
DIGITAL STORYTELLING FOR SOCIAL IMPACT



THE
ROCKEFELLER
FOUNDATION

HATTAWAY
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Foreword

The Rockefeller Foundation envisions a world in which globalization's benefits are more widely shared and the inevitable challenges that accompany the increased dynamism and volatility are more easily weathered. Without question, digital technology has accelerated the tempo of the world's activity and the pervasiveness of human connections. Many of us are far more connected to stories and information than we have ever been, yet the noise and ubiquity of this digital world makes it harder to surface and share personal stories of change and impact.

Few would deny that storytelling is a powerful tool for inspiring action and change and influencing thought leaders and decision makers. In the digital era, the shape and delivery of stories has shifted dramatically. Long-form narrative and conventional journalism now share the stage with messages of 140 characters or fewer and images that disappear seconds after they are opened. While there have never been more ways to reach audiences, it has also never been more difficult to *really* reach them.

The Foundation recognizes a big opportunity in this intersection of story and technology, and has launched a project to consider the role that digital technology can play in elevating the practice of storytelling as a means to improve the well-being of the poor and vulnerable around the world.

We drew the insights and ideas in this report from interviews and roundtable discussions with thought leaders in entertainment media and news, brand strategy, technology, philanthropy, government, nonprofits, and business. We conducted a technical platform assessment and landscape analysis to evaluate the current state of digital storytelling. We explored the power of narrative and networked communication to expand reach and influence. We also identified unmet supply and demand needs in the field and opportunities for innovation.

We heard from journalists how digital media is introducing new topics into the public dialogue and giving stories longer life cycles than before.

We heard from the entertainment industry about both increased competition and decreased funding for the production of compelling stories about social impact.

We heard from brand strategists about creating an organizational strategy and a culture that empowers every staff member to create and value the role of stories in their work.

We heard from nonprofits and business about the importance of stories coming from the people impacted by the work. Technologists also provided ideas on the best digital tools to capture and share stories with a broader audience.

We heard from government and academia about the significant digital skills gap in social impact organizations and the need for training services and metric-driven examples of storytelling success.

Some of the findings in this report were expected, others surprising, but all can inform action for those working in the social impact space, including the team at the Rockefeller Foundation. Our next step is to workshop the report recommendations with selected cross-sector leaders to produce a game-changing platform, one that exists in multiple places or formats, that easily builds capacity and demand, that is measurable and flexible, that fosters leadership and community, and that ultimately advances humanity.

We're excited to get started.

Jay Geneske
Director of Digital, The Rockefeller Foundation

Executive Summary

The Rockefeller Foundation commissioned this study to explore the power of narrative and networked communication to expand the reach and resources of social impact organizations; identify unmet needs in the field; and recommend useful tools, techniques and technologies that can elevate the practice of digital storytelling for social impact.

We found that a great deal of work has been done to capture best practices and create how-to guides for telling stories, and for using existing technological tools. However, we identified consistent gaps in how organizations create, promote and sustain storytelling cultures. First, there are “supply-side” issues in digital storytelling: a need for comprehensive strategic and tactical guidance on how to tell, store, share and curate compelling and motivating stories on a consistent basis. There are also “demand-side” issues in digital storytelling: a need for incentives and requirements that foundations, businesses and the nonprofit community could embrace to ensure that social impact organizations are truly becoming storytelling organizations.

All social impact organizations—philanthropy, business, nonprofit and others—have the ability to shift the dynamics in the social impact sector by bringing the right people and resources together to improve both the supply side and the demand side of the storytelling marketplace. The advancements in digital technologies have provided an opportunity to reach many more people; now it's time to give social impact organizations the tools and connections they need to tell more and better stories—paired with specific asks that convert audiences up a ladder of engagement.

Through the ideas in this report, we envision an innovative new storytelling marketplace, where for the first time social impact organizations can leverage an interactive platform that provides strategic guidance, content, case studies and links to capacity building tools—all to elevate the practice of digital storytelling.

The insights and ideas in this report are based on interviews and roundtable discussions with thought leaders in the news and entertainment media, technology, philanthropy, government, nonprofits and business. Additionally, a technical platform assessment and storytelling landscape analysis were conducted to evaluate the current state of digital storytelling.

This report is for anyone looking to strengthen the practice of digital storytelling in the social impact sector. Decision-makers and content creators in the sector can learn about the elements of strategic storytelling, the knowledge and skills necessary to become a storytelling organization, and the strategic tools and technological platforms available to digital storytellers. Philanthropists and thought leaders can learn about unmet needs identified by experts in the field, as well as potential steps forward.

