STORY MOVEMENTS

ILLUMINATING STORY-LED MOVEMENTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Convening Report

CMSi — CENTER FOR MEDIA & SOCIAL IMPACT — SCHOOL of COMMUNICATION — AMERICAN UNIVERSITY · WASHINGTON, DC

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The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), based at American University's School of Communication, is a creative innovation lab and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media for equity, social change, and social justice. Focusing on independent, documentary, and entertainment media, the Center bridges boundaries between scholars, producers and communication practitioners across media industries, social justice, public policy, and public engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and academic research; creates original media; convenes conferences and events; and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter.

This report was authored by a CMSI team comprising Varsha Ramani, David Conrad-Pérez, and Caty Borum.

Introduction

Media platforms and new technologies continue to affect the way we use, trust, and make meaning from news and entertainment. What has remained unchanged is the significance and impact of narrative and storytelling in everyday life. To better understand the diverse stakes and potential of today's changing media landscape, the Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) convened a diverse group of media makers, comedians, journalists, and thinkers who work across media and social change. In March 2024, CMSI hosted the fourth iteration of its biennial convening, *Story Movements*, at Washington D.C's Planet Word Museum.

CMSI believes in the power of stories to ignite civic imagination–that is, the power to imagine what a just, kind, and inclusive world will look like. We believe that once we can form a collective vision of a new future, we can come closer to realizing that hopeful vision in the real world; and media and storytelling continues to play a vital role in this work. This is the driving motivation of the *Story Movements* gathering.

Over two days, we highlighted incredible work from storytellers in different realms to make a better world a reality; we brought together these disparate realms in the same physical space to ignite cross-cultural and cross-industry collaborations; we created a space of hope and positive energy where stories bind together journalists, content producers, filmmakers, activists, academics, philanthropic leaders, and many others, to discover and nurture a community that puts stories to work for social justice, which we define as the pursuit of, and potential for, all people to live healthy, meaningful, productive lives.

The convening, supported by John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, combined 20 spotlight speaker talks with interactive opportunities for participants to meet and find their own space for ideas and collaboration, as well as a live comedy show, *Oh, We Can Joke About That?*.

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WATCH THE 2024 *STORY MOVEMENTS* HIGHLIGHTS VIDEO

> " **CMSI believes in the power of stories to ignite civic imagination–that is, the power to imagine what a just, kind, and inclusive world will look like.**

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Emergent Themes

01

Key trends raised by participants in the content creator space included declining trust in traditional media institutions, heightened volatility of social media platforms, and a shift to increased algorithmic content recommendation. With the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and misinformation propagation, educating creators about spotting and fighting disinformation emerged as an important opportunity for the coming years. Recommendations to support this opportunity included: funding creator programs, supporting creators in your network, and investing in new media channels instead of focusing solely on traditional advertising.

02

While dealing with politically divisive issues, such as the climate crisis, it is important to create spaces for diverse perspectives to engage in open dialogue and share personal stories and experiences, rather than just presenting data and facts. This can help bridge divides and lead to greater understanding.

03

The simplistic "villain/hero" narrative structure continues to harm public understandings of persistent social struggles and issues. In its place, there is an increasing need for narrative work that explores the nuance and humanity in all characters, even those who have caused harm.

04

Organizations are working toward systemic changes to support a more ethical, community-centered, and impactful documentary filmmaking ecosystem, but there is an urgent need for wider public (and funder) recognition and support of these organizations and efforts.

05

Trends in nonfiction storytelling distribution are creating an increasingly difficult environment for stories that center social justice challenges and bipartisan collaboration to find audiences. And while storytellers are enduring to find alternative methods of distribution, it is essential that attention continue to be directed at what type of stories are not being distributed, while lifting up the stories that are.

06

While comedy and storytelling can help bridge cultural divides and promote greater understanding of persistent social challenges, they are also being effectively used to promote hate and sponsor dangerous political campaigns and agendas. Given this reality, it is imperative that human rights organizations understand that hate groups and political campaigns are also finding economic and political success using the same storytelling tools; rather than ignoring or dismissing this reality, storytellers should be developing new tactics that address it.

