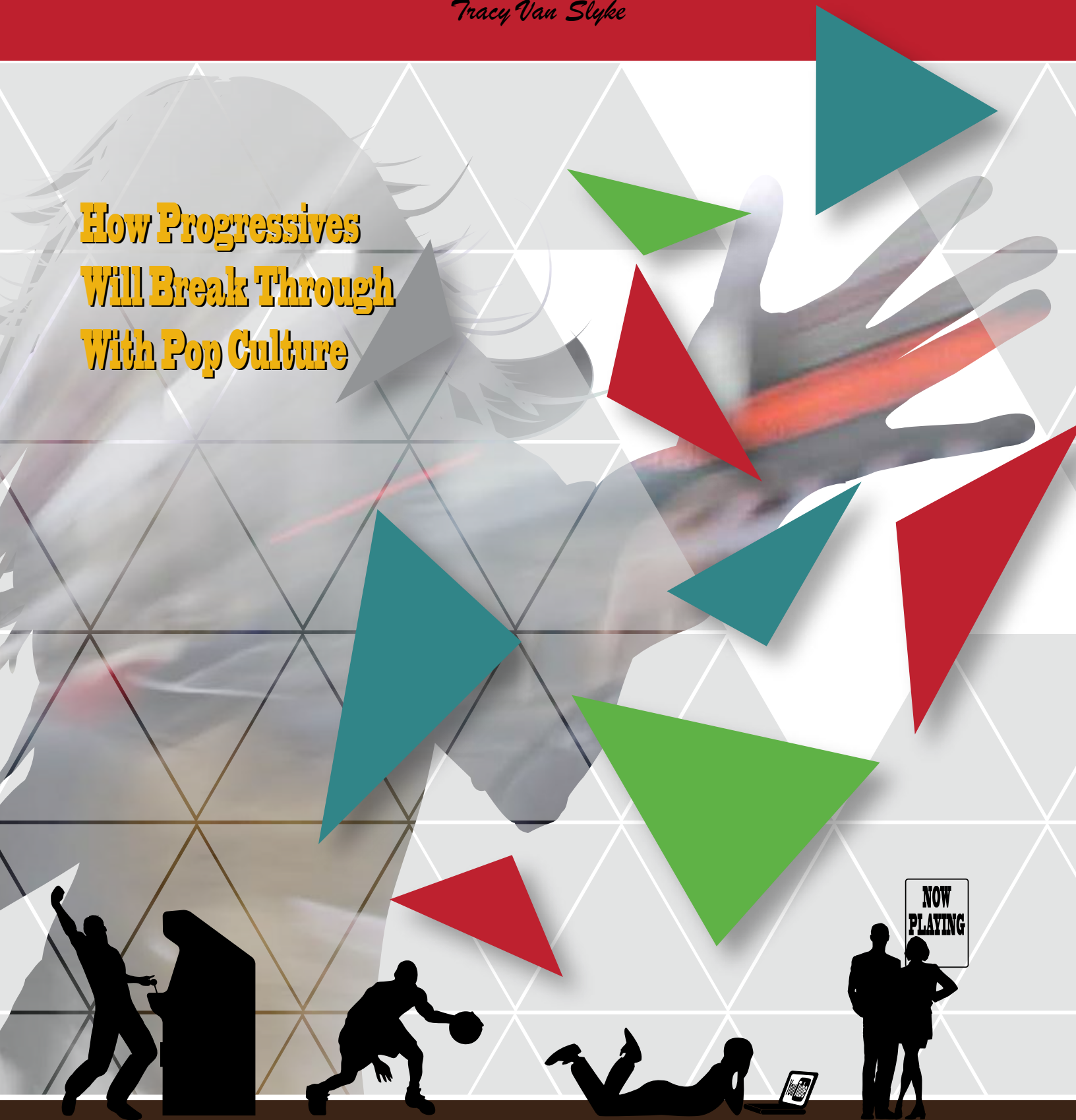


SPOILER ALERT

Tracy Van Slyke

**How Progressives
Will Break Through
With Pop Culture**



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By Tracy Van Slyke

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www.spoileralert.report

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SPOILER ALERT

Introduction: That moment when you know culture has shaped you

From early adolescence on, I would retreat from the world of hormones, boys, mean girls, academic pressure, and pimples by holing up with books. Books featuring powerful women, women who kicked literal and metaphorical ass, books about love, adventure, magic, mystery, and more.¹

Looking back, I know that those books helped define who I am today. I grew up in an incredibly progressive household, with parents who met protesting the Vietnam War, where common dinner conversations centered on the news, politics, and organizing. I can remember attending my first anti-gun rally as a toddler. But it was books where I met a world of women who were smart and feisty, loving and snarky, women of contradictions and power. The storylines drew me in and the characters were my friends. As I grew older, I expanded my reading base and was influenced by the lives of real women who defined guts and gender rule-breaking, like [Martha Gellhorn](#), an amazing and daring journalist known for being the first female war correspondent, and [Elaine Brown](#), the first chairwoman of the Black Panther Party. This love also transferred over to the ladies of television such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Veronica Mars* in my college years and beyond. Their stories were entertaining and often unbelievable, but at their core, the characters and storylines reflected the same issues, social pressures, and desires that millions of young people were feeling every day. In many ways, these fictional and real ladies

were my mentors, shapers of who I am, what I valued, how I wanted to be in the world. In addition to my mother, these were the characters who showed me what being a strong, powerful, multifaceted woman looked like.

Books, fashion, movies, TV, magazines, sports, religion, food, hobbies, music, art, and more—individually and together, lowbrow and highbrow, diverse and ever-changing—all make up the beautiful and messy thing we call culture. And that is what culture does. It shapes us, helps us define our values, opens us up to new ideas, and builds connections with others that can evolve into long-lasting communities. Culture sets the stage for individual transformation and societal change alike.

For almost 15 years, my professional career has centered on how to communicate, inspire, activate, and inform people in the name of gender, racial, and economic justice. And while I have moved from journalism to organizing to communications to organizational network weaving, I have always looked towards the future—exploring new ideas and opportunities to improve our organizations through collaboration and innovation. I’m no stranger to looking at how a field needs to evolve, from the book I co-authored, [Beyond the Echo Chamber](#),² on how progressive journalism could increase its impact, to visioning how to build network models [among community members and institutions](#)³ to running groundbreaking

¹ If you haven't read [The Blue Sword](#) by Robin McKinley, you totally need to.





networks, including the New Bottom Line and The Media Consortium.

As a fellow of [The Opportunity Agenda](#), from the Fall of 2013 through Fall 2014, I focused my work on the potential intersections and opportunities between the progressive movement and pop culture. I spent hundreds of hours reading and [writing](#)⁴ about cultural trends and strategies, storytelling advancements and visualization tools, along with examining other industries from advertising to video gaming to Hollywood. I interviewed and studied artists who are changing the world, creatives pioneering new modes of storytelling and audience engagement, organizational leaders who are advancing culture change

strategies within their own organizations or for the progressive movement at large, and academics studying the intricacies and impact of storytelling and activism.

The result is this report—“Spoiler Alert: How Progressives Will Break Through With Pop Culture.” *As many pop culture consumers know, “Spoiler Alert” is the warning you receive when a major plot point in a story is about to be revealed. The spoiler within reveals the major strategic investments, organized into what I call the **Culture Change Triad** model, that progressives can make into popular culture and creative activism to achieve transformative societal and political change.*

But before you dive into the rest of this report, take a few minutes to orient yourself in the world of culture by pondering these questions.

Question 1: Name two or three past cultural moments and experiences that have helped shape your identity and politics.

Question 2: Imagine that in 10 years people of color are represented in more than half the major Hollywood movies and television shows in their full, complicated, wonderful humanness, instead of the stereotypical characterizations of black men as criminals, Latinas as servants, and Asians as awkward geeks.

What would change based on this cultural shift?

How would this change affect your work?

Go to www.spoileralert.report to share your experiences and thoughts and to be inspired by others.

² Jessica Clark and Tracy Van Slyke, *Beyond the Echo Chamber: Reshaping Politics Through Networked Progressive Media*, (The New Press, 2010) http://www.amazon.com/Beyond-Echo-Chamber-Networked-Progressive/dp/B007BWC62K/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1369608209&sr=8-1&keywords=beyond+the+echo+chamber.

³ Jessica Clark and Tracy Van Slyke, “Beyond the Echo Chamber Network Layer Slideshow,” 29 January 2010, <http://www.slideshare.net/tracyvs/beyond-the-echo-chamber-network-layer-slideshow>.

⁴ <http://www.tracyvanslyke.com>



I. Overview: The Culture Change Triad

The Culture Change Triad model describes the three major strategic investment points into pop culture and creative activism that the progressive movement must make to achieve transformative social change. At the center of the model are the people we want to understand, reach, and engage; they are linked to each of the strategic investment points: connecting to culture, setting our cultural change course, and creating networks with culture makers.

Change: Putting People, Not Messaging, at the Center

Whether by organizing, journalism, or cultural content, we call those we want to reach many different things: audiences, targets, communities, consumers. But what it all comes down to is people—individuals and networks, neighborhood blocks and political blocs, children and grandparents. With culture change a central tenet of the progressive movement, we can align and/or shift people's values, beliefs, and behaviors. *But progressives generally prioritize our communications with people to center on what we want them to hear instead of starting with what they need or what they are interested in.*

Culture is not about a communications strategy. It's about how and why people communicate

to and with each other. Messaging and talking points as part of strategic communications is incredibly important for carrying our ideas forward. But if progressives continue with a megaphone mentality, engaging new and current communities with cultural experiences that shape values and beliefs will be severely limited. We have to go beyond just thinking about the messages we want to relay, to connecting with the lives, identities, and interests of the people we want to reach. Progressives need to adapt our approach to the people we want to reach. We need to learn that:

- Long-term cultural change development should integrate behavioral psychology to help inform strategies for audience identification and persuasion.
- Audiences don't fall into a "one-size-fits-all muumuu"; the diversity of audiences influences how we create, drive, and respond to content and cultural experiences.



- 
- No longer just passive consumers, many audiences want to interact and play with stories, media, art, and cultural experiences. We must also change our thinking from just the messages we want to deliver to them, but how we can we also tap into their passions and help to answer their needs.

For more on “**Putting People, Not Messaging, At the Center**” to page 25.

Tapping into the Cultural Pulse

With so much of the progressive movement’s focus on the political arena, we tend to ignore the enormous influence of pop culture. Because of the progressive movement’s general disconnect from both pop culture and artists in our own communities, we rarely have our fingers on the pulse of how the narratives, visuals, and storylines around the issues central to our work are playing out—from Hollywood to YouTube, from music to fashion, from sports to community-based art. However, if we can track and intersect with the cultural pulse, we can:

- Create a base of data and knowledge that informs long-term strategic plans to alter or influence narratives within different cultural sectors.
- Amp up our opportunities to engage in rapid response, cultural intervention organizing moments (e.g., when the next Donald Sterling moment arises).
- Pinpoint the audiences being reached and how they are reacting or engaging with the content or products.
- Understand who are the creatives and influencers driving and developing storylines.
- Over time, track narrative shifts, if we have gathered enough data and are actually investing in serious culture change work.

For more on “**Tapping into the Cultural Pulse**” go to page 32.

I. Overview: The Culture Change Triad

Transporting Our Stories

Remember those Sunday mornings curled up on the couch with a great book for hours? Or that bleary-eyed morning after an all-night show binge? “Getting lost in a good story” is a classic metaphor for the power of stories to transport our imaginations to new worlds, introduce us to new people, and inspire new ideas. Transportation is not only a metaphor for the power of storytelling, but can also apply to the strategy behind the storytelling. It’s important for progressives to understand the strategic paths they can travel to transport our values, visuals, and stories out into the world.