Project Vision

Elevate the Practice of Digital Storytelling for Social Impact

Interviewees included people from:

Technology

Facebook
Tumblr
Blue State Digital

Media

TIME
Brick Wall Media

Academia

Georgetown University

Branding

Precision Strategies
Briteweb
Edelman
Little M Media

Entertainment

Regarding Humanity
The Cheezburger Network

Social Impact Organizations

Charity: Water
ONE
Red Cross
Link2Feed

Government

State Department

Key Questions

This study explores answers to critical questions in five key areas, and suggests tools and resources needed to help organizations elevate the practice and impact of digital storytelling.



STRATEGY

How can digital storytelling help social impact organizations advance their missions?



CAPACITY

What resources and skills do individuals and organizations need to shape and share their stories?



CONTENT

What are the elements of compelling and motivating stories?



PLATFORMS

What technologies are available (or needed) to help people curate, house and share stories?



EVALUATION

What simple, effective and meaningful metrics can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of digital storytelling?

Key Insights & Ideas

Interest in storytelling is abundant, and many tools exist to help people tell and share stories. However, social impact organizations often don't think strategically about how best to utilize storytelling to achieve meaningful objectives, such as mobilizing people to take action. Many social impact organizations lack the capacity to create compelling stories that capture people's attention and imagination—and inspire them to donate, volunteer or take other actions. Few employ people with the knowledge and skills necessary to craft stories strategically and engage their stakeholders in conversations that lead to action. Many struggle to identify the right platforms to use to reach their target audiences. Few understand how to evaluate their success at storytelling.

The research identified an overwhelming need for thought leadership and capacity building to strengthen storytelling in the field. Social impact organizations need easily accessible tools to help with developing their strategies, evaluating their capacity needs, understanding what content and platforms will help them reach their objectives, and measuring their success. But for them to make the commitment to doing this well, there needs to be an increase in demand for stories. Leaders of nonprofits, foundations and social-impact oriented businesses need to understand how stories will help them increase their reach and resources—and funders need to value and invest in story production.

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What makes for an effective storytelling organization?

- Senior management promotes a storytelling culture
- Everyone in the organization understands the organization's values and what makes a compelling, strategic story
- The organization has developed a storytelling strategy, supported by appropriate content and platforms
- Meaningful metrics are used to evaluate the effectiveness of storytelling

	Strategy	Capacity	Content	Platforms	Evaluation
Key Questions	How can digital storytelling help social impact organizations advance their missions?	What resources and skills do individuals and organizations need to shape and share their stories?	What are the elements of compelling and motivating stories?	What technologies are available (or needed) to help people curate, house and share stories?	What simple, effective and meaningful metrics can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of digital storytelling?
Insights	<p>Social impact organizations often dive into storytelling without articulating clear goals, understanding the interests and motivations of target audiences, or setting measurable objectives. These strategic guidelines are necessary to craft effective content and design an engagement plan using appropriate platforms to reach the right people and mobilize them for the cause.</p>	<p>The most meaningful stories come from people with authentic and insightful experiences to share, even though they may not be skilled storytellers. Storytelling professionals with specialized creative and technical skills know how to turn these compelling stories into well produced, high-quality content that captures people's interest and imagination—but few organizations have skilled storytellers on staff or the resources to hire consultants to create content for storytelling.</p> <p>For most effective storytelling organizations, everyone within the organization understands why stories are important to share and what elements make a compelling, strategic story.</p> <p>Senior managers need to understand the importance of dedicating time, talent and resources to designing content strategies and producing high-quality content.</p> <p>There is a need for hands-on help focused on how to produce and share stories that contribute to an organization's overall goals; while plenty of tools exist, people don't know how to use and apply them.</p> <p>Collection and curation of stories is critical to successfully executing strategic storytelling, but organizations lack capacity to do it well.</p>	<p>Quality counts: In today's hyper-competitive media environment, only the most compelling content gets noticed and shared.</p> <p>Compelling and motivating stories create emotional resonance and human connection—while serving a strategic purpose, such as driving people to take meaningful actions.</p> <p>Stories for social impact must show people as active agents of change, who play a central role in creating solutions to the problems they face. This preserves their dignity, encourages empathy and inspires support from others.</p>	<p>Many tools exist that enable storytelling: tools to help with creation, collection and curation, as well as tools to help connect experienced storytellers with those who need to share their stories. Different organizations have different needs based on target audiences, capacity and resources, and should make choices accordingly: There's no one-size-fits-all solution.</p> <p>With the sheer number of tools and platforms in existence, social impact organizations struggle to understand which to use in order to most effectively engage the right audiences.</p> <p>Social impact organizations need guidance on best practices for utilizing common platforms—and access to data that can help them target the right audiences.</p>	<p>Organizations that evaluate the impact of their storytelling accurately can learn what's working and strengthen their storytelling—and also build a body of evidence about the merits of investing in digital storytelling.</p> <p>People charged with evaluating the impact of strategic storytelling within an organization need guidance on how to set metrics for digital storytelling. They also need training on readily available tools, such as Google Analytics and metrics available on YouTube.</p>
Ideas	<p>Develop an interactive tool that guides users through the key strategic steps of developing a digital storytelling program.</p> <p>Offer hands-on training and consultation to help users articulate compelling goals; explore audience motivations; and set realistic, measurable objectives.</p>	<p>Develop interactive tools to help senior managers assess their needs for storytelling talent.</p> <p>Provide resources to connect social impact organizations with content-producing talent, technical assistance and training.</p> <p>Establish thought leadership forums to elevate the practice of strategic storytelling in the social impact sector through awards, conferences and public discussion.</p> <p>Educate senior management about the impact potential of, and organizational requirements for, effective digital storytelling—by sharing examples of storytelling that helped organizations achieve meaningful goals.</p>	<p>Provide a content tool that guides content creators through the steps of crafting stories that inspire and engage people—and issue a call to action.</p> <p>Share best practices for digital storytelling along with inspiring and educational case studies—with examples of compelling content on a variety of topics from small, medium-sized and large organizations.</p>	<p>Develop a tool that helps users determine which platforms will help them reach their target audiences and learn how to engage these audiences in building communities of support.</p>	<p>Produce guidelines on how to set impact goals and storytelling objectives.</p> <p>Share case studies with appropriate metrics and KPIs to track.</p>