AI, Social Media, and Tech for the Future

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is altering the techscape. The potential for AI and social media to amplify disinformation, extremism, and harmful content was a key theme, along with the need for media literacy and public education campaigns to help people better understand risks in today's communication environment and critically evaluate online information. Participants engaged in discussions about turning techniques that have been used to promote hate and divisiveness, such as implicit language and platform algorithms, to instead promote positive social change and counter harmful narratives by designing platforms to incentivize trustworthy, high-quality content.

Ashwath Narayanan

"

A lot of times we have organizations that are investing and communicating with the press, they're investing in ads. But investing in creators is an investment in people and we need more of it. We have a bigger opportunity than ever before to put people at the center of our stories, at the center of our distribution and I encourage you to do it."

—Ashwath Narayanan

Ashwath Narayanan, the co-founder and CEO of Social Currant, spoke about using social media influencers and content creators to effectively reach and engage target audiences, particularly for social impact organizations and nonprofits. Social Currant helps match organizations with influencers and content creators across social media platforms to amplify their messages and reach more people. The team has directed more than $1 million to creators around causes like voter registration and policy change, reaching 35 million people and engaging 4,000 creators. According to Ashwath, content creators are already engaging with social causes, and many are willing to create more social justice content if they are paid for their work.

RESOURCES:

🔗 Stitch This report from Spitfire media

Kurt Braddock

> **"**
> Social media plays a huge part in the proliferation of the kinds of ideas that lead to violence that come from one small little implicit drip statement from somebody who has a vested interest in motivating that violence. Even if they don't mean to motivate violence, if they don't expressly say they want people to become violent, they can step back and say, "I never told them to do that." Nevertheless, people do interpret it as such. So, what I study specifically is the psychology of this process. How do people take these implicit words and turn them into actual motivated violence?"
>
> **—Kurt Braddock**

Kurt Braddock, a professor of public communication at American University, discussed the phenomenon of "stochastic terrorism," the use of implicit, coded language by public officials that can motivate and incite violence, even if the officials do not directly call for it. Braddock explained how this rhetoric is amplified and reinforced in online echo chambers, and how it can normalize the idea of using violence for political ends. To address this issue, Braddock challenged participants to call out and condemn this rhetoric when it occurs, and he stressed an urgent need to implement media literacy initiatives to help people critically evaluate online content and prepare them to resist pervasive persuasive attempts to radicalize them.

RESOURCES:

🔗 Study on Engagement in subversive online activity predicts susceptibility to persuasion by far-right extremist propaganda

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Ravi Iyer

> **"**
> We talk about misinformation, we talk about hate, we talk about harassment. Is that the problem? And I guess I'd like to argue that that's not necessarily the problem. These things all exist offline. What actually the problem online is, is not the existence of people lying or creating hate, which existed long before social media, but it's the amplification and incentivization of that kind of content."
>
> **—Ravi Iyer**

Ravi Iyer, managing director of the USC Marshall School's Neely Center, spoke about designing better civic conversations online without judging content. He argued that the main problem online is not the existence of misinformation, hate, and harassment, but the amplification and incentivization of that type of content by social media platforms. To address this, Iyer suggested that platforms should empower users to control the kind of content they see rather than solely relying on content moderation policies; measure and validate the impact of their design choices on users' actual experiences online, not just on policy violations; and change their incentives and algorithms to promote higher-quality, less polarizing content, instead of aiming for maximum engagement. Iyer also discussed his work at Meta to try to implement these types of design-focused solutions and proposed a "Design Code for Social Media" to hold platforms accountable.

RESOURCES:

🔗 Dangerous speech project

The Role Of Creativity & Entertainment In The Climate Crisis

Climate-focused messaging is not in short supply—through scientific reports, research papers, television programs, Hollywood movies, and through various creative channels. At the same time, the challenge of effectively communicating the urgency and nuance of climate change remains. In order to help address this persistent problem, panelists highlighted the need to frame climate change messaging in more relatable ways, such as focusing on "extreme weather" rather than just "climate change," to reach broader and more politically diverse audiences.