- **Running errands** includes repeatable activities such as picking up groceries, running to the hardware store, clothes shopping (or my personal preference, shoe shopping!). These discrete tasks have specific goals needed for us to have functional and fulfilling lives. When it comes to culture, many organizations are doing the same, using cultural tactics—infographics, working with artists on specific projects, promoting personal stories via video, responding to hot culture moments—in order to amplify the organizational and campaign message, engage communities, and ultimately, win specific campaigns.
- **Road trips** are cultural campaigns for those whose end destination is the culture change, in large-scale cultural values and narratives. Culture change work can last a year, a decade, or longer, with multiple stops into different communities (audiences

While similar tactics can be used for both, and each strategy often interacts and supports the other, each has different end goals—one to win a campaign victory, the other to change culture itself. Running errands or embarking on road trips should be based on organizations’ goals and resources, which influence the level of investment (resources, staff time, creative partnership development), goal setting, and expectations about impact.

For more on “**Transporting Our Stories**” go to page 38.



Building Networks and Working Partnerships with Creatives

To develop effective culture products and culture change strategies, progressive leaders, organizers, and communications staff need to foster working partnerships with creatives and culture makers, whether they are in our communities—geography, identity, and ideological—or outside our comfort zone in the for-profit and pop culture spaces.

When working with creatives to develop products, experiences, and strategies we must:

- Understand and appreciate the important role that arts and culture plays in our movements.
- Respect creatives' expertise and the value they bring—which includes paying them fairly.
- Make space for more creatives to be at strategy tables from the beginning.
- Share our stories, values, and experiences with them, but aside from transactional processes (e.g., a poster commission), not feel entitled to control their creative development or final product. It's time to loosen the control reins and let creatives do what they do best.
- Translate our stories and outreach to best fit the language and processes of those working in a variety of mainstream pop culture arenas. Many of them don't connect to "advocacy speak," but do care about and are actively seeking good stories and ideas that inspire their work.

Progressives also need to step outside of our comfortable and usual alliances to build better relationships and working partnerships with creatives, cultural producers, and decision makers in the for-profit cultural spaces. Our goal is to seed our values, stories, and visuals into their creative processes and products in order to reach the size and types of audiences outside our normal zone.

For more on **"Building Networks and Working Partnerships with Creatives"** go to page 52.



The Culture Change

Put People, Not Message, At Center

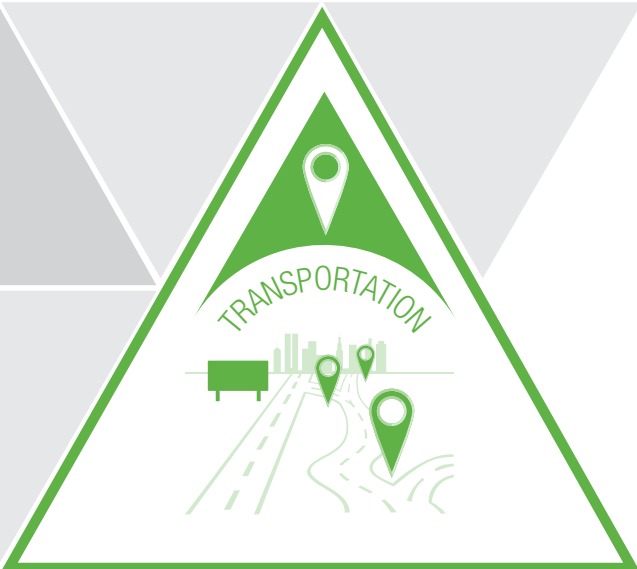
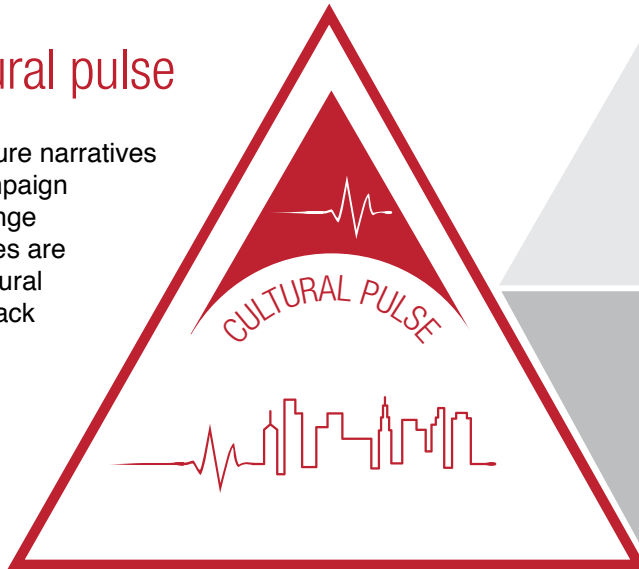
Prioritize people's needs, motivations and identities, not just messages we want to deliver. Integrate behavioral psychology for large-scale cultural change planning, understand audiences don't fit into "one-size-fits-all muumuu" in development of cultural tactics and strategies, and support cultural experiences that allow people to engage, interact and play.



Triad Model

Tapping into the cultural pulse

Connect to cultural trends, pop culture narratives and audience listening. Inform campaign strategy and long-term cultural change strategy. Understand how audiences are responding and reacting to pop cultural narratives and trends. Over time, track long-term influence on culture and cultural conversations.



Transporting Our Stories

Choose cultural path to move stories & values. Running Errands: integrating repeatable, scalable, diverse cultural tactics into campaigns to win campaigns. Road Trips: Engaging in cultural campaign whose end destination is the large-scale cultural and narrative change.

Building Networks with Creatives

Foster working partnerships with creatives in our communities - geographical or ideological - and in pop culture. Appreciate the role of culture in movements. Respect and pay creatives and bring them into strategy development spaces. Translate our stories/outreach into language that works for them, "not advocacy speak."

II. Why progressives need to power up investment in culture change

In early 2014, Gretchen Sisson and Katrina Kimport of Abortion Onscreen, a project of Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health (ANSIRH) at the University of California, released research⁵ showing that of the hundreds of plotlines in movies and television that center around abortion, an alarming number of them show the medical procedure to be far riskier—sometimes resulting in death—than is actually true. Their accompanying infographic dives into more details. *Bitch Magazine* produced a great video roundup of abortion scenes to illustrate this.

As Kimport and fellow authors Kate Cockrill and Tracy A. Weitz [write in a 2011 report](#),⁶ these pop culture storylines “carry great weight as public narratives and thus impact public perceptions of abortion, the women who receive them, and the people who provide them, as well as voter behavior and policy-making.”

That’s why when the delightful rom-com film *Obvious Child* was released in the summer of 2014, reproductive rights advocates threw their

support behind the film. The main character, Donna, played by the hilarious actor Jenny Slate, has a one-night stand, soon finds out she is pregnant, and then decides to have an abortion. Jill Filipovic [writes in *Cosmopolitan*](#):⁷

The abortion is a plot device in the film, but not a traumatic one, or one that punishes Donna. Instead, it shows Donna who will show up for her. Her best friend is there from the moment she takes the test to the moment she goes to the clinic. Her mother

⁵ Abortion Onscreen, ANSIRH, <http://www.ansirh.org/research/abortion-onscreen.php>

⁶ Katrina Kimport, Kate Cockrill and Tracy A. Weitz, “Analyzing the impacts of abortion clinic structures and processes: a qualitative analysis of women’s negative experience of abortion clinics,” 27 May 2011. Accessed 13 August 2014 http://www.ansirh.org/documents/library/kimport-cockrill-weitz_contraception2-2012.pdf.

⁷ Jill Filipovic, “Abortion Comedy ‘Obvious Child’ is the Summer’s Most Important Movie.” 3 June 2014, *Cosmopolitan*. Access 13 August 2014 <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/celebs/news/a7070/obvious-child-abortion-movie-jenny-slate/>



finally says something close enough to the right thing. The guy who got her pregnant turns out to be a pretty decent human, and the abortion is a catalyst for a potential romantic relationship. It's a pregnancy story that has a happy ending, even when the ending isn't a baby... The film doesn't offer a neat conclusion, but it does leave you with the sense that, whatever else happens in Donna's life, this one thing will not define her. It's one important but certainly not life-altering—let alone life-ending—event.

Movie critics lauded the film for gracefully mixing heart, humor, and intelligence while directly tackling a subject that most plotlines would avoid or use to reinforce negative stereotypes. The film's writer and director, Gillian Robespierre, [told NPR](#)⁸ that she was happy to bring more public visibility to abortion. "It's a word I'm really happy seeing on a poster; I'm really happy seeing [it] in headlines from *Variety* to *The New York Times* to Indiewire—and not just these feminist blogs that have been writing about the film since 2009, which is when it started as a short."

But that visibility is what may have led [NBC to refuse to run any ads](#)⁹ for the film containing the word "abortion." Soon after the ad rejection rumors started, NARAL Pro-Choice New York and Planned Parenthood launched [online petitions](#) for NBC to run the movie advertisement, while Planned Parenthood kicked off a #stopthestigma Twitter campaign. As the public pressure and media scrutiny mounted, NBC denied they had rejected the

television ad, but [admitted that they had asked for the word](#)¹⁰ "abortion" to be removed from digital ads. The company claimed it was a mistake that it would correct.

This organizing demonstrates how many within the progressive movement have become adept at using cultural moments to engage in rapid response campaigns that are great for community engagement and mobilization, while working to counteract harmful narratives.

But rapid response actions are only one part of the culture change equation. While *Obvious Child* alone won't shift the narrative about abortion and reproductive rights, it is a great example and massive step forward in combining a more accurate narrative on an important issue with quality and fun storytelling. As the social change and progressive movement chases the holy grail of "narrative shifting," it's time to recognize that culture—and investments in culture change strategy—has to be integral and integrated into social change work. Those investments range from connecting to the cultural moments and trends that shape values and understandings of issues we care about; developing a clear roadmap that proactively drives values-based stories and cultural experiences for both campaigns and transformative narrative shifting strategies; and last but not least, building trusting relationships and working partnerships with a diversity of culture makers who can tap into our imagination and propel our stories out into the world.

⁸ The Women Behind 'Obvious Child' Talk Farts, Abortion And Stage Fright, National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/2014/06/26/325508208/the-women-behind-obvious-child-talk-farts-abortion-and-stage-fright>

⁹ NBC Allegedly Refused To Run Ads For 'Obvious Child' That Included The Word 'Abortion', Think Progress, <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2014/06/20/3451476/nbc-obvious-child-ads/>

¹⁰ Update: NBC & Planned Parenthood Reach Truce Over 'Obvious Child' Ads <http://www.deadline.com/2014/06/nbc-planned-parenthood-squall-over-obvious-child-ad/>

II. Why progressives need to power up investment in culture change

Instead of chasing narrative shifts, we can change narratives through investment and connections to culture. Culture can help make our narratives the norm, and with this shift, organizers will have more power to usher in transformative social, racial, economic, and gender justice change.

Culture is populated by multi-billion dollar industries, sprawling and small communities, and individuals moving ideas, stories, and art on a daily basis. Culture is the font of ideas, the capsule of our passions, the outlet of our habits, the reinforcement or challenge to our beliefs.

For the past few years, many within the progressive movement have focused on “narrative shifting,” whether it was creating our own story and vision on our issues or changing the public and political narrative around us. Having a narrative about what is wrong with the world and what is the vision of the world that we want to live in is absolutely fundamental for game-changing work.

But while much time has been spent on the idea and formation of narratives, progressives in general invest most of their “narrative shifting” resources and energy within the political news space. While this is critical, we are missing out on many areas where narrative and values are shaped for millions of people who take those beliefs and apply them to their lives—from their purchase power to their political drive. Cultural moments and news can overlap with and influence the news cycle, but culture also sets the stage for long-term transformational narrative change.

