



# Narrative Strategy: Housing



### MODERN HOME No. 115

With Wood Foundation, Not Excavated.

To illustrate a few of the materials we specify on this, our \$725.00 house.

The arrangement of this house is as follows:

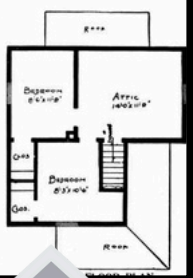
#### FIRST FLOOR.

- Parlor - - - 12 feet by 10 feet 6 inches
- Bedroom - - 8 feet 6 inches by 11 feet 9 inches
- Kitchen - - - 14 feet by 11 feet 9 inches
- Pantry - - - 8 feet 2 inches by 3 feet 6 inches

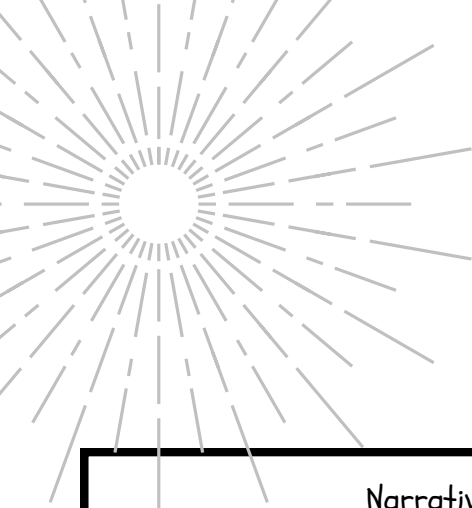
#### SECOND FLOOR.

- Front Bedroom, 8 feet 3 inches by 10 feet 6 inches
  - Rear Bedroom, 8 feet 6 inches by 11 feet 9 inches
  - Large Attic - - 14 feet by 11 feet 9 inches
- All bedrooms have roomy closets.

Width, 24 feet; length, 28 feet, exclusive porch.



[www.narrativestrategy.org](http://www.narrativestrategy.org)



## Narrative Strategy: Housing Zine by Claire Haas

November 2024

For more information, visit  
<http://www.narrativestrategy.org>

where you can find toolkits on how to apply all this,  
links to more resources,  
the fully cited academic project that led to this work,  
and an audio-zine/podcast version where I read this zine to you.



## What we can do about it

Narrative Strategy is how we use a strategy to change the narrative. If we use narrative tactics as part of our campaigns, we can shift the debate and ready the world for more transformative change. Here are some things you can do with your community and in your campaigns now:



Talk about the solution: Social homes bring stability, like a place for families to gather over a meal or someone to have a second change.



Expand the identities represented in housing stories and how they are represented. Go against the stereotype and look for stories that show our vision of a solution, not just the problem. Remember - we agree there is a problem, nobody needs convincing on that.



Train spokespeople to explain the causes of housing inafforability. Check out this toolkit on prepping to tell housing stories.



Include a spokesperson bio so reporters have no excuse for not representing our members fully. Download a guide on how to make one.



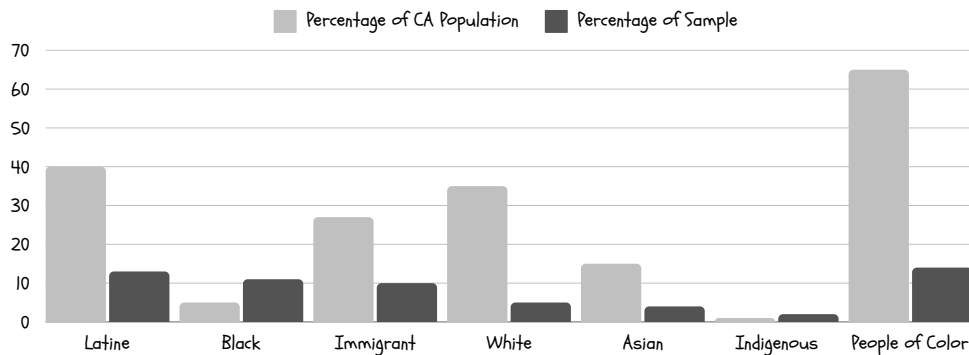
Talk to reporters about how their representations of race may be contributing to right wing populism. You can share this 1-pager with them.