The Importance of Storytelling

This project was originally designed to answer the “how” of storytelling, under the assumption that the “why” is already understood. However, the research revealed a few key insights that reinforce the importance of storytelling in helping organizations expand their reach and resources—and thus enhance their impact. Below are insights followed by quotes from people interviewed for this report, identified by their sector or industry.

Effective stories inspire people for social causes by creating human connection and emotional resonance.

“Storytelling allows you to connect with people on how something feels—a human emotion is hard to argue with.” – **TECHNOLOGY**

“Stories can serve to promote human connection, and build relationships and promote the ability to understand either your own life or somebody else’s life.” – **MEDIA**

“Story is a way of taking something that might seem distant or irrelevant and presenting it in a way that’s relatable.” – **ENTERTAINMENT**

Well-crafted stories can communicate abstract and complex ideas in ways that encourage understanding and value connections.

“Stories can embody values; they can show how an organization is living its life by giving tangible examples. Putting faces and names to [an organization’s] values goes much further to promoting high-level concepts that aren’t as tangible.” – **BRANDING**

“The essence of storytelling is communicating in a way that makes people naturally follow where you’re going and want to hear more, and as a way to explain complicated ideas through a personal narrative people can relate to.” – **TECHNOLOGY**

Stories can be used to introduce a new topic into the public dialogue, contribute to an ongoing conversation and engage people as active participants.

“We’re seeing the elongation of storytelling in a big way. Stories have much longer life cycles than before, and through social media people now can play a role in the way that stories unfold.” – **MEDIA**

Stories can be used to share learning and lessons from successes and failures with colleagues, donors and other key audiences.

“The failures are just as meaningful as the lessons learned. The beating of the chest ‘we are successful’ gets old. If you aren’t able to share your lessons learned, no one is going to care about what you have to say.” – **TECHNOLOGY**

“The participation that happens around the story characterizes the story.” – **TECHNOLOGY**



STRATEGY



Strategy Insights

Social impact organizations often dive into storytelling without articulating clear goals, understanding the interests and motivations of target audiences, or setting measurable objectives. The strategic guidelines below are necessary to craft effective content and design an engagement plan using appropriate platforms to reach the right people and mobilize them for the cause.

Articulate Clear Goals

“Organizations need intentionality. You’ll get a better sense of how you want to share the story and how you want to measure it.” – **ACADEMIA**

“While it’s true that it seems like people want to use social [media] to share cat videos and not substantial material, I think it’s more about getting people to understand what it is they’re supposed to share.” – **MEDIA**

“A lot of folks will just give you their mission statement when you ask for a story. I feel like [story] is such a loaded term that organizations aren’t able to differentiate a true story from their other forms of communication.” – **TECHNOLOGY**

Identify Target Audiences

“It always helps to know what you’re trying to achieve. I think a lot of organizations get in trouble because they aren’t connected to the experience of the end user that they’re trying to reach.” – **TECHNOLOGY**

“People get lost in moving the chess pieces around instead of trying to put themselves in the shoes of the pawns.” – **TECHNOLOGY**

Set Specific Objectives

“Having a clear template for why and what you want out of a story would greatly help organizations.” – **BRANDING**

“For a good story, you need to keep it true, keep it relevant and keep it interesting. It needs to motivate people to the outcome you’re seeking.” – **TECHNOLOGY**

Ideas

- Develop an interactive tool that guides users through the key strategic steps of developing a digital storytelling program.
- Offer hands-on training and consultation to help users articulate compelling goals; explore audience motivations; and set realistic, measurable objectives.

