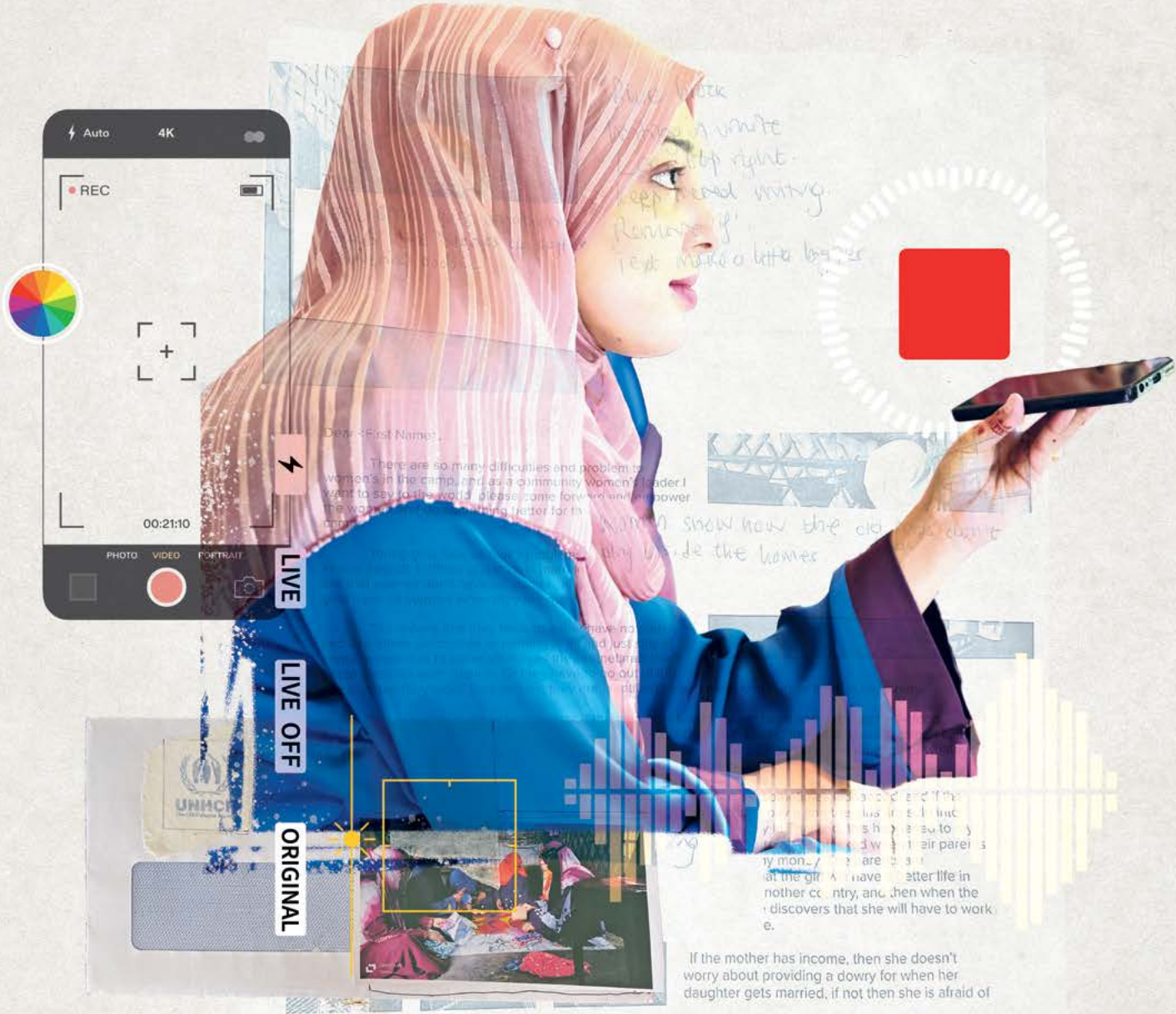


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Changing the narrative

Engaging donors through authentic storytelling

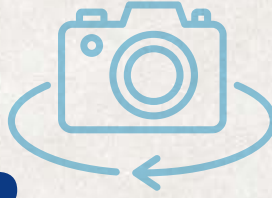
Storytelling
 WaterAid's community-led winter campaign

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How to...
 Create meaningful
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Changing the narrative



Jess Crombie highlights the benefits of engaging donors through authentic storytelling

Change, as the old cliché states, takes time. But only when there is no urgent need to propel innovation. The jet engine was fast-tracked to meet the onset of World War II, and a Covid vaccine was delivered in less than a year when the world needed to come out of lockdown.