This whole toolkit can be found at <http://www.narrativestrategy.org>

# Racial Mis-Representation

## Racial identities in CA and in this sample of articles by %



Articles were more likely to identify racial identities when talking about the PROBLEMS of housing.

### Some narratives of home reinforced stereotypical representations:

- Nearly half of all the articles identifying women were about home as family.
- 71% of the articles representing indigenous identity contained home as origin/roots.

LGBTQI+ identities are under-represented – queer people have housing issues, but these stories are almost completely absent.

82% of representations of disability were about health, suggesting paternalism in the coverage of disabled people and an over-use of a medical model of disability. Some articles also reinforced the false narrative about mental illness causing homelessness.

Asians are overrepresented in stories about financialization/profit reinforcing the model minority myth.

### We can create change: :

While there is a lot out of our control – there are ways we can influence how identities are represented in the media on housing stories. Check out the toolkit at [www.narrativestrategy.org](http://www.narrativestrategy.org) – or via the QR codes on the next page – for some concrete steps housing organizers can take now.

Welcome!

Maybe you are a housing organizer or someone facing a housing issue that is involved in organizing to change housing policies and practices. Maybe you're already doing narrative strategy or maybe it is new to you. This zine is for you.

We want housing to be different – we know there are big problems. But the stories we tell shape what we can fight for and win. This zine is about how we understand the moment we're in – and how we can imagine and create something different.

There's reasons for the housing problems we face – our neighborhoods are now owned (more) by hedge funds and the financial institutions are willing to profit, even if it means more of us are unhoused. Our government has done little to stop this process – that's because of a bunch of factors like not really caring, laws in their way, and how they are beholden to financial industries and real estate. But the whole conversation is dictated by our history and cultural moment – we believe what we believe about housing because of the narratives that make up our culture. To make a big material change – we have to change the narrative, too.

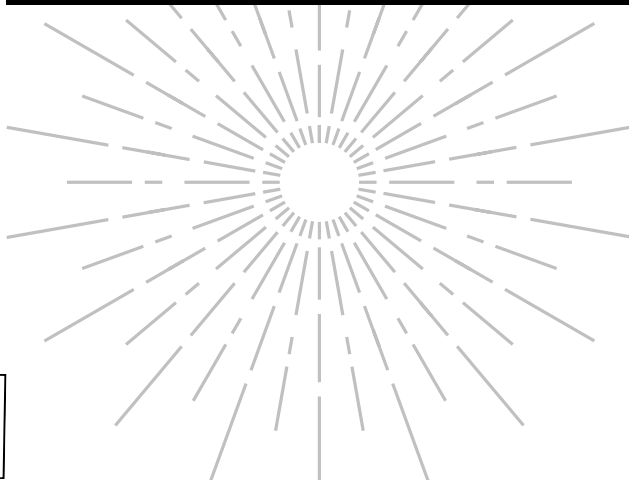
This guide is meant to give you tools to act on changing public narratives with what you have access to right now, so that you and your organization can incorporate narrative strategy into your plans now.

# What is Narrative?

Narratives are stories, told by a teller to an audience, involving characters and a plot that consists of events selected to be part of the story. Our thoughts are organized in narratives, and narratives are how we create shared meanings in our cultures. Narratives carry meanings that we can identify with and help us clarify how we identify and what's important to us.

Narratives are conveyed through representations - which includes spoken, written, and signed language, but also body language, images, and all forms of cultural production. When we take in a narrative, we sort it in our mental concept map, and then it influences the narratives we produce in our speech, social media posts, art work, etc. Organizers use lots of different kinds of stories in lots of layers.

A sociocultural trend is a pattern of shared narratives currently moving through a culture that can be observed and studied.