Over the last few years, there’s been a deliberate effort to integrate culture change as a key tenet of the progressive movement’s long-term strategy for transformational societal change. Artists actively engaged with social justice are self-organizing and taking on new strategic roles; these include Favianna Rodriguez and CultureStrike, a network of artists working with organizations on issues such as immigration and the environment, and artist collectives such as Not An Alternative. Social justice organizations like Caring Across Generations are testing long-term culture change strategies to redefine and animate cultural narratives. Convenings such as Creative Change, organized by The Opportunity Agenda, brings creatives and organizers together for a weeklong retreat to share ideas and brainstorm social justice creative projects and products together. Storytelling as an art form and a strategy is being examined in new ways, which can be seen in the recent reports “Storytelling and Social Change” and the Rockefeller Foundation report “Digital Storytelling for Social Impact.”

In addition, a small but powerful cohort within the progressive community called The Culture Group articulated the need and opportunities for integrating culture change into progressive organizing DNA. One of The Culture Group co-founders, Liz Manne, former executive director of FilmAid International and member of President Obama’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, described the group as a pop-up think tank that prioritized pop culture and mass media.





In The Culture Group's recent publication *"Making Waves: A Guide to Cultural Strategy,"*¹¹ the authors write, "We change culture through culture. That means culture is the agent of change and the object of change."

From a shoestring YouTube video to a Hollywood blockbuster, from a single poster to a traveling art show, from the lyrics of a song to a sold-out concert, from a book to an interactive media experience, working with culture makers will give voice to our values and provide shape to our stories. *With increased investment, we can support the stories—fictional and non-fictional—and cultural experiences that make or break policy fights, campaigns, and elections. Most important, we can propel a transformative social change vision—for our communities, country, and world—from ideas to reality.*

A. Why culture change: A recap

"Culture is the lead. That's the dog. The news is the tail."¹²

So says Glenn Beck, right-wing agitator, news pundit, and now, culture warrior.

Beck, whose estimated earnings are around \$90 million per year, has decided to throw down with all his might on challenging and changing American culture: He has three movies in the works; his internet TV network, TheBlaze, has more than 300,000 paid subscribers; and his online news portal draws over 25 million unique visitors per month. He even launched his own line of jeans after Levi's produced an

advertisement Beck found too progressive. And if Glenn Beck getting into the fashion business doesn't scare us, nothing will!

Right now, the majority of the progressive movement separates pop and politics as if pop culture has no influence on how political and social stories are shaped, or how characters and the issues we care about are discussed or understood by millions of Americans. Our laserlike focus on the news and news cycle (while still absolutely critical) limits our ability to influence the political and social narratives that frame issues, advance policies, and change societies.

Jeff Chang and Brian Komar beautifully articulated¹³ for *The American Prospect* that culture is the driving force of politics:

Culture is the space in our national consciousness filled by music, books, sports, movies, theater, visual arts, and media. It is the realm of ideas, images, and stories—the narrative in which we are immersed every day. It is where people make sense of the world, where ideas are introduced, values are inculcated, and emotions are attached to concrete change. Cultural change is often the dress rehearsal for political change. Or put in another way, political change is the final manifestation of cultural shifts that have already occurred. Or put in another way, political change is the final manifestation of cultural shifts that have already occurred. Jackie Robinson's 1947 Major League Baseball debut preceded

¹¹ "Making Waves: A Guide to Cultural Strategy," http://atctower.net/theculturegroup/Making%20Waves_The%20Culture%20Group.pdf, page 6

¹² Eliana Johnson "The New Glenn Beck" *The National Review*, March 10, 2014 <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/372988/new-glenn-beck-eliana-johnson>

¹³ "Culture Before Politics," *The American Prospect*, December 6, 2010, <http://prospect.org/article/culture-politics>

II. Why progressives need to power up investment in culture change

Brown v. Board of Education by seven years. Ellen DeGeneres' coming-out on her TV sitcom preceded the first favorable court ruling on same-sex marriage by eight years. Until progressives make culture an integral and intentional part of their theory of change, they will not be able to compete effectively against conservatives.

While some would offer that culture and politics are more of an interlocked system that constantly drives, interrupts, reinforces, and changes the other, Chang and Komar's argument is that culture change is essential to mainstreaming our vision and values.

From television to sports, fashion to music, movies to games, religion to art, pop culture includes the stories, products, experiences, and activities available to the public at large. It's also true that pop culture is mostly controlled by large corporations and elites. The criticisms of pop culture run the gamut: It is considered dumbed down, an appropriation of cultural practices of specific communities, or providing the worst narratives about the issues and people we care about. These concerns, which are too often true, can make it hard for some within the social justice movement to want to engage within the pop culture space.

But it's hard to deny that pop culture is both a reflection and shaper of our society's values and beliefs. Pop culture has power. We can either ignore it, letting dominant narratives as well as millions of people who interact and are influenced by popular culture slide by, or we can figure out how to double down and

invest in the people, strategies, products, and experiences that will transport our stories and values into mainstream narratives.

Culture is not only important for the world we want to imagine and create, it's also integral to how we bind together and strengthen the social change movement. Arts and culture are the threads of the fabric that holds our communities and movements together, argues artist Carlton Turner, executive director of [Alternate Roots](#), which supports artists working at the intersection of arts and activism in the South.

"Let's think about the Civil Rights movement. If not for the music and the spirituality and the act of singing together, which is literally bringing the rhythm of your breath together to be so in tune that it gave people the courage to stare death in the eye and not blink. People marginalize the role of arts and culture as a central part of that movement," Turner says.¹⁴

"So many movements nowadays are using the same the tactics as the Civil Rights movement, but not acknowledging the importance of arts and culture in that movement. They are not thinking the heartbeat, not thinking the breath, not thinking about what connects people to build on their collective strength to stare death in the face and not blink."

In The Culture Group's report ["Culture Matters: Understanding Cultural Strategy and Measuring Cultural Impact,"](#)¹⁵ the authors articulate the importance of integrating culture strategies into organizing campaigns:

¹⁴ Interview with Carlton Turner

¹⁵ "Culture Matters: Understanding Cultural Strategy and Measuring Cultural Impact, http://atctower.net/theculturegroup/TCG_CultureMatters_Full.pdf, page 14





Currently, many campaigns are unable to build or sustain broad, long-term support because they do not think about culture strategically. To maximize the reach and effect of our campaigns, interviewees suggested that we invest in research about the baseline norms of different communities and use that information to help develop cultural strategies specific to each campaign. What people see on television, watch in films, and read in newspapers or online news sources affects everyday behavior and decisions in the community and in the home. In some communities, women are the drivers of cultural change because they are statistically more likely than men to share information with others, buy products, and vote. In other communities, the power dynamics are different.

The Culture Group's and others' work to articulate the importance of culture strategy has advanced the progressive sector's general understanding of how it fits into our overarching vision of social and political change. Says Erin Potts, Executive Director of [Revolutions Per Minute](#), a nonprofit organization that provides support to artists for activism and philanthropy, and a member of The Culture Group:¹⁶ "Five years ago, I had to explain culture every time I walked into the room and then explain it in my work. It was like you were walking into a really strong headwind. Three years ago, there was a good transition and people started to get it."

Potts attributes the shift to entities like The Culture Group, events like [Creative Change](#), and the rise of the concept "story and narrative"

within progressive movement building and communications strategy.

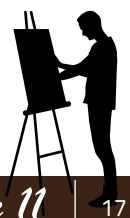
While Potts is pleased with the progress, she cautions that the progressive movement has yet to fully fuse culture strategies into the progressive movement's DNA. "There remains a fundamental misunderstanding of culture that dominates the progressive movement," she says. "It's still a transactional understanding. We're not building long-term relationships of meaning with cultural leaders or the culture sector. We're not investing in the infrastructure to make that thrive."

Michelle Miller, the co-founder of [Coworker.org](#) and former cultural lead organizer for SEIU, agrees that the correct infrastructure is critical for advancing culture change. During her decade-plus tenure at SEIU, Miller helped to develop strategies¹⁷ for engaging the general public with campaigns through popular culture and programs that tapped into the cultural assets of union members to build up their own creative and cultural talents and to help tell the story of the union. She developed storytelling, photography, and art training programs that created another access point for members to become involved in the union in pursuit of activities that were "about who they who they were instead of what their problems were."

She believes that more conceptual advancements in understanding the role and impact of storytelling needs to happen within the progressive organizing sector. "Ten years ago storytelling was seen as weak," she says. "Storytelling as a word is no longer a turnoff, but storytelling is still misunderstood. [The

¹⁶Interview with Erin Potts

¹⁷Interview with Michelle Miller



II. Why progressives need to power up investment in culture change

progressive movement's] approach remains, 'We want people to know 10 facts.' The story content is basically trying to do the same thing—spread facts and our messages.”

Andrew Boyd an artist-activist who co-founded the Other 98%, edited the book *Beautiful Trouble* and leads an accompanying organization that provides training on tactics and strategies for creative activism. He attributes¹⁸ the shift to the rise of *The Daily Show* as well as progressive-led cultural activism work such as Billionaires for Bush and the Yes Men. “The more mainstream orgs—labor, mainstream NGOs, electoral—got on the trend trip. It was the next ‘it’ thing, where the reasoning was we have to be funny and add in infotainment,” Boyd says. “But there are two ways to go about creative change work. We [creatives] are like a service—helping lubricate, we make the work fun, connect to pop culture, and make things charming. That is useful and important. But people really want substance that moves them and that they can feel. We can be useful handmaidens, but also can be fetishized to exclude the substantive work and the voices from below.”

Rinku Sen, Executive Director of Race Forward and publisher of *ColorLines* (which provides excellent culture coverage and analysis), says,¹⁹ “Broadly, the progressive movement—and community organizing—needs to see elements of culture shift as part of their job.” In spring 2013, *ColorLines* and allies declared a major victory in their “Drop the I Word” campaign when they successfully pressured the

Associated Press to stop calling undocumented immigrants “illegal.” “We were trying to make a substantive change. But we were also trying to show how culture is created by institutions,” Sen says.

Sen believes culture change is integral to transformative organizing efforts. “I believe you can change the mainstream frame and then have more freedom to frame an issue for your group—and that advances your strategy. It’s about how we change the way people think and not just appeal to how people already think.”

B. The power of pop culture

Let’s not pretend. We love to consume culture: fun and escapist or thought-provoking and educational.

According to the Motion Picture Association of America,²⁰ United States and Canada theatrical releases totaled \$10.9 billion in 2013. In addition, 227.8 million people—68% of the population of the U.S. and Canada—attended a movie in a theater at least once in 2013. Meanwhile, according to Nielsen’s March 2014 cross-platform report,²¹ overall time spent watching TV in households that own TVs was 155 hours and 32 minutes per month. The average adult spent 5 hours and 4 minutes per day watching TV, and 32 minutes per day watching time-adjusted TV via live streaming, Video on Demand, DVR and mobile devices.

In recent years, technology has made it possible for people to access, consume, and interact with all different types of media, news,

¹⁸ Interview with Andrew Boyd

¹⁹ Interview with Rinku Sen

²⁰ “Theatrical Market Statistics 2013.” Motion Picture Association of America. p. 1
http://www.mpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/MPAA-Theatrical-Market-Statistics-2013_032514-v2.pdf.

²¹ Nielsen. “An Era of Growth: The Cross-Platform Report.” 5 March 2014.
<http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports/2014/an-era-of-growth-the-cross-platform-report.html>.





and culture. Audiences can now watch and engage²² with their entertainment anywhere and anytime. “We’re in a new era of television,” says David Poltrack, chief research officer for CBS. “New distribution means new access. New access means bigger audiences.”