For the individuals and organizations devoted to making climate-related storytelling and content, avoiding greenwashing, and securing funding were raised as critical challenges, along with maintaining creative control and alignment with values. This is especially true when large corporations or organizations offer financial support. The panelists discussed strategies for embedding climate themes and narratives within broader social and political contexts, such as capitalism, racism, and public health, rather than treating climate change as an issue that exists in isolation. Across presentations, the panelists emphasized the power of storytelling and creative media in overcoming some of the failures of past climate education campaigns and in driving meaningful change on climate and environmental issues, while navigating the practical and ideological challenges inherent in this work.

Rollie Williams

> **"**There are two things about climate change, right? Everybody knows it's the biggest problem facing us today, and it's super boring and no one wants to talk about it, which is a very difficult combination to overcome."
>
> **—Rollie Williams**

Rollie Williams is a comedian and creator of the award-winning digital comedy series "Climate Town." He discussed his successful approach in cultivating broad and engaged audiences by creating longer-form "video essays" about climate change topics for social media. He also shared his tactics for creating this content, including centering a compelling fact or idea, research and fact-checking, planning narrative structure, and more. He emphasized the value of collaborative teamwork, and embracing the challenges involved in creating high-quality climate content.

RESOURCES:

🔗 The Climate Denier's Playbook podcast

Isaias Hernandez

> **"**
> One of the things I really emphasize and why I chose environmentalism in my work today is that I've always been very curious about the living and non-living systems around us. We talk a lot about this concept around generational wealth and the American dream. It's very rooted in this idea that through hard work and success you can get whatever you want. But I think I really pushed back on this narrative and adopted this narrative ecological wealth, because in our dominant capital structure today, we really have devalued all the living species from the fauna, flora, and fungi."
>
> **—Isaias Hernandez**

Isaias Hernandez is an educator, content creator and creative who created an independent media platform Queer Brown Vegan, to bring intersectional environmental education to all. Through this platform, he aims to produce engaging, educational climate and environmental content on social media. He has collaborated with the Solutions Journalism Network and produced a web series that features interviews with academic scholars and activists. His goal is to improve climate literacy, especially among younger generations, by creating accessible, solutions-focused media. He emphasized the importance of connecting with local communities and working with institutions to amplify environmental education and activism.

RESURCES:

🔗 Teaching Climate Together

Alisa Petrosova

> " Stories that move
> audiences move
> the world. Good
> Energy is built on that
> fundamental truth.
> Dry facts don't move
> people, stories do. It's
> through stories that
> we learn to empathize
> with the people
> outside ourselves
> and absorb crucial
> information about our
> world. Stories shape
> attitudes and drive
> action."
>
> **—Alisa Petrosova**

Ali Petrosova is the associate director of consulting program and climate research for Good Energy. Petrosova described her efforts to bring climate change awareness to the entertainment industry, including her work on the TV show "Extrapolations" and the development of a "Climate Lens" storytelling tool. Petrosova highlighted the importance of incorporating climate change into stories and characters to make them more relatable to audiences and drive action on climate issues. She presented research that reveals the lack of climate change representation in TV and film, and the impact that climate-focused stories can have on viewers.

RESORCES:

🔗 Cooper Climate Coalition

Monique Verdin

> **"**
> I'm just trying to let people know what's happening in my home and how our interdependence is not only with each other, but the planet is in an interdependent relationship. And what happens in South Louisiana matters for what happens in Alaska and all places all over the world."
>
> **—Monique Verdin**

Monique Verdin, a transdisciplinary artist from southeast Louisiana, documents the complex relationship between environment, culture, and climate in the region. She is a citizen of the Houma Nation and the director of the Land Memory Bank and Seed Exchange. Her art practice focuses on layering time and place, using techniques like digital collaging, to highlight the interconnectedness of land loss, colonialism, and multinational corporate interests which are affecting her community. Verdin's presentation emphasized the urgency of the climate crisis in Louisiana and the need to un-silence stories of her elders to help people better understand the complex history and ongoing challenges faced by the Houma people.