# Reimagining Home and Neighborhoods

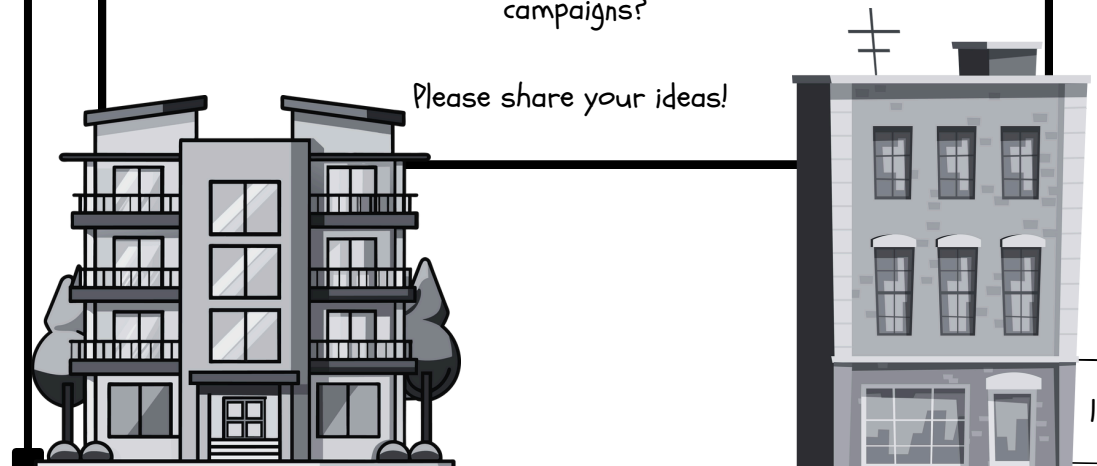
Take a moment to notice just how deep our mental frameworks are about good and bad neighborhoods. Can you imagine a neighborhood without imagining some element of coding for race and class?

## We need to collectively reimagine home and neighborhoods in a new framework.

How can your organization or community engage in reimagining neighborhoods?

What experiments could you try in the context of your campaigns?

Please share your ideas!





# "Home, Sweet Home!"

1/3 articles about home as in family/love also were about neighborhood.

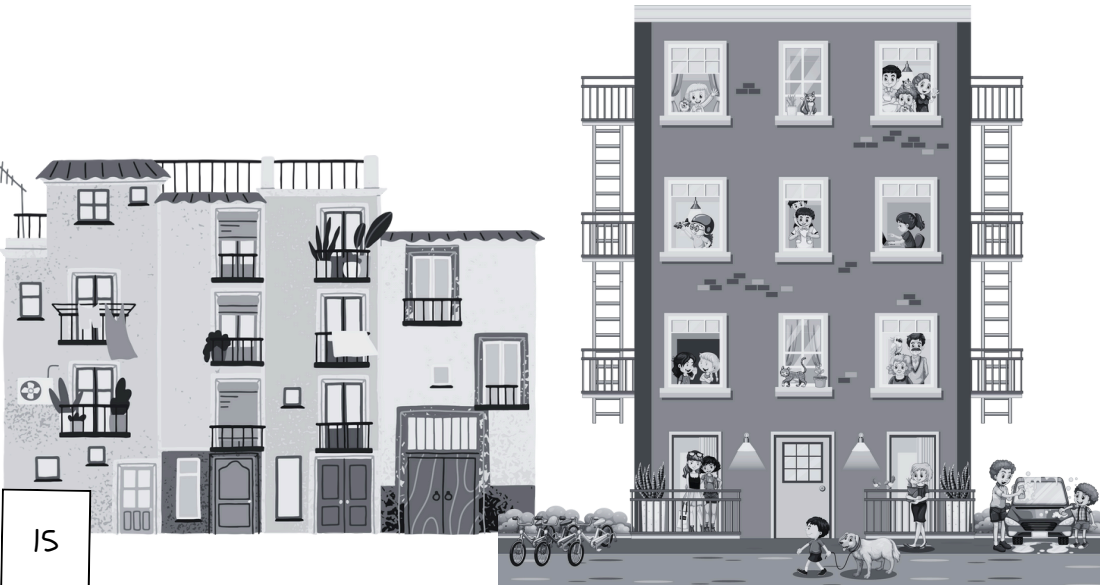
1/2 of articles about "home" were also about the need for and cost of housing.