Anywhere and anytime also means any device. For example, about 50 million people in the U.S. now watch video on their mobile phones.²³ And according to YouTube’s own statistics.²⁴

- More than 1 billion unique visitors access YouTube every month, and users watch over 6 billion hours of video every month.
- According to Nielsen, more 18- to 34-year-olds in the U.S. interact with YouTube than with any cable network.
- Every minute, users upload another 100 hours of video.²⁵

YouTube is also the second largest search engine,²⁶ and 53% of shoppers are influenced by YouTube.²⁷ (*More on the creators and storytellers operating on YouTube in the “Building networks and working partnerships with creatives” section on page 52.*)

YouTube is not the only online content power player. For example, Vine, a mobile app

developed by Twitter that allows users to post six seconds of video, was profiled by The New York Times²⁸ as a “next-generation YouTube, a hotbed of microentertainment, Internet activity, and youth culture.”

But culture is not just about what we watch and create. It’s also about how we play.

“No other sector has experienced the same explosive growth as the computer and video game industry,” says Michael D. Gallagher, president and CEO of Entertainment Software Association (ESA) in its 2013 Essential Facts About The Computer and Video Game Industry.²⁹ report. As a \$66 billion industry and with 58% of Americans playing video games, the video gaming industry is reflecting and driving culture.

According to the ESA, the average U.S. household owns at least one dedicated game-playing device. Sixty-two percent of gamers play games with others, either in person or online, and 77 percent of those who play with others do so for at least one hour per week. And don’t assume it’s a guy thing: 48 percent are women.³⁰

The power of video gaming cannot be dismissed—from people’s attention span to how it can motivate to action. Zynga, a

²² <http://qz.com/237600/charts-how-we-watch-tv-now/>

²³ Tony Danova. “The Mobile Video Revolution: How Netflix, Vevo, and YouTube Have Thrived on Smartphones And Tablets,” 5 Jan. 2014. Business Insider.

<http://www.businessinsider.com/mobile-video-statistics-and-growth-2013-12-ixzz2z3kxpKF6>

²⁴ “Statistics.” YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/en-GB/statistics.html>.

²⁵ “Statistics.” YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/en-GB/statistics.html>.

²⁶ <http://www.mushroomnetworks.com/infographics/youtube---the-2nd-largest-search-engine-infographic>

²⁷ “Beyond Reviews: The 12 Types of Videos Already Influencing Your Customers.” Zefyr.

<http://blog.zefyr.com/2014/beyond-reviews/>.

²⁸ Jenna Wortham. “Six Seconds of Loopy Creativity, and Millions of Fans.” New York Times. 3 May 2014. http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/03/six-seconds-of-loopy-creativity-and-millions-of-fans/?_php=true&type=blogs&r=0

²⁹ Essential Facts About The Computer and Video Game Industry, http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2013.pdf

³⁰ Essential Facts About The Computer and Video Game Industry, http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2013.pdf, pp. 5-7

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social game development company with a [philanthropic arm](#), found that average online gaming time is approximately 40 minutes, in contrast to an average of five minutes spent on a news site.³¹ Asi Burak, Executive Director of [Games for Change](#), a nonprofit organization that supports the creation and distribution of games designed to address social justice issues, [reports that](#)³² people spend more time playing online games than they do on their email. In addition, Zynga [says that through FarmVille](#), a popular simulation game for social networks, 60% of players have donated to charity and 32% have been introduced to a cause.

It's also true that while video games, books, movies, and other mass market pop culture products can move people to social good, they can also reinforce stereotypes and storylines that run counter to many progressive-based values and are harmful to the communities we work with.

In the wake of the Isla Vista, CA, shootings in late May 2014—when six people were killed by a deeply troubled and violent young man whose YouTube videos and manifestos outlined his hatred and revenge plans for the women he perceived to have rejected him—the conversation about the role and promotion online of misogyny and violence against women started to permeate the media. *Washington Post* movie critic [Ann Hornaday](#) caused a firestorm of divided response [when she wrote](#)³³ about the connections between Hollywood and the perpetuation of sexism we see on the silver screen:

Movies may not reflect reality, but they powerfully condition what we desire, expect, and feel we deserve from it. The myths that movies have been selling us become even more palpable at a time when spectators become their own auteurs and stars on YouTube, Instagram, and Vine. If our cinematic grammar is one of violence, sexual conquest, and macho swagger—thanks to male studio executives who green-light projects according to their own pathetic predilections—no one should be surprised when those impulses take luridly literal form in the culture at large.

Part of what makes cinema so potent is the way even its most outlandish characters and narratives burrow into and fuse with our own stories and identities. When the dominant medium of our age—both as art form and industrial practice—is in the hands of one gender, what may start out as harmless escapist fantasies can, through repetition and amplification, become distortions and dangerous lies.

Hornaday is not only pointing out the power of pop culture, but the power of those who decide on the shape and content of pop culture, including the portrayal of characters that are supposed to be the embodiment of our own identities. *Entertainment Weekly's* [interview with](#) the African American actor Viola Davis, she addressed her own quandary as an actress and movie consumer:³⁴

³¹ Vincent Stehle. "Nonprofits Should Use Online Games to Connect Viscerally With People." *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. 10 March 2014. <http://philanthropy.com/article/Online-Games-Can-Help/145191/>

³² <https://storify.com/MediaFunders/game-on-new-tools-for-learning-and-advocacy>

³³ http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/in-a-final-videotaped-message-a-sad-reflection-of-the-sexist-stories-we-so-often-see-on-screen/2014/05/25/dec7e7ea-e40d-11e3-afc6-a1dd9407abcf_story.html

³⁴ Karen Valby, What's the best romance starring African-Americans (I vote 'Love and Basketball') and why are there are so few? <http://insidemovies.ew.com/2014/06/22/think-like-a-man-too-black-romance>



I'm a black woman who is from Central Falls, Rhode Island. I'm dark-skinned, I'm quirky, I'm shy, I'm strong, I'm guarded, I'm weak at times, I'm sensual, I'm not overtly sexual, I am so many things in so many ways and I will never see myself on screen. And the reason I will never see myself up on screen is because that does not translate with [people's ideas of] black. You know, who's ever seen a nerdy, quirky, timid black woman on screen? I don't know where she is. It's like Toni Morrison wrote in her literary criticism book in 1994, that as soon as a character of color is introduced in a story, imagination stops.

Ironically, as pop culture spits out stereotypes, specific identity groups have become the target market for networks and advertisers. As doctoral candidate and journalist Sherri Williams and social media marketing coordinator Lynessa Williams [write](#)³⁵ black television audiences are redefining talking about our favorite shows around the “water cooler”:

Technology and social media are reviving the old medium of television — and black viewers are leading these trends. Black audiences watch [37 percent](#) more television than any other group and black Internet users [use Twitter more actively than any other group](#). Black audiences' higher engagement on social media has led to connected, creative, and innovative conversations among viewers that previously were not possible.

And with this shift, networks are starting to see both financial and audience benefits from airing stories and shows that break stereotypes. For example, because of Shonda Rhimes's success with the TV hits *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal*, ABC doubled down on what some TV commentators call the “Shonda effect” for its 2014–15 season. As *Vulture* [reports](#):³⁶

Almost everywhere you look on the ABC schedule (or its list of upcoming shows), Rhimes's DNA is evident. There are all the shows with non-white leads (Black-ish, *Cristela*, and midseason's *Fresh Off the Boat*) or with fully diverse casts (*Selfie*, *American Crime*). Off-camera, ABC is also going beyond the usual (white, male) suspects: In addition to Rhimes's own *How to Get Away With Murder*, eight of the eleven other shows the network has ordered for next season have creators or showrunners who are either women ... or African-American men.

But there is still much work to do. At the start of the 2014 television season, both Rhimes and Davis were the focus of a tone deaf, ill-conceived and racist³⁷ article by Alessandra Stanley, the television critic for the *New York Times*. Stanley managed to pull out a stereotypical racist trope in the her first sentence when she wrote, “When Shonda Rhimes writes her autobiography, it should be called ‘How to Get Away With Being an Angry Black Woman,’” and then described Davis as, “older, darker-skinned and less classically beautiful.”

³⁵ Sherri Williams and Lynessa Williams. “#BlackSocialTV: How Black Viewers Are Dominating on Two Screens.” Medium. 5 May 2014. <https://medium.com/theli-st-medium/blacksocialtv-how-black-viewers-are-dominating-on-two-screens-7ef0afff5b66>

³⁶ <http://www.vulture.com/2014/05/upfronts-2014-abc-schedule-analysis.html>

³⁷ Alessandra Stanley, *New York Times*, Wrought in Rhime's Image, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/21/arts/television/viola-davis-plays-shonda-rhimes-latest-tough-heroine.html?_r=0.



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But as these expanded storylines and diverse characters expand across our screens, audiences begin to either see themselves or other communities differently—which has a direct impact on their values and beliefs. As academics Geoff F. Kaufman and Lisa Libby [write in their report “Changing Beliefs and Behavior Through Experience Taking,”](#) directly immersing oneself in a story world and seeing through the characters’ eyes can influence subsequent beliefs and actions:³⁸

By casting aside one’s own self-concept and mentally simulating the experiences of a story character as if they were one’s own, readers can try out new roles, relationships, personalities, motives... the effects of experience-taking can be harnessed and directed toward such positive ends as increasing civic engagement and reducing prejudice and stereotyping.

And some of these new shows will not just be judged on Nielsen ratings. Audiences’ online interactivity with and about their favorite shows are redefining success. For example, the sci-fi series [Supernatural](#), which only has about 3 million viewers on the CW network, has thrived for more than nine seasons “partly because its fan base makes up in engagement what it lacks in size,”³⁹ [according to a National Public Radio report](#). *Supernatural* has approximately the same number of [Facebook “likes”](#)⁴⁰ as shows with audiences six times bigger. Powerful fandoms are made up of self-organized individuals who form their own communities to dissect and deliberate on their cultural passions, engage and influence networks, and even create their own media from gifs to fan fiction. (See more about the power of

organizing fandoms by the Harry Potter Alliance in “Road Tripping: Traveling to Our Vision ” on page 46)

Supernatural’s writers have gone to great lengths to incorporate fan culture into the structure of the show. They have listened as their fans have remixed content, debated and suggested storyline ideas, and then even incorporated some of those ideas into specific storylines, while giving sly shoutouts to their fans.

Pop culture is a powerful influencer of the narratives that shape everyday lives and political choices. Meanwhile, technological shifts are transforming how content is created and consumed. Diverse demographic audiences and passionate fandoms can make or break cultural content. *If the right investments are made, progressives can seed stories and narratives through and with a wide array of culture makers; develop and mobilize our communities to influence cultural content and products; and spread those stories and values to new communities. Together, this can create new cultural experiences, moments, and over time, long lasting values shifts.*

But to get towards a big picture vision, the progressive movement needs to recognize that:

- **To change the public narrative, we have to integrate culture as part of our movements.** The social justice movement needs to invest in both creative culture makers and culture change strategies that knit together movements and advance our collective organizing, advocacy, messaging, communications, and policy work. Through

³⁸ Geoff F. Kaufman and Lisa Libby, “Changing Beliefs and Behavior Through Experience Taking,” http://www.tiltfactor.org/wp-content/uploads2/Kaufman_Libby2012_JPSPadvanceonlinepublication.pdf

³⁹ Neda Ulaby, The Few, The Fervent: Fans of ‘Supernatural’ Redefine TV Success <http://www.npr.org/2014/01/15/262092791/the-few-the-fervent-fans-of-supernatural-redefine-tv-success>

⁴⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/Supernatural>





the deep integration of arts and culture, we can set the stage for long-term social, racial, gender, and economic justice change. The political news and work spaces are critical, but the investment in culture is transformational.

