



How Stories Cause Social Change

A new guide for grantmakers (and nonprofits, too) shows how narratives help us learn, organize, educate and advocate.

Paul VanDeCarr has worked in the field of storytelling in many different roles, from interviewing Holocaust survivors, to conducting research for playwright Anna Deavere Smith, to his current work as Managing Director of [Working Narratives](#), a nonprofit that uses stories to drive social movements.

He has also worked for grantmaking organizations, and his new guide, "Storytelling and Social Change: A Strategy Guide for Grantmakers," is a synthesis of what he's learned from both fields. Told through case studies and interviews with over 75 program officers, communications experts, and storytellers of all sorts (including yours truly), the guide demonstrates that storytelling is more than just a means of expression, it's a way to build movements.



Paul VanDeCarr

Goodman: What got you interested in writing this guide?

VanDeCarr: Storytelling is everywhere. I'd heard a lot of talk about storytelling in grantmaking circles. A lot of foundations and grantees were and are doing excellent work, but they still had questions about how to tell better stories, how to evaluate, how to connect with people. I wanted to create a resource that brought together a lot of the projects I saw being done, and examined them as strategies.

Were strategies similar among the foundations you looked at?

I found there were four main ways groups utilize stories. They are to learn, to organize, to educate, and to advocate. Initially I imagined

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How Stories Cause Social Change

A new guide investigates (and it's free)

A New Way to Think About Webinars

Find out how on October 18th

A Reader Writes...

One story prompts another



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free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and Celia Hoffman. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.thegoodmancenter.com.

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these four functions occurring as points on a circle. First you gathered stories to learn what people wanted and needed; then you shared stories within communities to organize and build strength; then you reached out to larger publics to do education through mass storytelling, such as web video; and finally, with this newly strong movement, you mobilized people to change policy. But I realized it's not so neat as all that, the functions are all forms of engagement, and the lines between them are blurred. Still, I hope this is a useful framework for thinking about stories for change.

Give us an example of how stories are used for learning.

GlobalGiving is a donation platform for international development projects. Its "Storytelling Project" has gathered tens of thousands of what it calls "micro-narratives," which are gathered by so-called "scribes" from community members in the countries where funded projects operate. GlobalGiving uses these micro-narratives to learn what these communities need and what projects should go up on the platform to receive donations. Then they used this cool evaluative software that is able to sort the collected stories into quantitative data and reveal community needs and possible solutions, information that GlobalGiving then uses directly in their work. That project was supported by the Rockefeller Foundation.

How can storytelling be a tool for organizing?

One of the case studies in the guide is of Public Narrative, a method originally developed by Marshall Ganz for training volunteer leadership teams in Obama's 2008 campaign. People came to the training thinking they were going to learn how to tell Obama's story but the first thing they learned to do was to tell their own stories. Once they were able to tell their "story of self," they shared their stories with each other, and from that came the "story of us." Next they took the "story of us" and turn it into the "story of now"--the challenge the group faced collectively and what they were going to do about it. The seed for the "story of now" came out of each person's individual story, so the community discovered what their challenges were and what they would do about them through the act of telling their stories.

What would you say is the biggest challenge foundations face when using a narrative strategy?

First, they have to link personal stories to the larger social issues they're dealing with. Let's say a grassroots story project invites people to talk about their health problems but neglects to connect those problems to the structure of health care delivery, or who gets treated, or why certain diseases are underfunded--then maybe you've got some interesting stories but just not what you need to effect change.

Another important aspect is making sure to create clear pathways to action. Everyone has heard a story that just made their blood boil or their heart beat faster. I saw a revival of the 1980s AIDS play "The Normal Heart" a couple years ago, and it made me so angry about indifference to the plague, but I left the theater and didn't do anything with that feeling and it went away. Now, this play wasn't exactly meant as a tool for social change, it was a Broadway show, but I would have gladly given \$20 or more to an AIDS organization if they had been canvassing outside. The same goes for all kinds of

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stories--you have to provide accessible routes to take action at all levels, whether it's online or in person or by mail.

For a free copy of Paul VanDeCarr's guide
"Storytelling and Social Change:
A Strategy Guide for Grantmakers"
[click here.](#)



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A New Way to Think About Webinars

Join our "Webinar on Webinars" October 18th and find out why a good webinar may be more like talk radio than anything else.

When I first started attending webinars, I was probably just as bored as you. But as the host/teacher droned on, I started to notice a few things. Having worked in talk radio earlier in my career, I started to see distinct similarities between the webinar format and a talk radio show.

Later on, as I began developing webinars to teach at The Goodman Center, I incorporated some of the principles that have been proven to make talk radio engaging. As a result, our webinars receive consistently high marks, and good causes that frequently conduct webinars of their own have asked me to teach these techniques to them.

We've condensed those lessons into a one-hour class open to the public. In "The Webinar on Webinars," you'll learn:

- How to keep participants engaged from beginning to end
- The fine details of creating a good online experience
- How to use your two assets (voices and visuals) to maximum advantage
- What else we learned from talk radio that makes webinars even better



Tuition for "The Webinar on Webinars" is \$125 per student, and discounts are available when organizations register three or more. To learn more and to register online for our October 18th class (11a-12n PT, 2-3p ET), [click here.](#)

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A Reader Writes...

A story from last month's newsletter prompts a personal and very memorable story from one of our readers.



Becky Lytle

I read with interest the story "Data Proves the Power of Story" and realized that I have a real life experience that really backs up the use of story to gain people's attention and interest.

Last October 22 I suffered a cardiac arrest here at work. Fortunately for me, someone found me right after it happened, and best of all, we have a number of people on staff who have been certified in CPR thanks to our company. So CPR was performed on me until the paramedics arrived and took over. Of course, since I am able to write this email, you can sense that the story has a happy ending. I spent a week and a half in intensive care at Duke Medical Center and then two months at home recovering. But the doctors assured me that the CPR made all of the difference in my ability to survive and come out the other end as healthy as before.

So now, at work I have the opportunity each month to speak to the classes of people who are being initially trained and certified in CPR for our company and those who are being re-certified.

Without exception they tell me that prior to hearing me they felt like they were just going through the motions with their training and it really didn't have any meaning to them. Now, after hearing from me as someone who benefitted from CPR, it has become very real to them and they take part in their training with an emphasis that they didn't have before.

It is so wonderful for me to be able to share my story with them so that I can not only give meaning to them, but to also give meaning to my incident and to make something good out of a near tragedy.

*Becky Lytle
Volunteer Coordinator
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