In our sector, the brutal murder of George Floyd and the subsequent reflection on race and colonial legacies, including how we communicate about aid work, was the catalyst for changing our narratives at pace over the last five years.

The subsequent shifts have been many and are a cause for positive reflection. Firstly, we have seen practical shifts: the development and rollout of in-depth informed consent processes; story production ways of working evolved to provide time for contributor input; editorial choice checkers developed to guide those creating communications and fundraising materials around how to do this equitably.

“The brutal murder of George Floyd...was the catalyst for changing our narratives at pace”

Secondly, there have been cultural shifts, centred around a realisation that while our storytelling has unquestioningly done good, it has also caused long-term harm by perpetuating and maintaining stereotypical ideas that don't just have a negative impact on individuals, but also impact decision-making around political policy and economic investment.

Examples of positive change

There are many examples of organisations enacting narrative change campaigns. Some of the most interesting include Chance for Childhood's #overexposed campaign, which stated that it would no longer be sharing the faces of any children it

supported because it did not believe that these children could ever give truly informed consent. Tearfund's fundraising film *We Built This Town* used humour to make a pointed reference to the saviouristic attitudes that it and others had perpetuated in the past. And MSF Norway enacted a mea culpa when it released the video *Anti-racism: When you picture Doctors Without Borders, what do you see?*, which stated that its storytelling had contributed to racist white saviourism and asked supporters to take a journey of narrative change alongside it.

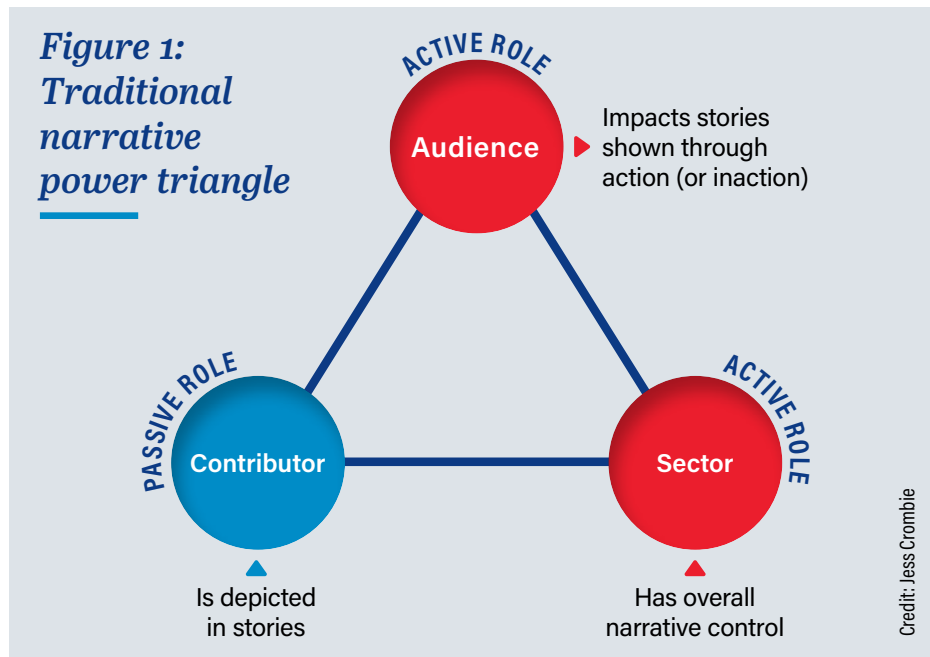
However, these changes are not deeply embedded yet. Today we face a tough funding environment, politicians who are playing into a national-over-international agenda, and the rollback of many large corporations' investment in diversity, equity and inclusion. Meanwhile, public opinion, while certainly more engaged and informed, is still catching up with the idea that harm and good are not mutually exclusive. See the recent *Band Aid at 40* controversy; while there were plenty who agreed that the song's racist lyrics were best consigned to history, there were still those who insisted that the money raised by this initiative meant that it was beyond criticism.