So, how do we take this work from the theoretical to the actionable? In the next section, I introduce the “Culture Change Triad” model that outlines what is needed to accelerate the progressive movement’s influence on pop culture.

- **To mainstream our values and stories, progressives should learn from pop culture.** Pop culture contains stories and experiences that appeal to the emotions: drama, curiosity, tears, competition, excitement, and laughter. We need to amp up the emphasis on the fun factor, the creativity, and audience experiences (as well as their influence on content creation) as we develop and deploy cultural strategies.
- **To shift culture, we need to understand culture.** While new technology is changing media production, consumption, and community conversation, it’s not enough for progressives to be drop-in users and producers. We need an infrastructure that helps organizations track how culture is shaping and delivering narratives about the issues, communities and values connected to our work. There also needs to be the related mechanisms that assess the audiences we want to reach and why, where those communities live—in what online and in real life spaces—and develop a clearer understanding of what drives those self-forming communities and how we can best relate to them.



III. The Culture Change Triad: How the progressive movement can invest in long-term culture change

A culture strategy cannot exist without an infrastructure and community to lift it up. As a result, it is important that cultural advocates develop an infrastructure that connects people to each other, amplifies important work, and most important, defines the cultural space.

–Culture Matters: Understanding Cultural Strategy and Measuring Cultural Impact⁴¹

In the introduction to this report, I asked you to imagine the below scenario and answer these questions:

Imagine that in 10 years people of color are represented in more than half the major Hollywood movies and television shows in their full, complicated, wonderful humanness, instead of the stereotypical characterizations of black men as criminals, Latinas as servants, and Asians as awkward geeks.

What would change based on this cultural shift?

How would this change affect your work?

Now let's take a step back and ask: How did we get to that big change? How did we cause seismic cultural shifts?

To bring about transformational change we need to make strategic investments into creative, dynamic, and influential culture change work. But what should those investments be, and why? To answer those questions, I have developed the Culture Change Triad model, which delves into the three main areas that the progressive movement can invest in pop culture and creative activism to usher in transformative political and societal change. This model isn't about measuring the impact of cultural tactics or strategies, but is about how to boost our impact and influence through strategic culture change investments.

The rest of the report will take you more in-depth into each piece of the triad model with interviews, research, examples, and key takeaways that illuminate how progressive organizations can weave pop culture and creative activism into their organizational DNA.

⁴¹ The Culture Group. "Culture Matters: Understanding Cultural Strategy and Measuring Cultural Impact." 2011. P. 27. http://atctower.net/theculturegroup/TCG_CultureMatters_Full.pdf.

A. Putting people, not messaging, at the center

Every day, progressives work to build power and create an equal and just society for, with, and by the people. But too often we talk to and through the news media instead of communicating directly to and with people—especially by way of storytelling, art, and entertainment. While social media and online organizing tools have maximized progressives' ability to reach people one-on-one and in large groups, our conversations often remain one way: Here's the message, action, or story you should read, sign, share, and like.

As Michael Slaby, 2012 Obama campaign Chief Integration and Innovation Officer, [wrote](#)⁴² in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*:

Empowering the President's fans and followers to effectively engage that second circle—the people that they are connected to across the country but we were not—was essential to growing our community beyond our committed base.

Most organizations still view Facebook and Twitter as media channels similar to their websites: another way to deliver messages and content to supporters. And while this is a good starting point, social media networks were designed as relationship platforms, not just content-delivery mechanisms. The most effective organizations recognize them as engagement opportunities for the activation of communities.

If progressives continue with a megaphone mentality, engaging new and current audiences with the cultural touchstones that shape values and beliefs will be severely limited. We have to go beyond just thinking about the messages we want to relay, to connecting with the lives, identities, and interests of the people we want to reach. J. Mikel Elcessor, who has two decades-plus experience in creating audiences for public media and nonprofit artists, has made THE argument for nonprofits to increase their “cultural fluency”⁴³ to increase audience size:

Outreach, marketing, and diversity initiatives have failed. The migration from one-to-many to deep reciprocal relationships is well underway. We know we need to embrace the tremendous wisdom and power in our community. Yet we still hide behind incremental improvements in our business practices when the real, pressing question is *why should* people who are currently in our audience use us if we are not connected to their lives?

.... Over time it became clear if we wanted to build real relationships with people who were not the traditional audience we needed to acquire new skills. We need to expand our Cultural Fluency.

Cultural Fluency, in this context, is the ability to both speak and listen, with deep contextual understanding, of each other's backgrounds, vested interests, and

⁴² Michael Slaby, Stanford Social Innovation Review, From Politics to Public Policy: Part 3 http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/from_politics_to_public_policy_part_3_-_bio-footer

⁴³ J. Mikel Elcessor, The Case for Cultural Fluency, http://www.artstrategies.org/downloads/Elcessor_CulturalFluency_032014.pdf



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aspirations. Our lack of sufficient Cultural Fluency is one of the major issues that hold us back from reaching new audiences.

To amp up our cultural fluency and increase our ability to influence culture itself, it's time to put our current and potential audiences at the center of our big-picture, narrative-change strategies.

Integrating behavioral psychology

From an organizational point of view, cultural strategies should understand the basic psychology, motivations, goals, and needs of targeted audiences. This will shape the arc of cultural change work, its goals, its timeline and arcs, the production, potential partnerships, and more.

Heidi Boisvert, founder and CEO of [Future Perfect Lab](#), a creative agency that designs digital projects for nonprofits, explains that it isn't enough for those committed to social change to put on the sheen of pop culture, without really understanding what it takes to engage people. "If we want to change Culture through culture, then we need to learn to speak to hearts and minds through the semiotic systems—the cognitive and affective cues employed by the commercial industry to instruct the alternate realities into which the masses are escaping, not just appropriate the mechanics," she says.

But how do we understand what motivates, engages, and speaks to the hearts and minds of the audiences we want to reach? Sure, we've got data that helps us understand what

A or B subject line has the most open rates. Surveys tell us about likes, and advancing technology gives us reams of information on habits, purchases, and other personal data that I'm pretty sure we don't want many others to know about. We're also learning how to track media consumption more closely. In early 2014, the [fast-growing](#)⁴⁴ media outlet [Upworthy](#)⁴⁵ announced that they were transitioning from measuring just page views and unique visitors to what they termed "[attention minutes](#),"⁴⁶ a combination of:

- **Total Attention on site** (per hour, day, week, month, whatever) that tells us (like total uniques or total page views) how good of a job Upworthy is doing overall at drawing attention to important topics, and
- **Total Attention per piece**, which is in turn a combination of how many people watch something on Upworthy and how much of it they actually watch. Pieces with higher Total Attention should be promoted more.

This is a great way to redefine and track impact of particular pieces of content as well as provide data points and insights on why audiences react to certain content and stories.

But to bake the audience analysis into the front end of strategic development and decision-making, one major avenue is to work closely with experts who are actually studying people: behavioral scientists, ethnographic researchers, cognitive linguistics experts, and others.

⁴⁴ Alyson Shontell. "How To Create The Fastest Growing Media Company In The World." Business Insider. 5 Nov. 2012. <http://www.businessinsider.com/upworthy-how-to-create-a-fast-growing-media-company-2012-11?op=1>

⁴⁵ <http://www.upworthy.com/>

⁴⁶ <http://upworthy.tumblr.com/post/75799492308/what-uniques-and-pageviews-leave-out-and-why-were>





It's already happening in other sectors. For example, as Jane McGonigal writes in [Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World](#):⁴⁷

Positive psychology is the relatively new field of science that studies “human flourishing” or how we achieve different kinds of happiness. For just over a decade now, positive psychology researchers have been accumulating a formidable body of knowledge about how our brains and bodies work to help us achieve well-being and life satisfaction....

Since the rise of positive psychology, the creative leaders of the industry have increasingly focused on the emotional and psychological impact of their games. More and more, the directors and designers of major game studios are drawing on research findings from positive psychology to make better games.

Harnessing the knowledge of experts who make it their life's work to study how and why people react to certain motivations, language cues, and experiences could dramatically inform the strategic decision-making of cultural strategies and projects.

Monolithic to multiple audiences

Too often, when engaging in developing a storytelling or cultural campaign tactic, the process begins with only the story we want to tell or messages we want to deliver and doesn't include a conversation about what is the right story, platform, or interactive

opportunity for the people we want to reach or “audience.” An audience is not monolithic, and can be broken down into many sub and overlapping categories. People come to belief systems and frames of the world based on many factors: genetics, family, friends, class, race, hobbies, education, cultural exposure, and more. This influences how they will consume, receive, share, and create information and entertainment. Sometimes people form communities or networks because of shared characteristics such as living in a geographical region. Others may be lumped together under one racial identity, but are actually a moving, nimble, diverse force.

As the [Harmony Institute](#), a research center that studies the impact of entertainment on people and society, notes in [#BlackTwitter: a networked cultural identity](#),⁴⁸ the community of Twitter users who discuss, debate, and spotlight issues and moments important to the black community are a diverse group unto themselves.

There is no single identity or set of characteristics that defines Black Twitter. Like all cultural groups, Black Twitter is dynamic, containing a variety of viewpoints and identities. We think of Black Twitter as a social construct created by a self-selecting community of users to describe aspects of black American society through their use of the Twitter platform. Not everyone on Black Twitter is black, and not everyone who is black is represented by Black Twitter.

⁴⁷ Jane McGonigal. *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. (Penguin Group, 2011). pp. 37-38.

⁴⁸ Apryl Williams and Doris Domoszlai, #BlackTwitter: a networked cultural identity <http://harmony-institute.org/therippleeffect/2013/08/06/blacktwitter-a-networked-cultural-identity/>



A. Putting people, not messaging, at the center

Audiences do not come in a one-size-fits-all muumuu. An effective culture change strategy will identify the targeted and varied audiences the work needs to reach and be able to pinpoint why they are important and answer vital questions such as: What are the characteristics that make up these audiences? What are their needs, wants, and goals? What are their interests?

Richard Millington writes [Feverbee](#), a daily blog and resource for building online communities. He contends in his [“Online Community Manifesto”](#).⁴⁹

We have to accept the less sexy part of building online communities—the fiddly, irrational, and entirely unpredictable community bit. We have to learn to love some concepts that are crucial to online communities....

We also need to know what motivates people. We need to know the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. We need to know how to create communities founded upon these motivations... Once you’ve picked who you want to reach, you need to identify what matters to them. Then you need to develop a framework for an online community that would work for them.

The same applies to audiences we are trying to reach through cultural experiences and big picture strategies: We need to know who they are, what is important to them, and what they want—and how we can create opportunities to fill those needs.

People want to play

As audiences gain more power to sustain and drive popular culture, more and more people are looking for immersive experiences that allow them to be involved in the creation process.

In [The Producer’s Guide to Transmedia: How to Develop, Fund, Produce and Distribute Compelling Stories Across Multiple Platforms](#),⁵⁰ Liz Rosenthal writes in the foreword:

Audiences are no longer just passive viewers but are often actively engaged in the stories that they love, sometimes as collaborators in terms of co-creation and fan fiction or avidly spreading the word as evangelical marketers and distributors....

The other huge change is that audiences are fragmented across multiple platforms, devices, and activities. Younger audience are absorbing information in totally new ways, shifting effortlessly from one device or platform to the next, and they want their media to be able to follow them. Wherever you sit in the lifecycle of a story—creator, producer, financier, distributor, or marketer—you need to be acutely aware of how to engage audiences in this increasingly fragmented world.

The video [“The Audience Has an Audience.”](#)⁵¹ which was created for the 2013 [Future of Storytelling](#) conference, documents the power of creating communities of audiences and engaging with people on cultural phenomena. “Once you’ve formed lasting relationships that just happen to be around the story you’re

⁴⁹ Richard Millington, Online Community Manifesto <http://richchallenge.typepad.com/files/communitybuildingmanifesto-1.pdf>

⁵⁰ Nuno Bernardo. *The Producer’s Guide to Transmedia: How to Develop, Fund, Produce and Distribute Compelling Stories Across Multiple Platforms*, (Beactive Books: 2011).