A Storytelling Organization Builds a Community of Support to Expand its Reach and Resources.



Strategic Storytelling

Storytelling contributes to social impact by inspiring and engaging people who can contribute ideas, energy and resources to advance a cause. But storytelling must be strategic in order to achieve the desired impact. An effective strategy begins with the articulation of a compelling goal and an understanding of the audiences who can help achieve it. Strategically designed and deployed stories can then help motivate and mobilize people to actively support the goal.

The Road Map to Impact below illustrates the stages people go through before taking action. Organizations can use strategically designed stories, shared via digital platforms that engage people in a variety of ways to: 1) raise awareness of a cause, 2) encourage people to care about it, 3) educate people about key problems and potential solutions, 4) create a sense of urgency to act and 5) offer opportunities for people to take action.



**Be aware
of the need**



**Care about
the cause**



**Understand the
problem and
solution**



**Feel a sense
of urgency**



**Know how
to help**



CAPACITY



Capacity Insights

The most meaningful stories come from people with authentic and insightful experiences to share, even though they may not be skilled storytellers.

“The closer to the ground you get, the better. It’s not to say that the community tells the story best, but I believe strongly that the stories should be coming from as close as possible to the people who are being impacted by your programs.” – **SOCIAL IMPACT**

“Co-creation is key. People on the ground should be in charge of developing the stories themselves so that they can decide what parts of their story get told. The end result is a much richer perspective.” – **ENTERTAINMENT**

Collection and curation of stories is critical to successfully executing strategic storytelling, but organizations lack capacity to do it well.

“We did a survey with the organizations to ask them about their storytelling capacity, and I think the collection piece is where it goes wrong because there often isn’t a strategic approach to collecting stories. There isn’t a lot of intentionality. I think if more time goes into collecting stories, you get a better output overall. You also get a better sense of how you want to share the story, and how you want to measure it. I think a platform or software tool would be really useful. The one thing that would be difficult is making sure that the questions and the way you ask for information are specific enough that you can get material out of it, but not so specific that people are turned off.” – **BRANDING**

“I encourage people to do a content audit of what they have and to map out that criteria: what community, what issue, etc. There isn’t going to be a universal template. You want to go through your content once every year. It helps to keep it lean so that you don’t have too much to process.” – **ENTERTAINMENT**

For most effective storytelling organizations, everyone within the organization understands why stories are important to share and what elements make a compelling, strategic story.

“From an organizational standpoint, there shouldn’t be one storyteller. It is more about having a culture and a way to embed values and goals among staff. It’s most powerful when everyone on the team contributes.” – **BRANDING**

“I see storytelling as a skill and ability and a set of values that are embedded in the DNA of an organization in every function that has to do with interacting with beneficiaries and partners.” – **TECHNOLOGY**

“In our research and interviews, we time and time again found that the most effective organizations had a storytelling culture where everyone was on the same page about how to tell a story.” – **ACADEMIA**

“The key is for organizations to understand how to think through the storytelling process. Smart organizations will come to us with raw video and will tell us about their mission and the story of South Sudan, for example, and their desire to raise money. Often it’s simply about how to pick the right story.” – **BRANDING**

Storytelling professionals with specialized creative and technical skills know how to turn these compelling stories into well produced, high-quality content that captures people's interest and imagination—but few organizations have skilled storytellers on staff or the resources to hire consultants to create content for storytelling.

"It's about having that person on the team who is wired for stories and lives and breathes [stories], so when [that person] overhears a conversation [he or she] can think about ways it can be told or distributed. Organizations often get bogged down in the day-to-day and don't see the wealth they're sitting on. It takes someone who can pull the stories out." — **BRANDING**

"A lot of times it comes down to having individuals in the organization [who] are passionate about storytelling. You have to have someone who is a millennial and who is a native of the technology platforms. Having someone who is genuinely interested in storytelling helps, because [that person is] more likely to pursue learning and experiment with new tools and technology." — **TECHNOLOGY**

"Organizations should bring on an individual temporarily or hire a firm where the brief is: you're going to set up our organization to tell stories." — **TECHNOLOGY**

"It's not going to be done well unless the person in charge is obsessed with the organization's mission and is invested in the use of stories. You can't have someone who just used to edit the college newspaper." — **TECHNOLOGY**

"Some people in an organization should be responsible for how to use the stories, but the actual creation of the stories should be managed by someone who understands storytelling." — **BRANDING**

"I don't think everybody has to be able to tell a story. In terms of sourcing stories from your local NGO partners all the way up the chain, if you're going to be doing that, someone who knows how to tell a story has to be part of that equation." — **SOCIAL IMPACT**

Senior managers need to understand the importance of dedicating time, talent and resources to designing content strategies and producing high-quality content.