Home represents stability. Shelter, a group in the UK ran a social housing communications campaign recently using the hashtag #MadeInSocialHousing. The campaign features some famous people (and others) telling the stories of how growing up in social housing impacted their growth and development. This campaign highlights the possibility of what can happen when we highlight the meanings of home and shows how it can give us an opportunity to talk about what we are fighting for, rather than the problem we are fighting against.

## What does housing mean to you?

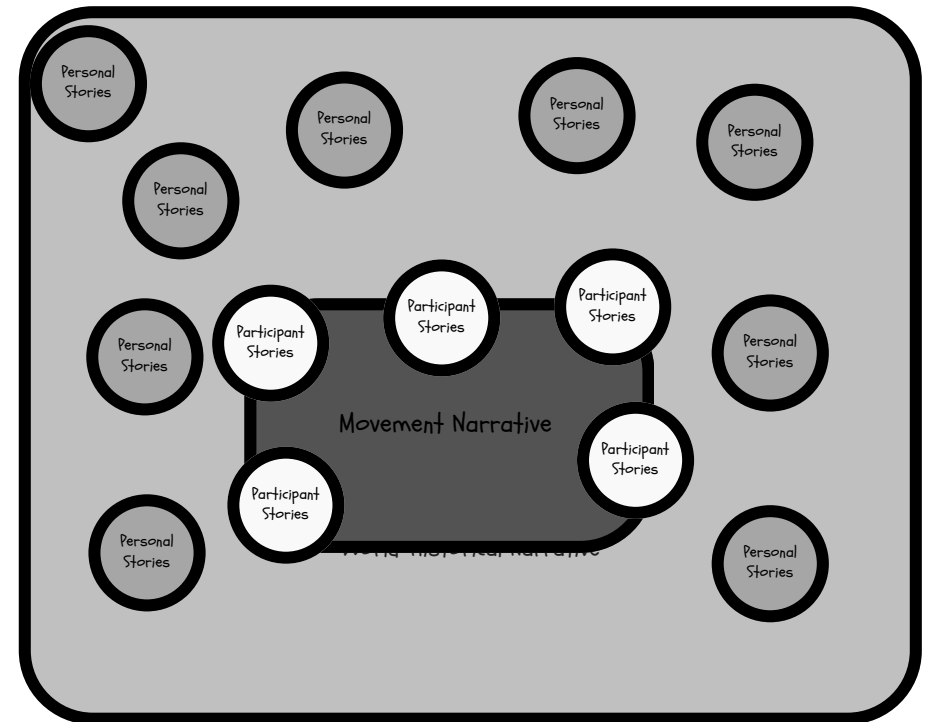
(take some notes with these apartments if you want!)



## How do Organizers Use Narratives?

Organizers use lots of kinds of narratives in different directions. The diagram below shows some of how we do that.

The "world-historical narrative" is the big picture story we tell about the moment we're in and what the systems we're dealing with are. Personal stories tell the impacts of these issues and systems on people. Our movement narrative is our story of who we are and what we're fighting for, and participant stories are the stories of what it means for a person to be involved in our organizing.



What stories do you and your organization use?  
When and why?

# What is culture?

## Culture:

1. a whole way of life made up of common meanings shared by a group of people in a particular time and place
2. the production of signals through the cultural industries, including artistic forms such as music, dance, visual arts, film, radio, journalism, literature, poetry, and more

## Cultural Organizing:

Community Organizing that engages in cultural production as a tactic

As organizers, we often engage with both of these definitions of culture. For example, we might pay attention to the cultural needs of our members when choosing foods to share at our meetings, which is about our culture being our way of life. We also might decide to paint a mural in the street at one of our actions, using a form of cultural practice as a tactic.

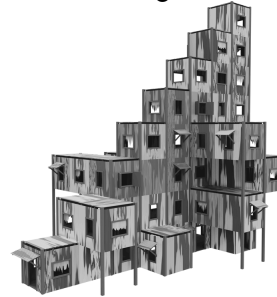
We might think of all organizing as using the whole way of life definition of culture, and cultural organizing as the specific subset of organizing that engages in cultural production in our tactics.