Lack of detailed data

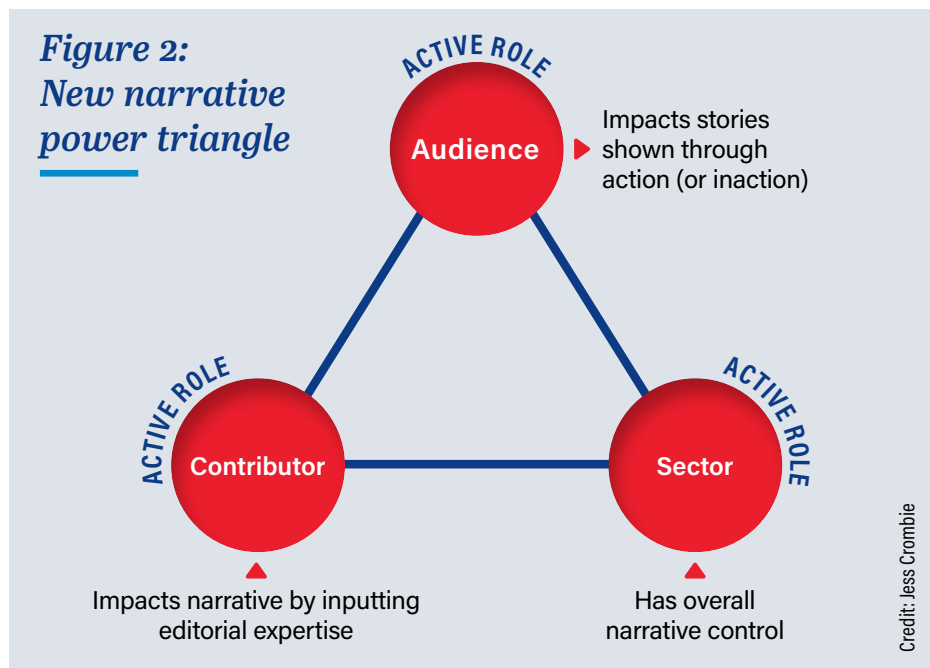
The sector also lacks detailed quantitative and qualitative information demonstrating the outcomes of such initiatives. Anecdotally, none of the above examples has had a negative impact, but for communicators and fundraisers keen to enact narrative shifts, they need compelling data that proves this change trajectory is going to allow them to meet their income and engagement KPIs.

Recognising this, my work over the past years has tried to provide data to help changemakers feel confident about continuing down this positive path. Alongside a handful of civil society organisations, I have been carrying out tests designed to do three things:

1. Build a story production methodology (contributor-centred storytelling – CSS) that enables contributors (otherwise known as beneficiaries) to lead decisions over what story is told about their experiences, to tackle stereotyping.



Credit: Jess Crombie



Credit: Jess Crombie

2. Prove that this method of story production creates fundraising content that can meet or even exceed financial and engagement supporter KPIs by carrying out live A/B tests.
3. Share resulting data publicly with the sector to encourage and influence for narrative change.

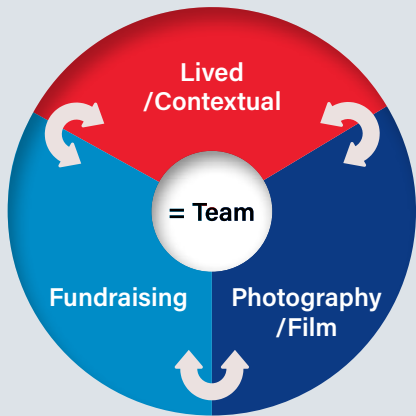
Contributor-centred storytelling

The act of creating communications materials is intrinsically bound up in complicated power dynamics. It can help to imagine the process of story production as a triangle of power, with different actors holding different

amounts of power to influence narratives (see figure 1).

This is the traditional narrative power triangle: the more active you are, the more powerful you are. The sector makes the editorial decisions so has the greatest amount of power, and the audience impacts the stories told through their response to those stories, so also holds substantial sway. The contributors to the stories do not hold power, as while they are depicted in these stories, and while their voices and testimonies may be included, they are framed by the editorial choices of the sector; asked to answer

Figure 3: Areas of expertise



Credit: Jess Crombie

predefined questions to fulfil a predefined brief.

Figure 2 shows the new narrative power triangle, in which power is shared by all the actors. The sector and audiences maintain their existing power, but the contributors also play an active role, impacting narrative decision-making.

To facilitate this shift, I have developed the CCS methodology. The central idea is to create a team of experts made up of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) staff from the fundraising and/or communications teams, audio-visual expertise from in-house or external resource, and affected individuals who bring lived and contextual expertise. Together this group make the editorial decisions about what story to tell, and how, about whatever the organisation has funded or needs to fund, with those with lived/contextual expertise acting as creative directors due to their greater knowledge of the story topics (see figure 3).

Inspiring audiences

Providing data to prove that narrative change engages and inspires audiences to take action is imperative.