"It would be great if the Rockefeller Foundation could lead the thought leadership around the need for more communications spending, because it needs to happen. So many nonprofits start from pure passion, yet that's muted by a lack of storytelling capacity." — **BRANDING**

"Having the tangible training piece is important, but what's really missing is elevating a few examples of what good storytelling looks like and showing what the positive outcomes looked like." — **ACADEMIA**

"I think it's broad education. My inclination is that everyone is about grassroots these days, so going broad and focusing on social media or a click-to-donate campaign might be the best option because I think people respond a lot better to that. When you look at things like Kickstarter, the fact the people feel connected and involved is what makes the model so powerful." — **MEDIA**

"There's not a great flow of examples of organizations that are doing storytelling well. There isn't a 'Nonprofit Storytelling Institute.' I think there is some knowledge sharing that doesn't exist that should." — **TECHNOLOGY**

"We need to communicate the idea that organizations need to have funding for storytelling. Funding is just not there. And if there are pools of money available, no one knows how to access them." — **ENTERTAINMENT**

"It's less about how to use the tools and more about building a case for why storytelling is important. You can teach anyone to tweet, but it doesn't matter if they don't understand how to tell a story." — **TECHNOLOGY**



Capacity Insights

There is a need for hands-on help focused on how to produce and share stories that contribute to an organization's overall goals; while plenty of tools exist, people don't know how to use and apply them.

"There is an assumption that if you are immersed in the work you know how to tell a story, but that's not true. We need training that shows people all the ways of communicating and telling a story. There is an appetite—an imperative, even—to do something fresh and new with storytelling on the ground." — **PHILANTHROPY**

"Training for nonprofits or activists is crucial...you'll get a much more nuanced understanding for the targets for these stories from training them to see stories that way." — **BRANDING**

"The world is awash in 'tools' that nobody uses. It's not a supply-side issue. Without knowing how a tool should be used and what the success factors

are, the outcome will be very limited." — **TECHNOLOGY**

"I don't think guidelines will do it. It has to be a thoughtful process about: what is their work? What ways do we have to illustrate that when change happens it happens to who, where and how? This should be part of the planning protocols and approach in the foundation. If you don't have that kind of a process that goes along with it, you're not going to get the answer at the end of that chain." — **TECHNOLOGY**

"A memo—it's not nothing. I just think it's kind of boring. I would say that for small organizations... somebody like Rockefeller or Gates can include story services in their grants, maybe even require it as part of the grant money to set them up for storytelling." — **TECHNOLOGY**

Ideas

- Develop interactive tools to help senior managers assess their needs for storytelling talent.
- Provide resources to connect social impact organizations with content-producing talent, technical assistance and training.
- Establish thought leadership forums to elevate the practice of strategic storytelling in the social impact sector through awards, conferences and public discussion.
- Educate senior management about the impact potential of, and organizational requirements for, effective digital storytelling—by sharing examples of storytelling that helped organizations achieve meaningful goals.



CONTENT



Content Insights

Quality counts: In today's hyper-competitive media environment, only the most compelling content gets noticed and shared.

"In our research, we came across some very good stories that were simply framed poorly on the website. They might have been difficult to find or were presented on a page with no real link to do something. We saw text-based stories that were too long. It isn't enough to have good content—the organization has to shape the content in a compelling way." — **ACADEMIA**

"The biggest differentiator for organizations was having a plot arc. Profiles of individuals are usually not stories; neither is an interview. A good story needs a strong hook up front and a plot arc that follows." — **BRANDING**

Compelling and motivating stories create emotional resonance and human connection—while serving a strategic purpose, such as driving people to take meaningful actions.

"It's just giving lip service if you're trying to do social good but there is no call to action. It shouldn't be an afterthought and tucked away at the bottom of the page. It needs to be in the story itself. Once the editorial is done, include a few ways people could get involved." — **MEDIA**

"Artfully weaving the call to action into content and linking content to other content will help audience find the donate button, or whatever action you need, because they like your story." — **SOCIAL IMPACT**

"[Stories] need to be about action. It's hard to get people to do one thing; two is really hard. The call to action needs to be one ask." — **TECHNOLOGY**

Stories for social impact must show people as active agents of change who play a central role in creating solutions to the problems they face. This preserves their dignity, encourages empathy and inspires support for others.