RESURCES:

🔗 My Louisiana Love

Documentary Empowerment For Building A Just World

While the past decade of documentary has included a dramatic landscape-altering expansion of platforms, through the rise of commercial streamers, allowing nonfiction storytellers to reach more diverse audiences over a longer time period, recent years have also marked the arrival of new global concerns over content suppression and unprecedented struggles in finding support for stories and narratives that focus on controversial social justice issues or challenge political, commercial or social power structures.

To face the challenges and opportunities of the moment, the panelists advocated for greater industry research into the real experiences of filmmakers today; greater collaboration with existing documentary organizations representing underrepresented communities; and more thoughtful, community-centered, and sustainable approaches to documentary filmmaking as a tool for social change and liberation. The interactive session also emphasized the need for an "ethic of care" when working in documentary, including building trust, maintaining on-going communication, setting expectations, and preparing participants for the impact of seeing themselves on film.

Sahar Driver

"
Color Congress focuses on relationship-building and solidarity work that connects these organizations to one another across identity and across geography. This is the foundation for truer, more nuanced, and intersectional storytelling, that is responsive, and accountable to all of our communities... And that contributes to narratives that advance society."

—Sahar Driver

Sahar Driver is the co-executive director and co-founder of Color Congress, an organization that supports and champions a diverse ecosystem of over 100 people-of-color-led documentary organizations across the U.S. The stories and narratives these organizations support are nuanced, complex, and empower people of color as agents of change. Their work is crucial for advancing more representative and equitable documentary storytelling in society. Sahar spoke about their recent report, which revealed that this ecosystem of organizations, while mighty and impactful, is under-resourced and unknown beyond the communities they serve. The organizations play essential roles in training, mentoring, networking, and supporting documentary filmmakers and audiences of color. They are deeply committed to their communities, but operate on limited budgets, with many having no full-time staff. Despite the challenges, they have collectively served over 15,000 filmmakers, 10,000 field professionals, and reached over 20 million audience members.

RESOURCES:

🔗 Color Congress 2024 Impact Report

Natalie Bullock Brown

> " As a filmmaker myself, I've been particularly struck by the reflection process because I believe that ample reflection can help filmmakers slow down in order to move at a speed that engenders trust and care, and that doesn't rush the storytelling process."
>
> **—Natalie Bullock Brown**

Natalie Bullock Brown is the director of the Documentary Accountability Working Group (DAWG), which is a working group that was formed in 2020 to address issues of inequality and extraction in the documentary filmmaking field, which were exacerbated by the rise of streaming platforms. DAWG developed a values-based framework for ethical documentary filmmaking, which includes a focus on the "reflection" phase where filmmakers consider their intentions, context, and impact on film participants. Bullock Brown shared her own experience of reflecting on whether to make a documentary about the traumatic targeting of young Black children by the criminal justice system in Tennessee, and how this reflection process helped her consider the potential harm to the participants. She emphasized the importance of introspection, considering one's own biases and backgrounds, and cultivating care for the humanity of documentary film participants.

RESOURCES:

🔗 From Reflection to Release: Framework for Values, Ethics, and Accountability

Maori Karmael Holmes

"

Our hope is that eventually we don't have to do this work. You know, we started at the festival to highlight filmmakers that we feel are overlooked, and to support filmmakers that we think are not being supported in the right ways. Eventually, as most nonprofits should be, we should be working ourselves out of a job, right?"

—Maori Karmael Holmes

Maori Karmael Holmes is a filmmaker, writer, and the founder of BlackStar Projects, a Philadelphia-based organization focused on uplifting the work of Black, Brown, and Indigenous artists working outside of traditional genres. Since 2012, BlackStar has organized an annual film festival showcasing diverse perspectives and aesthetics, while also running a variety of other programs including a filmmaker seminar, a journal of film and visual culture, and year-round exhibitions and screenings. At the core of BlackStar's mission is a commitment to liberation, community building, intersectionality, and providing access and opportunities for artistic practice. The organization's work is grounded in principles of Sankofa, acknowledging the past while envisioning a more just and equitable future.