## Good Neighborhood,



The US has subsidized investment in suburban neighborhoods, while simultaneously using red-lining racialized groups out and systematically disinvesting in the inner-city neighborhoods where they lived.

## Bad Neighborhood



We still talk in coded language to talk about the race of our neighbors and this narrative underlies everything we do in housing.

Articles about neighborhoods also talked of housing costs, the need for housing, and housing as an investment, which aligns with this historical reality.

Between 1/3 and 1/2 of all representations of racial groups talked about neighborhoods, as did 1/3 of articles about workers, people in poverty, and children.

## Investment and "The Homeowner"



Many articles about investment included meanings about housing costs, and often included racialized identities.

Half of articles about housing as a luxury contained meanings about housing as an investment. These articles were less likely to include identities.

3/4 of articles about financialization and profit had housing as an investment - but these articles were least likely to have identities.

People are in the stories of investment when they are doing the investment - but not when they are the ones whose neighborhood is being stolen by investment firms.

In a "good neighborhood" you can expect your neighbors to be (white) homeowners.



## "The Rent is Too Damn High!"

The top two meanings for housing were of cost/debt/taxes (144) and need/shelter(140).  
83 articles contained both

We all agree:  
**Housing costs too much.  
People need to be housed.**

## Housing is Health.



Housing as health works as a frame to talk about the problem:  
2/3 of articles with housing as health also had housing as a need and >50% also had meanings of housing cost.

## "The Housing Crisis" and "Housing is a Human Right!"

Only 9% of articles contained housing as a right, and most of those were stories of politicians campaigning, indicating this meaning is tied to activism. It's a meaning that works well with our base but may cause other people to quit listening.

20% of articles talked about the housing crisis, but 4/5 of these also talked about housing as a need, and >70% of them about cost. A crisis refers to a an urgent moment to solve a problem - a longterm crisis frame may wear people out in a world of so much stressful bad news already.

Neither the housing crisis nor housing as a right had a lot of identities represented, meaning there's less strong characters for audiences to relate to in these stories.



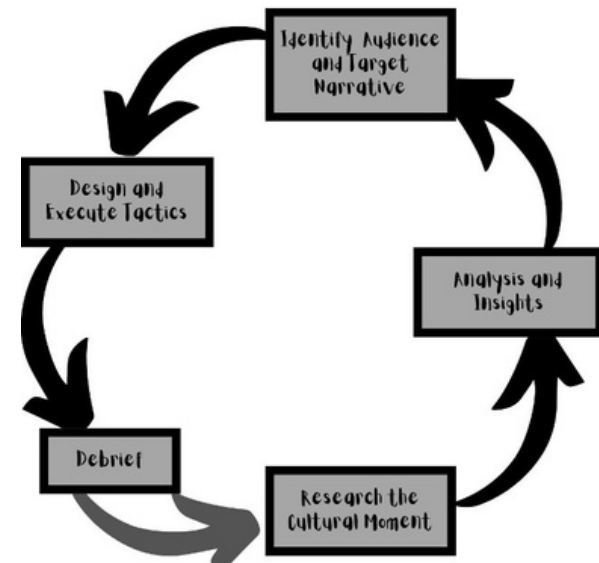
**We may need one narrative for our base of activists and other narratives for other publics.**

# How to organize to change Narrative and Culture

Just like we organize to change material conditions, we can also organize to change narratives and culture. This is a proposed protocol for how we do this process.

We start researching the cultural moment - talking to our neighbors, observing what's around us, reading the news, checking out music, art, film, etc. Then we analyze what we see to find insights that we turn into a target narrative and decide on a target audience. Then we design campaign tactics and do them. Then we debrief to see what worked.

This kind of process can be called narrative or cultural strategy.