"I hope that we can convey that the people we work with have agency. They are fashioning their own solutions, and they have ideas about how their lives could get better. They are the agents of change themselves. That's the message I would like for the development sector to transmit." — **PHILANTHROPY**

"People who work in the development industry have an acute awareness for human dignity. I think there are some very clear guidelines like: don't ever disparage our recipients. They are our peers—we should treat them like our neighbors." — **TECHNOLOGY**

"If most international development projects that are Western-driven would just listen and understand the context better, and had a way of including voice and context and understanding, most of those projects would be so much better. We are so arrogant in thinking that we know what's best for people." — **PHILANTHROPY**

"There's a shift from this idea of 'let's make you feel bad' toward the idea of empowerment and dignity. It's about viewing people in the developing world as clients—and not recipients of charity—who can be empowered to make their own lives better. It's no longer about the organization being the hero." — **BRANDING**

Ideas

- Provide a content tool that guides content creators through the steps of crafting stories that inspire and engage people—and issue a call to action.
- Share best practices for digital storytelling along with inspiring and educational case studies—with examples of compelling content on a variety of topics from small, medium-sized and large organizations.

Structuring Stories for Social Impact

Psychological research shows that we interpret our experiences, and seek to understand the world, by creating stories of protagonists acting with intention to achieve a goal. These stories are called “meta-narratives,” “paradigms” or sometimes “frames,” because they provide frameworks through which we create meaning and make judgments.

Motivating people to work toward a goal requires painting an inspiring vision of the future and explaining the challenges that must be overcome along the way. The diagram below shows a powerful narrative framework for social impact organizations, positioning people involved in a cause as protagonists who must conquer an adversary (or adversaries) to achieve a meaningful goal.

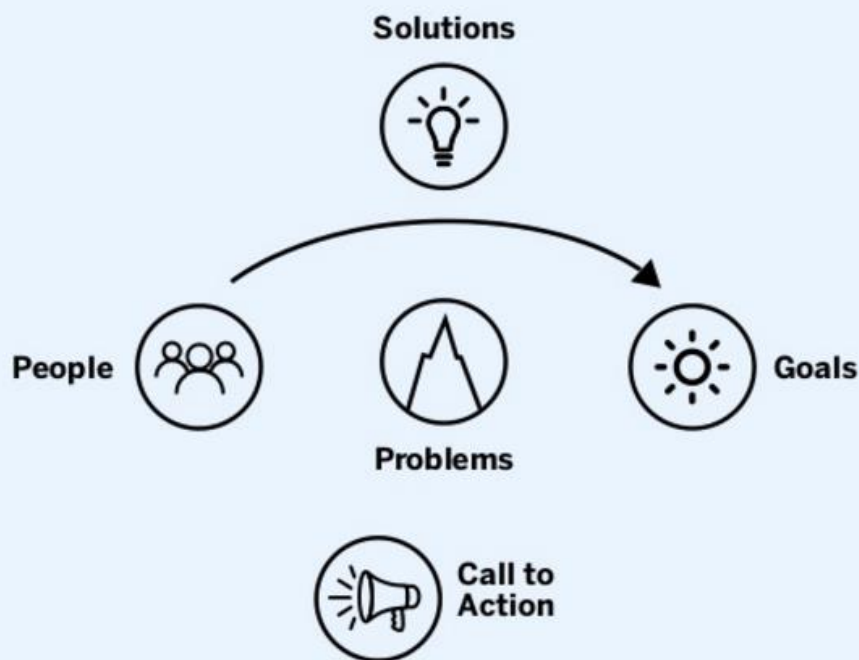
This structure connects an organization’s work with the hopes and values of its audiences, while drawing a clear connection between the challenges the

audiences face and the solutions that can help them overcome those obstacles. The framework helps the audience members understand the organization’s work in human terms, and see its relevance to their lives.

Social impact organizations can use this structure to craft a core narrative that communicates strategically selected ideas and motivates people to support their work. Then, they can tell more focused stories that provide examples of specific people and situations to illustrate the larger ideas in vivid, memorable ways.

The combination of this “meta-narrative” structure with stories about individuals packs maximum motivating power for social impact. It connects the stories of individuals to larger ideas, encouraging empathy while promoting understanding of the problems addressed by social impact organizations.

Narrative Structure





PLATFORM



Platform Insights

Many tools exist that enable storytelling: tools to help with creation, collection and curation, as well as tools to help connect experienced storytellers with those who need to share their stories. Different organizations have different needs based on target audiences, capacity and resources, and should make choices accordingly: There's no one-size-fits-all solution.

"I can't think of any panacea technology off hand...I don't think there is a technological solution yet or ever will be for that sort of stuff." –
TECHNOLOGY

"The tools exist. You can give any knucklehead a Gmail account, they can tag and make a Tumblr and start tweeting out pictures. It's how that all relates back to the goals and the actions you want users to take." –
TECHNOLOGY

With the sheer number of tools and platforms in existence, social impact organizations struggle to understand which to use in order to most effectively engage the right audiences.

"In order to lower the barrier to entry, just give a mobile number or a WhatsApp user profile or an email address to send stuff in. From there you can do whatever you want." –**TECHNOLOGY**

"We've used Storify for curation, and social networks for adding stories and video and audio." –**TECHNOLOGY**

Social Impact Organizations need guidance on best practices for utilizing common platforms—and access to data that can help them target the right audiences.