RESOURCES:

🔗 Beyond The Colonial Camera 3 Departures

David Conrad-Pérez

> "Over the last few years at CMSI we've released a series of studies, which seek to explore what we call power in documentary – meaning the decisions that shape what we see on-screen, who is creating the films that get seen the most, including who and what they're focusing on, and what are the infrastructures that enable films to be made and to find value?"
>
> **–David Conrad-Pérez**

David Conrad-Pérez is the director of research at the Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), based in American University's School of Communication. He launched *Beyond the Impact*, a research report examining the challenges and opportunities around using documentary films for social impact and justice. The study was created under CMSI's Documentary Power Research Institute initiative, supported by the Perspective Fund. Based on more than 100 interviews conducted with filmmakers and impact producers, the report shed light on the widespread concern about increasingly restrictive practices by major commercial distributors, who are limiting distribution of politically controversial films and the urgent need for more resources and attention around wellness and trauma-informed practices for documentary screenings and events, which often end up causing more harm than good. David spoke about the need to find new ways to reach audiences beyond the typical documentary festival and screening attendees, including considering partnering with commercial companies and community organizations; the ineffectiveness of bringing in outside impact "experts" from major cities into local communities, without local leadership and long-term trust building; and the importance of recognizing that impact work and co-creation takes time.

RESOURCES:

🔗 Going Beyond the Impact Report and Case Studies

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Democracy's Survival And The Stories We Tell

Storytelling can be a critical part of building a more inclusive, representative democracy; but it can also be a tool for divisiveness and hate. Reflecting this spectrum of opportunity and risk, this panel discussion explored the rise of right-wing comedy and how it is being used as a vehicle for hate speech and grievances, as well as how storytelling is being used to promote civic engagement, community building and local power in other cultural spheres like hip-hop. The panelists further discussed strategies for building new coalitions and influence through grassroots organizing, narrative change, and developing one's own cultural infrastructure. This included creating partnerships across ideological lines, investing in local communities, and embracing the complexity of storytelling rather than seeking perfect representation. Overall, the discussion highlighted the need to go on the offense with positive, empathetic messaging and human connection, rather than just defending against hateful rhetoric.

Jasiri X

> "I tell people in Pittsburgh, 'Our school board actually, has a bigger budget than our city.' But we'll dismiss, like, 'Oh, you're a school board member.' But that member actually has control over more resources than a city councilman or a mayor in the city of Pittsburgh. So, we talk about politics, for us, it is a form of building, power, community power and also harm reduction."
>
> **–Jasiri X**

Jasiri X is the co-founder of 1Hood Media, an organization in Pittsburgh that builds liberated communities through art, education, and social justice. He discussed starting the 1Hood Media Academy to help young people "tell their own stories" and counteract the negative media portrayal of Black men, thus having a voice and shaping the narrative. 1Hood uses cultural organizing, like events featuring hip-hop artists, to engage the community around civic issues and get people involved in the political process. The team believes this approach of connecting through art and culture is more effective than just focusing on the "world is ending" messaging. He highlighted their work in areas like media, education, civic engagement, and cultural organizing which is making real changes in the community through progressive leadership.

RESOURCES:

🔗 *This Week in White Supremacy* podcast

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Nick Marx

> **"**
>
> Right-wing comedy has reached a point of economic sustainability and significant influence. Indeed, the future of progressive politics, I argue, depends in-part on facing right-wing comedy and recognizing its influence to our political opponents. 'That's not funny.' While it may be an honest reaction, it is a perfectly fine way to express one's tastes or moral principles. It's just not a very good long-term political tactic."
>
> **–Nick Marx**

Nick Marx is an associate professor of film and media studies in the Department of Communication Studies at Colorado State University. He studies the relationship between comedy, media, and politics. He discussed the rise of right-wing comedy in the U.S., which has been increasingly used by right-wing groups and figures to build an alternative media industry distinct from the perceived liberal bias of Hollywood. Prominent right-wing figures like Ben Shapiro, Jeremy Boreing, and Joe Rogan are using comedy and humor to attract politically engaged conservative audiences and spread their ideological messages. Right-wing comedy, exemplified by works like the movie *Lady Ballers* and the *Gutfeld!* show on Fox News, has found economic sustainability and growing influence.