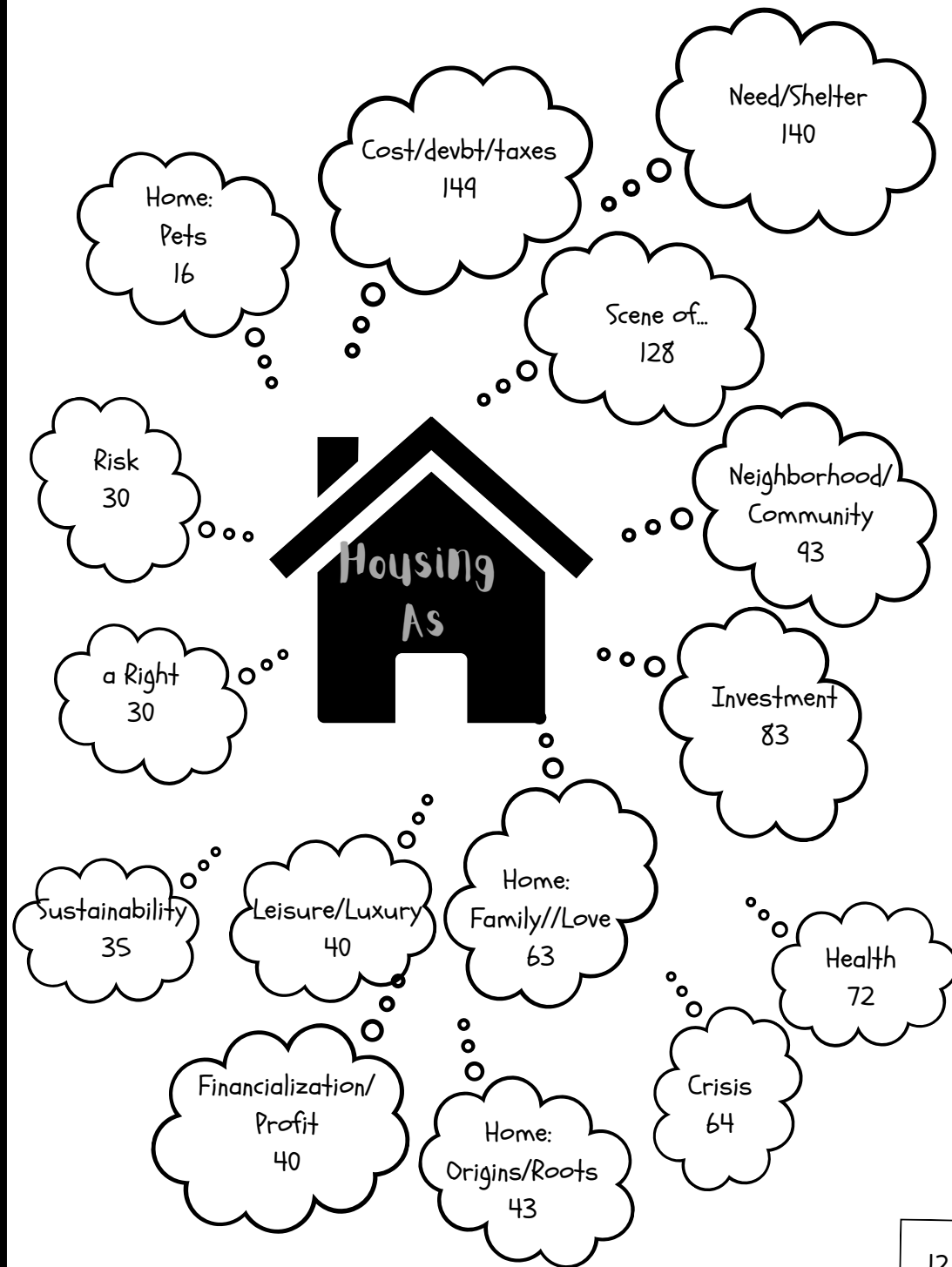
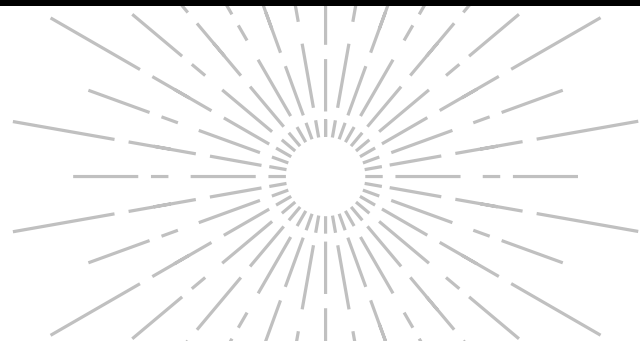
# What is Narrative Strategy?