"Technical tools exist in terms of something that's easily accessible, customizable, managed/curated and sort of managing the content once you have it...What's sort of interesting and challenging about this conversation, is the way in which I think creative and content creators would say that to the extent that storytelling is an art, not a science, you need people who are storytellers to be involved in the process of collecting and shaping and presenting the stories you want to tell." –**TECHNOLOGY**

"Often just the understanding of what is the communication cycle [is most helpful], and it's not blasting the audience with everything they need to know. It's about engagement, and all we want to do is create a great story, [so audiences] are now engaged to click the link to learn more. In this day and age people just talk about millennials but even with older audiences on devices, there's a drastic shift in humans in general in our understanding of the world and the details we know. Social media lets us tell stories shorter and faster with less context." –**TECHNOLOGY**

Ideas

- Develop a tool that helps users determine which platforms will help them reach their target audiences and learn how to engage these audiences in building communities of support.



Digital Storytelling Platform Overview

A comprehensive assessment of the tools and platforms available for storytelling was conducted as a part of this project. The entire report is available upon request. Here follow the high-level basics, trends and insights for each platform category:

CMS/Blogging

Email

Social Media

Video & Audio

Curation

Experimental

CMS/Blogging

Popular platforms: Wordpress, Django, Joomla, Drupal

The Basics. Content management systems and blogs are excellent web-based platforms to showcase creative content and extend reach to multiple audiences. They can host text, images and videos on a landing page that can be linked to other platforms—enabling content producers to leverage social networks to reach broader audiences. Tagging of specific themes within content allows people to quickly sift through material to find information of interest, and post it to social media or curation platforms.

Trends. Many nonprofits are moving beyond blogs comprised primarily of text and photography, and beginning instead to integrate video and other formats to create richer user experiences that enhance the impact of storytelling. As new media sources offer audiences increasingly richer online experiences, NGOs will need to produce more high-quality, multi-media content to attract and engage audiences.

Insight. All four platforms are versatile, allowing content producers to utilize multi-media formats and link to other platforms—and thus extend their reach. Wordpress is the simplest platform to deploy and maintain.

Email

Popular platforms: MailChimp, Blue State Digital, ExactTarget, Constant Contact

The Basics. Email remains an essential tool for storytelling and for driving people to take action. It's an effective way to capture attention and create/maintain engagement, especially among people who are not regular visitors to an organization's website, for activities such as event organizing or volunteer mobilization. And it remains the most effective digital tool for direct fundraising. To be most effective, email must be deployed alongside a CMS platform that allows users to easily click through to a landing page in response to an engaging "ask."

Trends. Changes in the "culture of the inbox"—how people view and use their email platforms—are dramatically changing the rules of email marketing, but in ways we still don't fully understand. Some shifts, like Google creating separate inbox real estate via a tabbed interface, will likely drive "open rates" down, but some data already show engagement rates going up—suggesting that the tabbed interface actually creates more "qualified traffic." Gmail's new feature for caching all images, on the other hand, may profoundly affect how email marketing is tracked—since much of our "open rate" data is sourced from tracking pixels. As adoption of the tabbing feature increases and the platforms continue to shift, organizations will need to continue to stay abreast of developments and cannot safely rely on old, familiar tactics.

Insight. Communicators will need to monitor changes in user behavior and experiment with new features to continue to best leverage email as a meaningful way of engaging audiences. General features and functions are very similar among different email platforms, but choosing the best platform to meet the various needs of different organizations can be a complex decision because of the range of features available.

Social Media

Popular platforms: Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, LinkedIn

The Basics. Social media platforms enable organizations to connect with people, share intimate stories, create conversations—or, more frequently, enter ongoing conversations—and build ever-expanding communities of people who share common interests. Social media is a dynamic, real-time medium that leverages the power of networks to disseminate content, with the expectation that audience members will contribute content and engage in dialogue.

Trends. Research shows that people most frequently look to people in their social networks—more than they look to traditional news and advertising—as sources of ideas and information. And the instantaneous, interactive nature of social media is dramatically altering the way people interact with organizations. Users expect to be engaged in dialogue, rather than treated as passive recipients of messages; authenticity, transparency and listening are increasingly important behaviors for organizations in order to establish trust within social media platforms. Meanwhile, social media is rapidly increasing storytelling from the front lines and giving voice to people directly affected by issues and events.

Insight. Social media will continue to evolve with new platforms, and audiences will migrate (such as young people adopting additional platforms in addition to Facebook). NGOs who use social media should expect to continue to adapt their strategies. Effectively using social media for audience engagement requires a major investment of time and energy, and organizations need to ensure that the investment in social media will advance their overall goals.