⁵¹ The Future of Storytelling, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXoNndQRX5c>





telling, that community becomes so much stronger,” says Kenyatta Cheese, who was featured in the video and who edits the official [Dr. Who tumblr](#).

Building fandoms—groups of excited devotees who create, share, talk, produce their own content, and develop relationships with each other inspired by a story or product—means creating a potentially powerful contingent of people invested in our work. Over time they can help provide feedback that influences our work as well. They also amplify and influence when it comes to spreading our stories and values. But fandoms don’t congregate because of once-in-a-while message-driven content. Certainly, it is relatively easier (and tactically smart) to create and share infographics and memes on Facebook to reach and engage core audiences. But to expand to new and targeted audiences, and to insert ourselves into the cultural conversation, we need to think about the kind of stories that they would relate to, be excited about, and want to be a part of.

Even the world of wrestling is doing this. Perkins Miller, former Executive Vice President of Digital Media for the WWE, [said a brand must tell a story](#).⁵² “We’re in the business of telling stories, 52 weeks a year. When our talents get out there and our fans watch their stories, they just flock to Twitter to continue the conversation.”

[Ivan Askwith](#), the former head of digital for Lucas Films and the man behind two blockbuster Kickstarter campaigns, [Reading Rainbow](#) and the [Veronica Mars](#) movie,

[advises](#)⁵³ producers and storytellers not to center their work on reaching audiences with questions like, “How do we get them to listen to us? How do we get them to appreciate what we do?” but to move to audience-focused questions such as, “What do customers want and need? What would they find most meaningful?” His other piece of advice is vital not just for moviemakers, but also for anyone looking to build a successful cultural experience: “Don’t just create a movie. Create a lasting experience... Don’t just market to fans. Build a lasting relationship.”⁵⁴

With the development of stories and the role of the audience becoming intricately intertwined, this affects story design, delivery, and engagement mechanisms. Jay Bushman was a writer and producer for the [Emmy-winning](#) 2012 web series [The Lizzie Bennet Diaries](#),⁵⁵ a modern update of *Pride and Prejudice* that combined online visual storytelling with extensive audience engagement that included [Twitter accounts](#) for the characters, [GooglePlus pages](#), and [song playlists on 8Tracks](#)—all of which allowed the show’s audience to connect with characters between episodes and feel like the characters were a part of their lives.

“I really try to allow the story to dictate to the form that it wants to be in. One of the challenges of being a professional creative is you have to decide what you do and then shape it to the rigid constraints—screenplays are 120 pages, novels are a certain shape and form,” says Bushman.⁵⁶ “But with new technology, [you] can really decide, ‘What is the best medium or best combination of media

⁵² Mark Fidelman, 10 Lessons from the Top 25 Most Engaged Brands on Twitter

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/markfidelman/2013/04/25/10-lessons-from-the-top-25-most-engaged-brands-on-twitter/2/>

⁵³ <http://www.slideshare.net/ivanaskwith>, slides 11-12

⁵⁴ <http://www.slideshare.net/ivanaskwith>, slide 75

⁵⁵ <http://www.lizziebennet.com/>

⁵⁶ Interview with Jay Bushman

A. Putting people, not messaging, at the center

to tell the story?’ There are so many different tools, so many different ways to create a story and audience interaction that we couldn’t do before.”

The 100+ episodes of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* typically reached 300,000 to 500,000 viewers per episode (its first episode has over 1.8 million views to date) and spawned *Emma Approved* (another fictional web series based on Jane Austen’s *Emma*) and even a book.

Bushman contends that *Lizzie* was so successful because it tapped into a “monumentally underserved audience” of young women on YouTube and the normalization over the past few years of fan and community engagement and interaction with content.

Latitude, a consulting company that works with media, technology, and advertising companies to understand, measure, and generate new possibilities for cross-platform experiences, created their “Future of Storytelling” project over the last few years. After interviewing more than 1,000 people around the world about how they want to experience stories, Latitude compiled a treasure trove of research on how storytelling is evolving and how audiences want to be involved. As part of their work, they have created “The 4 I’s of Storytelling,”⁵⁷ on the ways that fans can engage with the stories they love:

- Immersion: going deeper into a story world to explore and learn about it.

- Interactivity: ranging from interacting with the characters in the story to influencing the outcome of the story.
- Integration: accessing the story across multiple platforms or even in the “real world.”
- Impact: inspiring the audience to take action in some way.

In Latitude’s “Future of Storytelling: Phase 2” report,⁵⁸ they say of the people they interviewed that “78% want to “friend” a character digitally (e.g., receive Facebook updates, text messages, etc.), with the ability to sway the character’s decisions—just as with a real friend.” At the same time, “people also want these relationships to affect their own lives, not just the character’s—by cultivating an open mind, teaching them, or motivating them in other positive ways.” Another critical finding--88% of the respondents want “stories that help them learn about and support worthy causes.”

For progressives to delve into long-term identity and cultural formation that advances the values and issues we care about within and among our targeted audiences, we have to understand how to relate to and with our audiences. A huge part of that includes the stories and media that they can engage, and yes, have fun with them. Progressives need to adapt our approach to the people we want to reach. As noted in the overview on page 6, we need to learn that:

⁵⁷ The Future of Storytelling: The 4 I’s of Storytelling: a Framework for the Future <http://futureofstorytellingproject.com/> - iiiii

⁵⁸ Latitude, “The Future of Storytelling: Phase 2.” 2013. <http://files.latd.com.s3.amazonaws.com/Latitude-FoS-Phase-2.pdf>.



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- Long-term cultural change development should integrate behavioral psychology to help inform strategies for audience identification and persuasion.
 - Audiences don't fall into a "one-size-fits-all muumuu"; the diversity of audiences influences how we need to create, drive, and respond to content and cultural experiences.
 - No longer just passive consumers, many audiences want to interact and play with stories, media, art, and cultural experiences. We must also change our thinking from just the messages we want to deliver to them, but how we can we also tap into their passions and help to answer their needs.

So how do we begin to more deeply understand the people we want to reach? The question leads us straight to the top of the culture change triangle: *Tapping into the Cultural Pulse*.



B. Tapping into the cultural pulse

Mr. Zimmerman is a 32-year-old editor at the news-and-entertainment site Gawker, where he's responsible for posting "viral" content—videos, photos, crazy local news stories—that readers can't resist sharing with everyone they know.... His secret, he says, is a deep connection to his audience's evolving, irreducibly human, primal sensibilities. Usually within a few seconds of seeing an item, Mr. Zimmerman can sense whether it's destined to become a viral story. "I guess you could call it intuition," he says.... But what's most interesting about Mr. Zimmerman is the way he has melded mind and machine.

"Why Everyone Will Totally Read This Column," Wall Street Journal⁵⁹

It's one thing to talk about culture in the big picture. It's another to actually understand how to intersect with the various and ever-changing forms and expressions of culture: the short bursts, the long-term trends, as well as whom and what is creating cultural conversation and norms. While there is great media tracking done by groups such as Media Matters and FAIR, there is little of the same with culture.

To stay on top of the culture pulse, the progressive movement needs a system with two core strategies: *culture trend tracking* and *audience listening*. These two strategies will enhance opportunities to engage in high-level cultural rapid response (to go in tandem with organizing campaigns) and inform longer-term culture change strategies.

⁵⁹ "Why Everyone Will Totally Read This Column," *Wall Street Journal*
<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304579404579231772007379090>



Culture trend tracking is a critical strategy for many companies and advertising agencies to inform their storytelling and marketing to their targeted customer base. Trend tracking allows companies to stay on top of what their consumer base is interested in, what outside forces are influencing (or not) their brand and audiences' perception of the brand, drill into their audiences' demographics, and figure out new ways to communicate with and sell to them. It allows them to be part of (and, they hope, shape) the cultural zeitgeist that leads to brand awareness, loyalty, and ultimately, sales.

Audience listening allows us to track and understand how audiences communicate with each other, what excites them, how they are accessing culture, language, and framing cues, and more. It allows us to anticipate and develop content and cultural experiences that we know they will respond to.

Too much of the time, while progressives are stuck in the megaphone mentality or granular testing of email opens or clicks on links, we lose sight of the deeper audience listening and cultural experiences and products that are influencing the very communities we are trying to reach. If we are going to successfully shift the narrative, we need to tap into the cultural pulse and start answering questions, such as: How are stories and narratives around issues and communities playing out in movies and television, online media, the music industry, and more? How are communities responding and talking to each other about those culture products and experiences? Who are the creative and community influencers we should be connecting to?

"It is possible to reclaim the narrative about your issue. And we need to do so or that narrative will be claimed by the opposition," says Rachel Weidinger,⁶⁰ Founder and Executive Director of [Upwell](#), which has pioneered the idea and development of "Big Listening" for the progressive movement. *[More on Upwell on page 35.]* "It's really easy to take over a conversation if you have the resources, but it takes a while to build a resilient and redundant structure to do that. We need a strong multilevel strategy that understands the current reality of conversation, where you want to take the conversation and make that part of the daily reality with a team that is listening."

By putting this information into action, we can help shape proactive culture shifting strategies.

Real-world examples of culture tracking and audience listening

[Sparks and Honey](#), a digital advertising agency that describes itself as "sync'd with culture in real time" for such clients as Disney, Ben & Jerry's, and Visa. They use real-time tracking technology and content monitoring tools that are tuned to specific algorithms that pull content of interest to their clients. But these tools and tech don't stand on their own. Sparks and Honey also employs staff who provide nuanced and experienced human analysis. The team is steeped both in the needs of their clients and in cultural trends, allowing them to not only track the daily bursts or what's in the "buzz bubble," but contextualize for their clients on how to react or take advantage of those cultural moments or products to enhance their own brand.

⁶⁰ Interview with Rachel Weidinger



B. Tapping into the cultural pulse

At a daily briefing of the staff, the team also works with and riffs off each other by examining these daily bursts and cultural patterns, and brainstorming their impact on longer-term lifestyle, life experience, and cultural trends. This work informs their tracking of the trends over time that are “shaping culture and consumer behavior.”⁶¹ They visualize this work through their “Elements of Culture” wall, a proprietary tool they developed that “represents the ecosystem of trends and cultural forces with the strongest energy and longevity, shaping culture and consumer behavior,” which also informs their strategy for how brands should intersect with culture.

Sandra De Castro Buffington,^{62a} Founding Director of the Global Media Center for Social Impact (GMI) at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, has spent the last six years working with Hollywood writers and producers to shape storylines to a broad range of health issues, resulting in 565 storylines that aired on 91 shows from 35 networks from 2009–2012. In addition to working with Hollywood, her work is situated between long-term cultural shifting and daily tracking of the impacts of TV storylines on audience awareness and behavior, including:

- **Media mapping**, which is a content analysis of the top 25 to 30 scripted shows that are popular with general, Hispanic, and African-American audiences. GMI trains coders to track what health and social justice content viewers are exposed to in storylines.
- **Impact tracking**, means that GMI gets a script ahead of time and develops a questionnaire, pre-test (a week before), and post-test (a week after) to track knowledge, attitudes, and behavior changes.

- **Issue and action promotion** by coordinating with producers around an upcoming television storyline and putting together a PSA starring one of the show’s major characters, who refers viewers to credible sources of information and action taking. The actions of the audience are then tracked.

In addition to tracking trending content and storylines, the other end of the equation is listening to the various audiences consuming and engaging with that content and storylines.

