lives Matter. In August 2022, former Metropolitan Police Department detective Joshua Jayes and Sgt. Kyle Meany were charged with civil rights crimes and obstruction of justice for using false information to obtain the search warrant that led to the operation. Accessed on: 6 Aug. 2022.

⁹ Available at <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms>. Accessed on: 6 Aug. 2022.



M4BL's communications team builds narrative power for the ideas, policies, and practices outlined in our Vision for Black Lives. One element of our narrative power-building strategy is using communications to strengthen organizing and policy efforts that make Black communities safer. For example, in the summer of 2020, on the heels of the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, millions of people mobilized to form the largest mass movement against police violence and racial injustice in U.S. history. Collective outrage spurred decentralized uprisings in defense of Black lives in all 50 states, with a demand to defund police and invest in Black communities. Divestment from harmful institutions such as policing and investment in Black communities is a long-term pillar of the Black liberation movement. The call to defund the police permeated the streets, the airways, the halls of Congress, and digital spaces and transcended borders, regimes, languages, and cultures. This brought global attention to abolitionist arguments that the only way to prevent deaths such as Mr. Floyd's and Ms. Taylor's is to take power and funding away from the police.

Building narrative power for divestment from policing and investments in new approaches to public safety such as community control doesn't happen overnight. The story of the role of the police to maintain "law and order" and as the primary mechanism for public safety has long been normalized in American mythology and through education and popular culture. Widespread belief in the role and necessity of policing thrives today because of a network of interconnected values, beliefs, stories, and narratives that give it power and permanence.

The story that is not told by the mainstream is that policing has always been racialized. "...Racial domination helped secure the entire social structure on which capitalist institutions (like profit-making plantations) depended on. Institutions like policing, incarceration, slave patrols, and immigrant surveillance all undergird this social structure in an attempt to keep it stable. These institutions distribute risk and security in ways that make society safe for some at the expense of others — with race often helping to organize who is



who”¹⁰. The initial role of the police was to control slaves, America’s first exploited labor force to secure economic power in the pre-industrialized United States. That legacy continues today as police work to protect the property and status of the wealthiest white Americans while unfairly profiling and harassing Black people, immigrants, transgender, the homeless, and other strategically oppressed and underrepresented communities.

To organize people toward a new understanding of public safety, we have to expose the dangerous and hidden underbelly of American policing and how it enforces the rules of white supremacy. And equally importantly, we have to demonstrate how over-bloated police budgets and unchecked police violence hurt us all, not just communities who have been dispossessed and repressed. Making new approaches to public safety common sense is hard work, but a critical step early in that journey is to center the counternarratives of the people in closest proximity to oppression because. Ken Plummer (2019) reminds us that “out of deep conditions of domination and exclusion, people create their own insights, understandings, knowledge, and narratives”.

Ideas that appear “impossible” or “extreme” may not be implemented right away, but history shows that when people face a crisis, they will look for new and novel solutions and be eager for something different. You put out ideas with a long-term vision for change. You prime people, and then something will happen that makes a fringe idea seem newly possible.

D. COTTA & R. SAAVEDRA: *What is the role of digital social media in the work of social engagement in favor of rights-based emerging agendas?*

S. MATTHEWS: Digital activism, including hashtags to connect people and ideas, provides communities routinely excluded or victimized by mainstream and elite media institutions a platform to speak our truth in our

¹⁰ See <https://mdcdsa.org/nightschool/resources/police-police-unions-and-racial-capitalism/> Accessed on: 6 aug. 2022.



own words. Digital activism also complicates narratives that only reflect a single, subjective angle with more nuanced stories.

Stories and storytelling are the backbones of an inclusive society; how we tell them defines whose lives are valued and whose are not. Unfortunately, from chattel slavery to enduring unchecked police violence, elite media institutions in the U.S. have continually been complicit in reinforcing anti-Black narratives and stereotypes that problematize Black communities and paint us as inferior and dangerous. While insufficient on its own to win justice for the oppressed, social media is an antidote to that poison.

In the case of Michael Brown, after police officer Darren Wilson killed him, the media transformed him from a victim of police violence into a Black criminal whose death was justified. Stories shared on social media from Ferguson and elsewhere rejected the ready-made template the media frequently weaponizes against Black victims of police violence. Instead, social media accounts spread a counternarrative that humanized Michael and told a more complete story.

Social media also provides a mechanism for connecting like-minded people organizing for the same or similar efforts from all over the world. This networking gives activists a place to share and compare stories of revolutionary struggle and strategies for combatting oppositional forces such as law enforcement. For example, during the Ferguson uprising in 2014, Palestinian activists gave Ferguson activists practical advice on dealing with tear gas.

When activists and organizers spread counternarratives on social media those stories destabilize oppositional propaganda and weaken dominant narratives. One way the status quo holds on to power is by relying on stories and narratives that reinforce their worldview and using those stories to pit us against one another. The role of narrative power for social justice is to expose the fallibility in the opposition's arguments and to assert our reality and truth.



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