Mastering the art of the narrative: using stories to shape public policy

*There can be little doubt people believe narratives are important and that crafting, manipulating, or influencing them likely shapes public policy. But how does one actually do this? To **Michael D. Jones** and **Deserai Crow**, it starts by understanding the component parts of a narrative and configuring those in a way that maximises your chances of success. Setting the stage, establishing the plot, and casting the characters are all vital steps towards stating the moral of the story: the solution to the policy problem. Once there it is just as important to identify the venues and intervention points at which telling the story matters most.*

When people talk about policy, they are often actually talking about "the narrative". For example, a quick Google search at the time of writing this blog found advice for getting in front of the narrative regarding social justice, a depiction of conflict vying to control a foreign policy narrative, and a plea to reclaim the male gender narrative, to name just a few hits returned from our query. There can be little doubt then that people think narratives are important and that crafting, manipulating, or influencing them likely shapes public policy. But how does one actually do this?

Narrative as *your* tool for policy change

For any policy issue there are a lot of facts, and relationships between evidence, people, or institutions (e.g. police, schools, governments) that make the issue complex. Given the complexity, not everything is talked about at the same time. Facts are selectively configured in plausible ways. For example, the US Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") was nearly one-thousand pages, loaded with legal jargon and packed with information. How do you make sense of something like that? The truth is only a very few will understand it in depth. Most of us, including policymakers who eventually voted on the bill, will prioritise some of the information within and ignore or downplay other parts. This is done by telling a story that includes assertions about what causes what, who the victims are, who is causing the harm, and what should be done. While there are other tools that are also relevant, telling a good policy story *always* matters.

It starts by understanding exactly what a narrative is — its component parts — and configuring those parts in a way that maximises your chances of success. We recently wrote an article in *Policy and Politics* trying to capture what the scientific understanding of narrative has to say about those configurations. We then decided to take it a step further and offer advice on using narratives to shape policy.

Shaping the narrative: five easy steps

1. *Tell the story*: it doesn't matter if you are a scientist explaining the evidence, a citizen sharing an anecdote, or a policy analyst writing a brief, when communicating policy you will only use some of the available information. If you are human, this selective use of information invariably comes out as a story. So, the first and most important thing to understand about telling policy stories is that you *are* telling a policy story.
2. *Set the stage*: the second step is to purposefully decide what to include in your policy narrative setting. The setting includes policy relevant information such as evidence, geography, and laws. We find it easiest to think of these setting elements as props on a stage. Being true to professional, scientific, and ethical norms, select props that help you inspire emotion and attention. Carefully consider your audience. They will vary in their reactions to your setting. For example, a European audience may have a very different reaction than an American audience to setting the scene of your story in a United Nations chamber.
3. *Establish the plot*: public policy is about problems. Your plot defines the problem. It determines how props interact with each other and characters. It tracks time in the narrative. Perhaps most importantly, it establishes cause and effect, which allows blame, which in turn facilitates solutions.
4. *Cast the characters*: now that you have set the stage and established a plot, you need to cast the characters. Well fleshed-out policy narratives have victims that are harmed, villains that cause the harm, and heroes that promise aid to the victims. Casting the right characters is important, as audiences vary in their reactions. Known characters (e.g. Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton) are embedded with emotions for certain audiences.

That emotion will guide the audience's responses to both the [broader argument](#) in the narrative as well as how [evidence](#) is interpreted.

5. *State the moral*: the moral is a solution to the policy problem. These can come in many forms — policies, awareness, calls to action — but good policy narratives culminate with something to be done.

Narrative interventions

Not all policy narratives are equal. The venues — e.g. legislatures, government agencies, media, etc. — in which they are disseminated matter. In our article we lean on the work of [Catherine F. Smith](#) to identify venues and highlight points where telling a story matters most. We call these narrative intervention points, which include crafting policies, regulations, writing policy briefs, dealing with media, and citizen engagement, among others. Here we offer a few summative points based on our discussions of intervention points in our recent article.

1. *Understand your goals*: legislative staffers writing briefs for a representative, policy analysts writing a report for a city council, and citizens passionately trying to convince policymakers to change policy are all likely to have different motivations. Understanding why you're telling a policy story will help you both form a compelling story and identify optimal intervention points.
2. *Understand the rules and norms of your venue*: since venues are not equal, (e.g. when writing a formal policy analysis you are far more constrained than when writing a blog entry), understand the rules and norms of your venue, and then conform your narrative to fit smoothly within.
3. *Know your audience*: knowing your audience's perspective is critical. Their perspectives are shaped by many defining characteristics such as ideology, gender, profession, and race, to name just a few. Study your audience and structure your story by selecting props for the stage, identifying emotionally compelling characters, and establishing a plot that they are likely to be responsive to.

We end here with a moral of our story. Whether you are a scientist or an issue-advocate, you likely care about shaping public policies so they are more closely aligned to your values. Mastering the art of the narrative can help you achieve these goals. So go forth and tell good stories.

This blog post is based on the authors' article, "[Narratives as tools for influencing policy change](#)", published in Policy & Politics (DOI: 10.1332/030557318X15230061022899).

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