**Narrative strategy aims to change cultural narratives as one aspect of a campaign.**

Cultural narratives make up the broad sets of beliefs and ways of understanding the world around us that are shared by a group of people (a culture). Some cultural narratives are harmful, and one aspect of narrative strategy is to identify and seek to change cultural narratives that prevent us from creating transformative change.

If you want to learn more about the organizations I surveyed and their awesome work, go here:

<http://www.narrativestrategy.org/resources>





# Analyzing Housing Meanings in California



I analyzed 325 media articles about housing from around California in the week leading up to Super Tuesday, 2024. I looked at how housing was represented in each article, such as as home, as a need, as a cost, or as a scene of a crime. I also looked at what identities were represented in each article. Then, I analyzed the results. The following pages share some of the most important data and insights, as well as some ideas of how we can use all this as housing organizers.

The diagram on the next page shows the meanings for housing I analyzed and how many of the 325 contained that meaning. Many articles included more than one meaning for housing.



## What are the types of Narrative Strategy?

Broad Consensus Narrative

Targeted Narrative(s)

Narrative Surge

### Broad Consensus Narrative

Some narrative strategy takes the approach of engaging with broad "consensus" narratives. This can include finding messages that work for the broadest group of people. It can also include harm reduction frameworks, like trying to get the media to be less racist on a particular issue.

### Targeted Narrative(s)

Some narrative strategy is about the targeted narratives that make our campaigns better. This is often an approach to find the best narrative(s) for the audiences needed in a particular campaign, and thinking about what storytelling methods will best communicate that narrative.

### Narrative Surges

Some narrative strategy is based in creating narrative surges amongst people who identify with a narrative that can be part of the shift in a broader cultural narrative. Narrative surges have the most specific audiences and the most specific narratives.

What form of narrative strategy is your organization engaging in? How do you want to engage?

# Narrative and Cultural Power

Recently, The Action Lab surveyed 300 organizers about power, and found that most organizers think of power as (1) the ability to do something, (2) organized people and organized money, or (3) the ability to reshape society/the system. These definitions of power reflect our traditional organizing strategies and ways of thinking.

But what about narrative and cultural power?

Mass media has long been used as a means of control, but in today's world of social media and so many information channels, we have many ways of wielding narrative and cultural power.

## RANKING OF DEFINITIONS OF POWER

01 THE ABILITY TO DO SOMETHING

02 ORGANIZED PEOPLE AND ORGANIZED MONEY

03 THE ABILITY TO RESHAPE SOCIETY/THE SYSTEM

04 AGENCY TO CONTROL ONE'S LIFE

A working definition of power:

(1) Power is organized people and organized money that has the ability to either act or influence others to act to make change. (Material Power)

(2) Power is the ability to control or influence cultural narratives through the creation of representations. (Narrative Power)

Here's how some groups are defining narrative and cultural power:

- Caring Across Generations defines three types of power: political, narrative, and modelling power, with political power being the power to change policy, narrative power being that of telling a story to influence attitudes, behaviors, and norms, and modelling power as the power to model a new way of being through creating it at small scale (Caring Across Generations, 2020, pp. 4-5).
- The Center for Story Based Strategy defines narrative power as, "multi-faceted and fluid form of power expressed through stories, particularly through the processes that socially construct specific stories as "the truth." (Reinsborough & Canning, 2010, p. 122).
- Narrative Funders and Consultants Jody Myrum and Mandy Van Deven define narrative power as "the ability to determine which meaning-making systems people use to interpret and construct the world," (Myrum, 2024).
- The Center for Cultural Power describe cultural power as "their ability to change and shape culture, fostering a world where power is more justly distributed" (What We Do - The Center for Cultural Power, n.d.).

How do you define power?  
How is narrative and cultural strategy a part of your working definition of power?