The CCS methodology has now been tested with several organisations, two of which have been generous enough to share their results in the public domain. These tests provide data to prove that story materials

created in partnership with the affected population and shared with supporters generate equal or even greater income and engagement.

The first test was carried out in partnership with Amref Health Africa in 2021. Amref sent two direct mail appeal packs to about 1,800 people on its UK supporter database, with the database split 50/50 for the test. The first pack was created by Patrick Malachi, a community health worker in Nairobi, Kenya. He controlled all editorial decisions, took, and selected the images (he was offered a professional photographer to direct but wanted to take his own pictures), and told the story in his own words.

“Creating comms materials is intrinsically bound up in complicated power dynamics”

The second was created by Amref, using a professional photographer with text written by its CEO.

The Who Owns the Story? report that followed this test, published in March 2022, concluded:

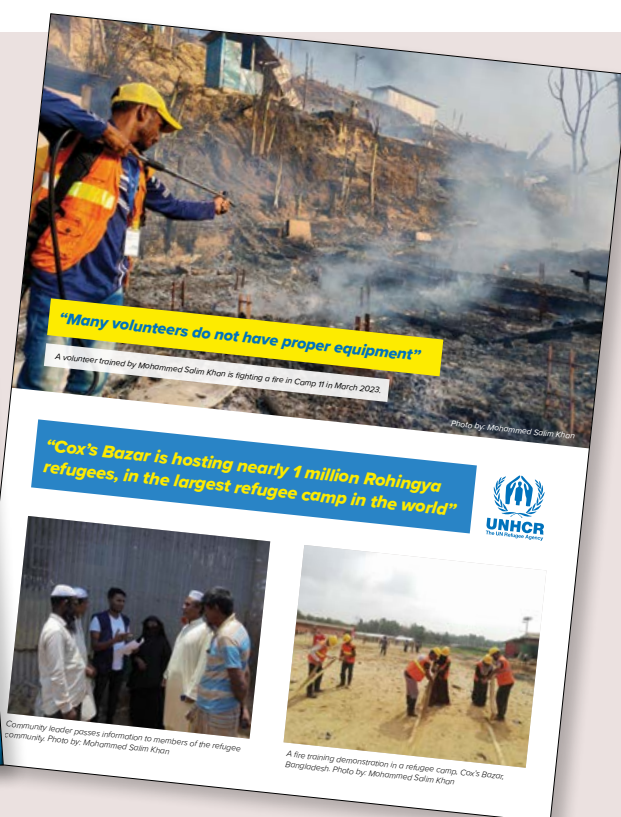
- The appeal designed by Malachi raised more money than the one created by UK-based fundraisers – and 38% more compared to previous appeals.
- Stories produced by people from their own communities feel more authentic and can create a stronger emotional bond with donors.
- Donors, questioned during interviews following their donation, recognised the positive challenge to some of the stereotypes INGOs are accused of perpetuating: “It’s good to see the old paternalistic model of charitable donation give way to a realisation that Africans are capable of making their own decisions about how to help their community,” said one respondent.

Left: front page of appeal A created by Patrick Malachi.

Right: back page of appeal B created by Amref’s UK fundraising team.



Right: front page of appeal created by the contributor-led team.
Below: front page of appeal created by UNHCR's fundraising team.



The second test was carried out in 2023-24 in partnership with UNHCR. This was undertaken in two phases, initially in Bangladesh in partnership with four individuals living as refugees from the Rohingya community in Cox's Bazar, and later in Kenya with 10 individuals living as refugees in Kakuma. The Bangladesh appeal was shared with over 300,000 donors across the USA and Canada; the Kenya appeal is still in production at the time of writing, so here we will share data from Bangladesh appeal only.

The donor group were again split 50/50 and the appeals were released as a blind A/B test – donors were not told that they were taking part in a test until afterwards. Donors in Canada received a direct mail appeal and an email; donors in the USA received only email. The report detailing the process and the outcomes, Rethink, Reframe, Redefine: Co-Creation and Storytelling concluded that:

- Donors are equally likely to give to refugee-led fundraising appeals in some, but not all markets:
 - In Canada the participant pack (direct mail and email) raised more money than the control.
 - In the USA (email only) the participant pack raised less than the control.

- Donors (responding to an online survey) self-reported that they were motivated to give by refugee-led storytelling:
 - Seeing a story created by a refugee made them feel 71.5% more likely to donate and 28.5% equally likely to donate (USA).
 - Seeing a story created by a refugee made them feel 35% more likely to donate and 62.5% equally likely to donate (Canada).