Meredith Levine,⁶² a self-described fanthropologist [fan + anthropologist], studies YouTube communities. She conducts ethnographic research on how content consumers come together as communities because of shared passions for certain brands, products, or interests. Data is quantified from the number of tagged videos, including those that are most viewed, most liked, and commented on. Levine combs through thousands of comments and watches hundreds of videos produced for and by the community to produce qualitative analysis of, among others, these elements:

- Shared language in the communities.
- Kind of content they respond to and produce on their own.
- Breakdowns of how the community members talk and relate to each other.
- Major influencers within the community.

Over a period of time, Levine can identify trends that influence and are influenced by the community.

⁶² Interview with Meredith Levine

^{62a} Interview with Sandra De Castro Buffington



“It’s a matter of always being up to date on ingest. If you were up to date last year, that doesn’t mean you are up to date today,” Levine says. “Trends can be ever changing and you can watch them ripple across the community over time as you are tracking that community.”

Levine adds that any person or institution who wants to successfully navigate YouTube needs to understand what resonates with that community. “What is really important on YouTube—is a person. You have to be willing to put a person on the line. That person, or people, is an ambassador and point of communication on a human level that is having a conversation with community members over a period of time.”

Despite have to get through some pretty bad content and nasty troll commentators, Levine says the end result is knowing who are the tastemakers and influencers within those online communities or fandoms as well as how to communicate with and message to them in their own community languages.

Another model of audience listening has been pioneered by [Upwell](#), the self-described “PR agency for the ocean.” In their work of “Big Listening” they conduct hourly and daily social media monitoring about the ocean and conducted pilot research for potential programs/teams on U.S. democracy issues including voting rights and money in politics. They are able to track major keywords and hashtags to determine what is popular on social media in the moment and over time.

“If we did better listening, we could help people [within the progressive organizing and

advocacy movement] understand that narrative shifts can happen in one big tip-over point, but more often happen in many tipping points, with many voices, over time,” Weidinger says.

Upwell produced a [160-page report in early 2013](#)⁶³ that dives into the whys and whats of Big Listening:

When combined with data-informed campaigning, Big Listening provides a methodology for increasing both the frequency and volume of online conversation around a particular issue. The basic idea is to identify pockets of real-time or historical conversation, wherever they may be, and then to use that information to make the conversation bigger. Big Listening is distinguished from traditional social media monitoring by its scale, fluidity, focus on issue or cause monitoring, and expanded access to historical data.

Using this knowledge base, Upwell then works to convert content developed from their network of ocean organizational allies or other media producers into fast campaigns to best spike attention to specific ocean issues. “Big Listening is taking all the conversations that are going on online and trying to find pockets; in our case, ocean issues like MPAs [marine protected areas], overfishing, sustainable seafood, whales, bluefin tuna, ocean acidification, sharks, and shark finning,” [explains](#)⁶⁴ Matt Fitzgerald, Upwell’s Curator and Social Metrics Manager. “We’re listening for those conversations and trying to meet those people where they are, rather than going out and saying, ‘This is the exact demographic profile of the person who we want to reach.’”

⁶³ Upwell Pilot Report

http://www.upwell.us/sites/g/files/g626006/f/201401/Upwell_pilotreport_executivesummary.pdf

⁶⁴ Why Your Nonprofit Should Be a Big Listener <http://www.bethkanter.org/listener/>



B. Tapping into the cultural pulse

Upwell's model demonstrates that while progressive organizing can be counted on to have multiple rapid response campaigns moving at once, we tend to do this in a vacuum, without knowing how our current or potential audience is engaged with or talking about the issue. We could be missing key frames, conversations, or knowledge that could inform organizing moments for cultural interventions and long-term strategy developments.

Culture tracking and audience listening are interlocked methods that will dramatically increase our ability to understand, reach, connect, and move communities and shift culture over time. We need a combination of human knowledge and tech tools that can help us:

- Increase intersectionality between social justice values and pop culture.
- Track and contextualize how storylines associated with issues such as women's sexuality and reproductive rights, how people of color are treated and portrayed, the environment, and economic issues are shaped and presented in pop culture.
- Identify what influencers—individuals, communities, products—are shaping conversations, attitudes, and behaviors about the issues we care about.
- Inform our short- and long-term cultural organizing strategies.

With this information, progressive organizations will be able to connect to the hearts and identities of current and potential audiences more profoundly, intersect with the cultural products and moments that shape beliefs and values, and amp up our ability to develop creative, nimble, and cutting-edge stories, products, and engagement opportunities. Over time, with the right tools and structure, there is also the potential to track our immediate and long-term influence on cultural conversations and directions.





C. Transporting our stories: Running errands or going on a road trip?

Stories are ancient, and have been seeding, documenting and changing cultures for eons. They're how humans explain our relationships, our day-to-day life, our dreams, and nightmares, how we make sense of ourselves and our society. Stories are how we have fun, how we question, how we relate, and how we mobilize others.

Stories are a potent tool. When progressives talk about “changing the narrative,” we’re really talking about influencing the public story. As Jonah Sachs, author of *Winning the Story Wars: Why Those Who Tell (and Live) the Best Stories Will Rule the Future*, writes:⁶⁵

We live in a world that has lost its connection to its traditional myths, and we are now trying to find new ones—we’re people, and that’s what people without myths do. These myths will shape our future, how we live, what we do, and what we buy. They will touch all of us. But not all of us get to write them. Those who do have tremendous power. And where there is power, there is struggle for it. That’s why, just below the surface, just beyond what the uninitiated can see, there are wars going on. The soldiers are Tea Party demonstrators and champions of “the 99 percent,” climate change activists, makers of computers and sneaker brands. They seem to be fighting

over ideas and dollars but they are really fighting for control of our stories. The best of them, those who know this and can convince us that their story is true, are blowing everyone else to smithereens.

To win the story wars, progressives need to start developing a strategic road map that marks out the stories we want to embed into ongoing cultural conversations and how we’re going to create the vehicles for moving those stories out into the world.

In the research paper “*The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives*,” Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock explore the influence of narratives in terms of how far a reader (viewer or listener) is “transported” into a narrative or as the saying goes, gets “lost in a story”.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Jonah Sachs. *Winning the Story Wars: Why Those Who Tell (and Live) the Best Stories Will Rule the Future*. Harvard Business Review Press: June 19, 2012. http://www.amazon.com/Winning-Story-Wars-Stories-Future-ebook/dp/B0088Q9UX6/ref=tmm_kin_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&sr=&qid=. PP. 6-7.

⁶⁶ “The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 79, 2000, Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock, Ohio State University, pg 701-721, http://www.communication-cache.com/uploads/1/0/8/8/10887248/the_role_of_transportation_in_the_persuasiveness_of_public_narratives.pdf



... [T]ransported individuals are so absorbed in a story that they would likely be reluctant to stop and critically analyze propositions presented therein. Public narratives often imply certain beliefs, but without stating them outright. Furthermore, stories are generally presented as vehicles for attitude change. These qualities of public narratives provide few explicit triggers for critical thinking, and thus counter arguing is less likely to occur.

As first introduced in the report overview, transportation is not only a metaphor for the influence of storytelling, but can also apply to the strategy behind the storytelling. To transport people into believing and connecting with our stories and values, there are two major pathways to integrate cultural change into a particular organization or movement: running errands and going on a road trip.

Running errands—repeatable activities like picking up groceries, running to the hardware store, clothes shopping (or my personal preference, shoe shopping!)—are discrete tasks that we perform for functional and fulfilling lives. When it comes to culture, many organizations are doing the same, using cultural tactics from infographics to working with artists on specific projects from projects to street art, from promoting personal stories via video to responding to hot culture moments. They do this in order to amplify the organizational and campaign message, engage core communities, and ultimately, win specific campaigns. These are repeatable (and some scalable activities) we regularly perform.

In contrast, there are those who are traveling another path: They are **going on a road trip**. A road trip is a long and winding exploration, with multiple stops along the way into new communities and adventures, picking up and dropping off traveling partners along the way, possibly using different modes of transport, all leading to an eventual destination. Cultural campaigns are road trips for those whose end destination is the change in large-scale cultural values or narratives. These campaigns can last from a year to a decade, with multiple stops into different communities (audiences and targeted communities we want to reach, engage, and influence), different modes of transports (the medium, platforms, and products delivering our narratives, art, and stories) and the potential caravans traveling with us (partners, creatives, audience members) to shape and create the work.

Similar tactics can be used for both, and each pathway often intersects with the other. Running errands can feed into a road trip, and the strengths and knowledge built from road trips can bolster campaign culture tactics. Road trips are stronger and more successful when the organizing and culture change strategies are developed in unison as a cohesive vision for a movement, and they don't live or die on the ebb and flow of one particular campaign. In the end, each has different goals: cultural tactics ("errands") are used to win a specific victory (that sometimes includes narrative change), while the other ("a road trip") is creating cultural and long-term narrative change that can propel political and societal change forward.



C. Transporting our stories: Running errands or going on a road trip

While all should be fed with a creative fire, understanding the differences between these two methods has multiple implications for organizations, including resources and financial investment, goals and corresponding expectations for results and impact, audience reach and connections, and cultural production and partnerships.

We need to run errands to help us fulfill our goals and lead a positive and fulfilling life. Road trips are the experiences that change our lives.

1. Going grocery shopping has never been so exciting

The realization is rippling through the ranks that, if deployed thoughtfully, our pranks, stunts, flash mobs, and encampments can bring about real shifts in power. In short, large numbers of people have seen that creative action gets the goods—and have begun to act accordingly. Art, it turns out, really does enrich activism, making it more compelling and sustainable.... We're building rhizomatic movements marked by creativity, humor, networked intelligence, technological sophistication, a profoundly participatory ethic, and the courage to risk it all for a livable future.

—Dave Oswald Mitchell and Andrew Boyd,
co-editors

[Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox For Revolution](#)

Running errands can be tedious and annoying in a real-world context. But when we're talking about culture tactics and campaigns, there are exciting opportunities to maximize creative talents and partnerships within a campaign and movements. Embedding cultural tactics into campaigns is incredibly important for strengthening communities, swaying public support, gaining new allies, creating alternate means for telling stories and messages outside of typical press releases, op-eds and blogs, and ultimately, for winning victories.

Publications such as *Beautiful Trouble*, a dynamic and informative book on the practice and art of cultural tactics, have become must-read guides for organizations and activists looking to understand the whys and hows of cultural organizing. *Making Waves*, a publication of The Culture Group, gives tremendous advice and guidelines for starting to think about integrating cultural work into an organization, including vocabulary and definitions for words commonly used within cultural strategy; examples and timelines of movements that have been fueled by creative change work; and guiding principles for organizations to work with artists and vice versa.

Many organizations employ repeatable tactics that pivot off of popular moments, parody pop culture trends, or use rapid response campaigns to push back on cultural controversies. For example—with the goal of easy shareability to spread messages and reach audiences—many groups combine the cultural trend of memes and organizational messages into simple (and hopefully funny) visuals based on pop culture references. As the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* wrote in an





introduction to a discussion on using pop culture:⁶⁷

To gain visibility and connect with new supporters, some nonprofits are piggybacking on popular cultural content made by others that's easily shared on the Internet. For example, one popular meme portrays movie stills of [Ryan Gosling](#) with captions starting "Hey, girl," showing his sensitive [sic] side. The National Wildlife Foundation picked up on that theme to create its own meme showing baby goslings with the caption, "Hey, girl. These goslings are cuter than Ryan."

But as cultural tactics grow in scope and vision, they require high-level expertise and partnerships with artists and creatives. For example, in the spring of 2014, the Cowboy and Indian Alliance [unveiled a beautiful piece](#) of crop art in Nebraska to protest construction of the Keystone XL pipeline. The work, developed with artist John Quigley, in Neligh, NE, on the Ponca Trail of Tears that would be traversed by the Keystone XL pipeline was "the world's largest crop art installation."