Video & Audio

Popular platforms: YouTube, Vimeo, Vine, Podbean

The Basics. Because video uses images, sound and movement, it can be the most captivating digital format for storytelling. It's also the most popular: users are more likely to click on videos than other content. The medium allows the audience to experience stories emotionally, and to connect with the people whose lives are featured—which can encourage empathy and further motivate people to take action. “Virality” can also be achieved through highly entertaining, interesting or moving content, expanding reach to new audiences and potentially gaining visibility in traditional news media. Audio technology, such as podcasts, is also increasingly used in storytelling.

Trends. Pew research suggests that 7 out of 10 online adults use video sharing sites, and YouTube has 1 billion unique users per month.

Insight. The cost barriers to producing video content continue to decrease. However, with more and more video available to the consumer as a result, it is critical that organizations develop quality videos that break through the noise and contribute to their overall goals.

Curation

Popular platforms: Flipboard, Pocket, Pinterest, Storify

The Basics. Sharing content and participating in conversations has become an essential part of storytelling. Curation platforms help users collect and repurpose content created by multiple sources to create their own narratives. This allows organizations to engage with their audiences—and use that dialogue to advance their goals.

Trends. As the number of content sources expands across the internet, tools to help aggregate and curate content in custom spaces gain importance. Curation tools often function as filtering mechanisms for quality or topical content.

Insight. The most important element of successfully utilizing curation tools for engagement is the discipline of listening to audience input and participating in community conversations. These tools also create an opportunity to express an organization's perspective on what's worth consuming on a given topic.

Monitoring

Popular platforms: Sysomos, Radian 6, Hootsuite, Simply Measured

The Basics. Monitoring real-time and historical social media posts has become an essential tool to understanding conversations and trends of specific topics or issues. Monitoring tools help users understand conversations—so they can plan their social media engagement.

Trends. Over the past year, social media analytics have evolved to provide advanced metrics focused on engagement. Real-time and historical data from a broad range of sources are now being integrated into a single user interface to track trends and foster engagement across various social platforms.

Insights: Social media monitoring provides key metrics and insights that benchmark the efficacy of your engagement strategies and can be communicated to internal stakeholders. These metrics can be leveraged to gain buy-in from leadership and optimize content based on what resonates best with your audience.

Experimental

The Basics. Many new experimental platforms exist, but their utility for most organizations is unknown or untested. As a result, most organizations wisely wait until an innovative digital platform is adapted by a broad user base before investing time and resources into building their own presence on it. However, early adopters of “bleeding edge” technology can establish themselves as thought leaders on the platform and build a loyal fan base early on its growth—before competition for attention becomes more intense. And some early adopters find their feedback can inform and guide the direction of the technology as it develops, so that it can better meet their needs.



EVALUATION



Evaluation Insights

Organizations that evaluate the impact of their storytelling accurately can learn what's working and strengthen their storytelling—and also build a body of evidence about the merits of investing in digital storytelling.

“When we asked organizations how they measure the effectiveness of their stories, the answer across the board was: ‘we don’t.’” — **ACADEMIA**

“Orient metrics around what your actual goals are. Easier said than done but important to articulate—one of the pitfalls of vanity metrics is that they only measure the lowest rung of engagement. And they really have no bearing on the rungs of the ladder that come next. I think there’s a really important role for experimentation to collect data, but beyond that if you’re going into something with a need to evaluate it, then you need to know what your ultimate goals are and find your metrics that align with those goals.” — **TECHNOLOGY**

People charged with evaluating the impact of strategic storytelling within an organization need guidance on how to set metrics for digital storytelling. They also need training on readily available tools, such as Google Analytics and metrics available on YouTube.

“If you can look beyond the ‘likes’—what are you actually asking people to do? Maybe it’s a donation or clicking on a link.” — **BRANDING**

“Everyone is infatuated by [social media] metrics. They’re called vanity metrics. Every organization has to figure out what they want from social media, because if they don’t then the vanity metrics will fill the gap.” — **TECHNOLOGY**

“The metric of how many likes or followers you have isn’t the right way to gauge cultural fertilization. It’s not always easy to translate impact to data.” — **ENTERTAINMENT**

“We highly recommend using Google Analytics and having someone on staff who understands the tool. Facebook’s Insights makes it easy to experiment, and that process may help you learn about what will perform. Constant Contact is another great tool that a lot of orgs have but don’t use effectively for evaluation.” — **BRANDING**

“I think it’s inherently subjective about having some experts say: this organization is doing a good job. You have to determine what the organization is trying to do, who its most important audiences are, and what results can be tracked over time—and then you can create a custom set of evaluation metrics for that organization.” — **TECHNOLOGY**

Ideas

- Produce guidelines on how to set impact goals and storytelling objectives.
- Share case studies with appropriate metrics and KPIs to track.



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