RESOURCES:

🔗 *That's Not Funny: How the Right Makes Comedy Work for Them*

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Brandon Kramer

> " All of the issues that I care about are very difficult to make any progress on if we cannot build coalitions, if we cannot compromise, if we cannot find ways to negotiate these differences. Socially, it's an existential threat to our democracy, our inability to have dialogue, to have debates, to be able to empathize and connect with one another."
>
> **—Brandon Kramer**

Filmmaker Brandon Kramer is the co-founder of [Meridian Hill Pictures](#). He spoke about his approach to documenting stories across political divides, focusing on his latest film *The First Step*. The film follows a bipartisan effort to pass criminal justice reform legislation, including bringing together advocates from different backgrounds to work on the addiction crisis. Through the documentary, Kramer aimed to authentically show moments of connection and collaboration between people with differing political views, rather than just highlighting conflict. At the same time, Kramer shared that he intentionally included perspectives critical of the bridge-building efforts in the film, advanced by both conservative and progressive grassroots coalitions, believing this was necessary to reveal the reality of bipartisan collaboration and to connect with diverse audiences. The film's outreach campaign centered community gatherings and discussions to extend the dialogue experienced by viewers. Kramer found hope in seeing real compromise and lasting relationships forged across divides, despite the challenges facing U.S. democracy.

RESOURCES:

🔗 *The First Step*

Comedians showcased at the show *OH, WE CAN JOKE ABOUT THAT?*

Maggie Crane is a stand-up, writer and actor in New York City. She has been featured in The New York Comedy Festival, High Mud Comedy Festival and has just returned from debuting her hit solo show *Side by Side* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. She can be seen on HBO, Comedy Central, and in dive bars all over Brooklyn.

Yasmin Elhady is a touring comedian and storyteller. She has performed at The Kennedy Center and is featured on NBC's *True Story* with Ed Helms and Randall Park. She's also appeared on NPR, Netflix is a Joke Radio on SiriusXM, and *The Washington Post*, WUSA9 with Reese Waters, and in Vice Media's book *Little America: Incredible True Stories of Immigrants in America*, which was later turned into an Apple TV+ series by Kumail Nanjiani. She was named a 2022 "Yes, And…Laughter Lab" finalist for comedy and social justice.

Rollie Williams is a Brooklyn-based comedian, video editor, and guy with both student debt and a Climate Science & Policy degree from Columbia University. He is the creator and host of the digital comedy series *Climate Town*. In the past few years, the channel has amassed 544,000 subscribers, several million views, a handful of awards, and has spawned an engaged Discord community of fun climate people.

D'Lo is an LA Based queer/trans actor/writer/comic whose work range includes stand-up, solo theater, plays, films and poetry. His solo shows *Ramble-Ations, D'FunQT* and *To T, or not To T* have been presented at theaters & festivals internationally, and his stand-up show D'FaQTo Life tours the college/university circuit. His work has been published and/or written about in academic journals, literary anthologies, and print/online journalism sources, such as *LA Times, The Guardian*, NBC, and *The Advocate*.

Gabe González is a Puerto Rican comedian, writer and actor living in Brooklyn, NY. He was born and raised in Central Florida. Gabe can be seen in Season 4 of *The Last OG*, the HBO Latino documentary *Habla y Vota*, and recently starred in Audible's *The Comedians*. He was featured in *Brooklyn Magazine*'s '30 Under 30' in 2017, *Time Out New York*'s 'Comedians of Color You Should Know' in 2018 and his pilot *Los Blancos* was a winner at the "Yes, And…Laughter Lab" in 2019.

WATCH THE SHOW

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