

# Systems Storytelling



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Facilitating systems transformation through stories

- Stories are like stars. Individual, shiny and bright, they move and inspire us.
- Narratives are a collection of stories like constellations are a collection of stars. Stories can be connected together into narratives, making a deeper kind of sense and meaning.
- A culture, then, is like a galaxy. Ever expanding and evolving, a culture is comprised, in part, of narratives as the galaxy is comprised, in part, of constellations.

# Storytelling is Our Oldest Social Change Tool

- Storytelling is humanity's oldest "technology" to create social change. When we narrate our histories and activate our imaginations, we foster a process of collective "meaning-making".
- Meaning-making is the way we selectively choose information, sequence it, bound it (identify a beginning, middle & end), and then use this interpretation to identify courses of action.
- When we tell stories together, and over time, we activate *collective agency*, the ability for groups to cohere and create a shared future.



# HOW STORYTELLING AFFECTS THE BRAIN

## NEURAL COUPLING

A story synchronizes the listener's brain with the teller's brain.

## MIRRORING

Mirror neurons enable listeners to mirror experience

## CORTICAL ACTIVITY

Two areas of the brain are activated when processing facts. Stories activate many additional areas such as the motor cortex, sensory cortex and frontal cortex.



## DOPAMINE

The brain releases dopamine in response to an emotionally-charged event, resolution of conflict, or even recognition of a pattern, creating a pleasurable response and ease of memory and recall

## CORTISOL

The brain releases cortisol when it experiences conflict which increases attention and memory

## OXYTOCIN

The brain releases oxytocin in response to characters that increases empathy and connection as well as compassion and trust

# Why Storytelling and Systems?

- Systems approaches require many stakeholders, often with differing viewpoints, to come together over long periods of time to affect change.
- Heroic, linear narratives are particularly dangerous for complex, systemic issues because they prioritize single solutions, often from privileged actors.
- We need to revitalize Storytelling practices that keep groups together while learning: considering viewpoints, testing and experimenting, evaluating, learning from failure and trying again.



## From Transaction



- How does Storytelling as a *product* convince others to think or do in specific ways?

## To Transformation



- How does Storytelling as a *process* bring us together by reshaping how we see a system?

# Community of Practice Members



**David Bornstein**  
Journalist & Author



**Joanne Cheung**  
Artist & Writer



**Melanie Goodchild**  
Researcher & Systems Thinker



**Nat Kendall-Taylor**  
Narrative researcher & Mobilizer



**Philippa Kabali-Kagwa**  
Storyteller, Poet & Coach



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AfroOptimist & Idea Explorer



**S'bu Nyamakazi**  
Musician & Speaker



**Tara Roberts**  
Explorer & Storyteller



**Nayantara Sen**  
Narrative Strategist & Writer



**Nicolas van Hemelryck**  
Filmmaker & Architect

## What do we hope Systems Storytelling can achieve?

1. **Better understanding** of the complex nature of a social system
2. More **trusting relationships** among collective team members and the communities you serve
3. Deeper and more **constructive dialogue** between the stakeholders in a system
4. A container that better holds the **emotional extremes** (both suffering and joy) that are inevitable in social change work
5. A more **cohesive collective identity** among collective team members and your constituents



# Examples of How Stories Change Systems

## TRAFFIC MIMES - BOGOTA, COLOMBIA

Faced with a notoriously corrupt traffic police force, sky-high traffic fatality rates, and chaos on the roads, Bogotá mayor Antanas Mockus took bold and audacious action: he disbanded the corrupt cops and offered to retrain and rehire them... as mimes. Using popular education techniques, the traffic mimes fanned out through the city, mocking lawbreakers, applauding courteous drivers, and dramatizing the frustrations and challenges of citizens moving through traffic. The result: a 50 percent drop in traffic fatalities, reduced traffic gridlock, and a marked shift in the traffic culture of the city.



## Candy Chang, I Wish This Was United States of America

I Wish This Was. Inspired by the vacant storefronts dotting New Orleans, Candy wondered what community members would like to see in the spaces. And so she posted grids of blank of "I Wish This Was \_\_" stickers – all fully removable – and asked people to give their opinions



## NATIONAL SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMME - South Africa (2020)

EE, EELC & SECTION27 received gravely concerning testimonies from learners, caregivers, educators and SGB members about the dire hardship faced by children across the country in the absence of the NSNP. Resulted in the recognition that the constitutional rights to basic nutrition and basic education are interdependent, and celebrate this as a victory not only for over nine million learners, but for the millions of households whose food security had been gravely compromised due to the Covid-19 necessitated lockdown.