“Stories produced by people from their own communities can create a stronger emotional bond with donors”

- While a minority of donors did notice that this appeal was refugee-led, the majority did not. However, this didn't affect their giving habits. Comments included: “I donate to UNHCR once a year. I appreciate stories like this, but it will not change my donation timeline”; and “First-person stories have real power. Not ‘flies in the eyes’ but stories that reflect the outcomes of giving.”

The results of these two tests with Amref and UNHCR demonstrate that appeals created using the CCS methodology, which prioritise the narrative choices and preferences of contributors, can raise more money, but crucially, do not raise less money. The principle of donor-centricity, which is dominant within sector strategic thinking, is to give donors what they say they want. But the results of this study have shown us that donors do not always notice when we give them something different, but also – and crucially – that it doesn't affect their propensity to give. This last metric is the most important as it gives us a green light to mainstream ethically-focused narrative change, without having to risk our income.

Influencing for narrative change

Alongside this, it is important to remember that this change is also designed to respond to the requests for a new narrative from the people most affected by these stories – those with lived experience. Following the tests outlined above, we carried out interviews with participants to ask them about their motivations for taking part, and their responses to both the process and the outcomes. These responses were then used to redesign

and improve the CCS methodology and are helpful to hear when considering whether this way of working is important enough to enact.

Participants enjoyed being in control of what story was told and the recognition that it was about their real lived experience, not someone's idea of their experience. Malachi, who created the Amref appeal, stated in the post-research conversation: "I liked the approach – the way the project was set up. I could tell my own story. I think that this is good as it is from the bottom up. I am the agent of change in my community and my society."

"First-person stories have real power"

Participant preferences

The People in the Pictures and Which Image do you Prefer? reports found similar results, with participants often communicating their preference for stories where they were able to control the narrative. Responses from the contributor team in Bangladesh reflect these views. The names of these participants have been redacted for safeguarding reasons, but one individual told us that they felt best placed to design the story because: "I am the person who has experienced it; I have lived this life. It is more meaningful if I share my history."

Another communicated that they could not see how "outsiders" could possibly communicate their experiences effectively: "The people coming from outside, they don't know the feeling inside us. It's important to share the stories by ourselves so that we can share clearly these feelings."

These motivations to share their experiences in their own way did not just reflect feelings; there was also concern that if others shared their story, they might misrepresent what had happened. One individual reflected on an experience of being interviewed about the Myanmar government attacks in 2017: "The way I said 'they killed our people' they (the foreign media) changed it...It's important that I tell the story because I know the details of the crimes. Instead of

Making the change

Here are some practical recommendations for changing your communications narrative:

Start small – Test and learn, as a working methodology, will be embedded in all your working lives, so approach this in the same way. Find a small opportunity for enacting a contributor-centred storytelling method of working, develop story materials, and then test them with a micro audience, gather data and test again. Iterate and learn as you go.

Find partners internally and externally – In the spirit of information sharing, seek out those who are also interested in this area and share knowledge. Host a lunchtime talk, set up a Slack channel, form a working group, form a reading group, find external friends. (If your organisation is a member of Bond you can join the Ethical Storytelling working group which I co-chair and which is made up of over 300 individuals keen to talk about this topic).

If you do carry out this work, share it outside your organisation – You don't have to write a detailed report, but publish a blog, host a lunchtime talk, or share the data in your new external partner group. There is real appetite for information, and the more open we can be, the more we can learn and grow together to enact change.



knowing it generally, I want them to know the details of our situation. It is also important for the next generation that we write it in history so that our future generation will know that not all governments kill people."

For individuals who have experienced trauma and who have been subjected to serious human rights abuses, the ability to create your own narrative, to write your own truth into the world, is not just a feeling, it is also about survival through sharing information of your ongoing struggle.

Everyone has a story to tell

If you are wondering whether these tests were a success because the individuals bringing lived-experience expertise to the team were brilliant undiscovered communications talents, put the idea aside immediately. Anyone, whether as near as your local shop, or

as far as a plane ride away, will have a story to tell. And, because they are the ones who have lived through the event or situation they are describing, they will tell it fully and with the nuances and contexts that help humanise us all. This way of working is about facilitating that input and recognising the value of that contribution.

When the going gets tough, remember that the people in the stories that we tell are actively asking for this change. Evolving narratives so that we don't stereotype or "other" people is not a nice-to-have, or an ethical choice; it is a core part of our responsibility and our role as a social justice sector. ■

Jess Crombie is an academic at University of Arts London and founder of Jess Crombie Consultancy [jesscrombieconsultancy.com](https://www.jesscrombieconsultancy.com)