"The crop design of a cowboy and Indian warrior includes key images of water and a hashtag made of arrows," [wrote the organization Bold Nebraska on its blog](#).⁶⁸ "A sun with seven rays depicts the tribal tradition of protecting seven generations and the renewable energy farmers, ranchers, and tribes want to see on their land rather than a tarsands pipeline that risks their water."

Meanwhile, other groups directly intervene in hot cultural moments to raise attention to issues, push back on negative messaging, and activate and grow their communities. Online organizing groups such as UltraViolet and ColorOfChange.org have proven themselves to be incredibly effective in intervening in negative cultural moments, by identifying and driving pushback into the mainstream conversation. [UltraViolet](#) challenged Rick Ross and successfully [pressured Reebok to drop him](#) as a spokesman after the rapper came under fire for [lyrics that alluded](#) to drugging and raping a woman. According to a [press release](#) from April 2013, 100,000 people signed the Reebok petition, while 10,000 called the company and more than 2,000 tweeted at the brand as part of UltraViolet's efforts.⁶⁹

[ColorOfChange.org](#) was a driving force in shaming former NBA LA Clippers owner Donald Sterling after his racist remarks were leaked to the public, as the organization launched an [effective petition](#) to encourage a corporate boycott of the Clippers until Sterling was removed as owner (More on [ColorOfChange.org](#) and their road trip cultural strategies on page 46). The online community #blacktwitter was able to disgrace the famous Southern cook Paula Deen for her racist remarks and actions using such tactics as sardonic trending topic [#PaulasBestDishes](#).⁷⁰ The backlash ultimately cost Deen over [\\$10 million](#), after she lost endorsement deals and was dropped from The Food Network.⁷¹ Rapid response cultural campaigns creates critical spikes in attention on issues, and provides openings for alternative

⁶⁷ How to Use Pop Culture to Spread Ideas and Motivate Supporters, http://philanthropy.com/article/How-to-Use-Pop-Culture-to/143443/?cid=pt&utm_source=pt&utm_medium=en

⁶⁸ #NoKXL Crop Art Unveiling <http://boldnebraska.org/cropart-2/>

⁶⁹ "UltraViolet Responds to Reebok Dropping Rick Ross." Ultraviolet. 11 April 2013. <http://www.weareultraviolet.org/press/releases/2013/4/11/ultraviolet-responds-reebok-dropping-rick-ross/>

⁷⁰ "Paula's Best Dishes: Twitter Hashtag Pokes Fun At Paula Deen's Unsavory Side As Allegations Of Racism Surface." Huffington Post. 19 June 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/19/paulas-best-dishes-twitter-reactions-allegations-of-racism_n_3467877.html

⁷¹ Nicole Goodkind. "Scandal Will Cost Paula Deen Over \$10 Million, Says Crisis Manager." Yahoo Finance. 26 June 2013. < <http://finance.yahoo.com/blogs/daily-ticker/scandal-cost-paula-deen-over-10-million-says-163142039.html> >.



C. Transporting our stories: Running errands or going on a road trip

messaging to be pushed into the cultural and news conversation.

On the other end of the “running errands” spectrum, there are well-resourced, high-end productions to propel a campaign forward. For example, in 2013, Greenpeace [declared victory](#) after a two-year campaign against Volkswagen, when the company failed to commit to emission reductions. In 2011, Greenpeace U.K. parodied [Volkswagen’s highly popular Super Bowl ad](#)⁷² with their own video featuring a young boy dressed as Darth Vader using “the force” to turn on the headlights of his dad’s VW, and launched their VWDarkside campaign. It was a meta cultural tactic: parodying a Super Bowl ad that was in turn a takeoff of pop culture legend Star Wars.

As one [blog noted](#):⁷³

Cleverly integrated, the campaign launched with a PR stunt and a nice bit of culture jamming, deploying a team of Storm Troopers down to Silicon Roundabout in London’s Old St[reet]. While the Storm Troopers spoke through megaphones and handed leaflets to the public, a crack team of Greenpeace campaigners scaled London’s most prestigious ad space and hung four billboard banners featuring Darth Vadour [sic]. Being perfectly strategically placed in the tech hub of London, thousands of tech savvy commuters on their way to work started tweeting under the hash-tags #OldStreet and #Stormtroopers which immediately started trending worldwide.

Through the PR stunt alone Greenpeace managed to gain 2000 new Facebook likes in 12 hours. Pretty good going.

In addition, Greenpeace U.K. launched an [organizing platform that integrated cultural tactics](#)⁷⁴ and gaming activities to engage people and draw them into the campaign. According to the Mobilisation Lab for Greenpeace and its allies:

The VW Darkside site made learning about a serious issue entertaining. There was ‘ask Yoda to explain the Rebellion,’ in Yoda speak, and a full page focus describing how the Light Side of the Force is clean, green, and renewable while the Dark Side is accelerating the rush for dead, dirty energy.

Then there was the allure of Jedi Training, a game rewarding people for campaigning. Users start as a ‘Youngling,’ and can progress to be a ‘Baby Ewok,’ eventually working their way towards Jedi hood. At every stage of the game, Jedi are encouraged to share the campaign with their networks for additional points. The competitive gaming element would prove essential in driving traffic; nearly 80% came through referring sites, mainly Facebook and Orkut.

The result? More than 1.3 million views of the Greenpeace ad, more than half a million signatures—and a victory.

⁷² The Force: Volkswagen Commercial, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R55e-uHQna0>

⁷³ Joseph Maduma, Greenpeace’s VW ‘Dark Side Campaign’ <http://good-design.org.uk/2011/07/pt-2-of-2-greenpeaces-vw-dark-side-campaign/>

⁷⁴ Half Million Ask Volkswagen Not to Give Into... The Dark Side (Case Study) <http://www.mobilisationlab.org/half-million-ask-volkswagen-not-to-give-into-the-dark-side-case-study/>



Integrating personal storytelling as a cultural campaign tactic

Many organizations are doubling down on the use of personal storytelling as the emotional anchors for campaigns. It's no longer enough for the obligatory personal quote and story that are part of virtually every press release; storytelling and personal story solicitation have become a common practice for many campaigns. Technology—from Facebook to YouTube to Tumblr—has made it easier to share, gather, and curate personal stories. Storytelling plays numerous roles, such as personal empowerment, reaching and encouraging others to share their own story for organizing or political activation, and reframing an issue.

As Paul VanDeCarr of *Working Narratives* writes in *Storytelling and Social Change: A Strategy Guide for Grantmakers*:⁷⁵

Storytelling has also exploded in activist and nonprofit organizations working for social change. Consider efforts that use oral history to expose human rights abuses, first-person documentary films to push for prison reform, telenovelas to advance immigrants' health, or digital storytelling to prevent LGBT youth suicide. Activist conferences now have workshops on storytelling. Many nonprofits in all issue areas are geared towards "telling our story" on their websites and in outreach campaigns....

These and other organizations have recognized something essential: If we live by stories, we change by stories... Funders and nonprofits have used storytelling in doing needs-and-strengths assessments, community organizing, public education, and program evaluation. They've used such diverse forms as plays, books, films, web videos, story circles, radio programs, oral histories, museums, walking tours, journalistic reports, and even story-based video games.

Personal storytelling is at the heart of the DREAMers campaign to win legal status and citizenship for undocumented youth brought to America when they were children. As Arely M. Zimmerman, Ph.D., of the Media, Activism and Participatory Politics Project at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California, writes for the report "*Documenting DREAMs*,"⁷⁶ the form of "participatory storytelling" where new media and storytelling meet has allowed DREAMers to effectively build their networks and change the narrative debate:

Storytelling through digital media has been essential in constructing this collective identity. In fact, storytelling has become a tool that helps undocumented youth overcome the stigma of their legal status. Equally as important, these spaces have been significant in helping youth foster a sense of political efficacy.... Sharing stories through various social and digital media platforms has allowed youth to challenge and, at times, supplant mass

⁷⁵ Paul VanDeCarr, *Storytelling and Social Change: A Strategy Guide for Grantmakers*. Working Narratives. <http://workingnarratives.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Story-Guide.pdf>. P. 5.

⁷⁶ Arely M. Zimmerman, Ph.D., "Documenting DREAMs: New Media, Undocumented Youth and the Immigrants Rights Movement." 6 June 2012. [http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/sites/all/files/publications/Documenting DREAMs - Working Paper-MAPP - June 6 2012.pdf](http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/sites/all/files/publications/Documenting%20DREAMs%20-%20Working%20Paper-MAPP%20-%20June%206%202012.pdf) PP. 38-39.

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media representations through more locally constructed and participatory forms of messaging. Undocumented youth who engage in ‘participatory storytelling’ take advantage of new forms of social and digital media, along with their low barriers for participation, to come out as undocumented while simultaneously reframing the immigrant rights debate through their personal narratives. This storytelling is not limited to oral testimonies or text, but is also circulated through movement art and user generated videos and documentaries, which present ‘coming out’ stories of undocumented youth.

What’s important to note with the DREAMers, is that the storytelling space had to feel safe and authentic for the participants, not just be a way to build a list or find a quote for a press release. Many people sharing their personal tales are overcoming great fear or risk to their lives and livelihoods, so organizations should take a cue from their communities about the best platforms and strategies to gather and publish the personal stories. In fact, as often as it’s needed for a campaign to have a branded personal storytelling site, organizations can also invest in helping community members start and participate in other personal, non-branded venues and conversations. Through their own personal networks, individual community members can potentially help reach new audiences and unearth additional personal stories.

But to really to change the narrative, storytelling needs to be back up by a strategy.

Patrick Reinsborough,⁷⁷ co-founder of the [Center for Story-Based Strategy](#), an organization that trains organizers and activists in how to use storytelling to advance social change, adds that while there is an increased focus on narrative, storytelling, and culture change within the social justice movement, he is concerned that people will dive into the work without being clear about their intentions. “We are in a narrative and story fad right now—but storytelling has been a best practice forever, from how you sell insurance to politics. Progressives are just late to the party... Not every story is created equal. A million stories don’t just add up. We need the right framing of a story and multiplicity of those stories and a plan on how we collectively echo each other. These are the strategic choices we need to make on the front end.”

Running errands recommendations

Experienced activists and culture makers have recommendations on how to strengthen the work of investing in and supporting cultural tactics,

Favianna Rodriguez,⁷⁸ a well-known [social justice artist](#) and co-founder of [CultureStrike](#), a network of artists focused on using art and culture to change the narrative around migrants and immigrations, says that while some groups are improving integration of cultural tactics into their work, they are prone to two limiting actions. Rodriguez advises groups to drop organizational branding from key cultural pieces. Logos and branding “take away from the power of the piece and it is a last decade way of thinking.” She also suggests that the lifecycle of current cultural content is

⁷⁷ Interview with Patrick Reinsborough

⁷⁸ Interview with Favianna Rodriguez





unnecessarily limited. Pieces and work can be produced and disappear into the ether, when there could be real opportunities to reuse, recycle, and scale out the work over time.

This syncs with recommendations of Beka Economopoulos,⁷⁹ co-founder of [Not An Alternative](#), an artist-activist collective that produces “creative action, installations, and presentations” aimed at political intervention and the advancement of social causes. She says that the field needs to invest in symbols and visual language that share collective meaning. “There is a difference between branding and the development of open source visual language. We need signifiers that knits movements together,” Economopoulos says. “Occupy Wall Street became a signifier—everyone could appropriate it, scale it, use it, and even disagree over it.”

Rodriguez herself has modeled this visual connector within the immigrant rights movement with the creation of the “[Migration is Beautiful](#)” butterfly symbol. From t-shirts and posters to stencils and actual wings, this symbol is an artist- and movement-supported reframe of the way migrants are viewed in this country. As Rodriguez told [The Huffington Post](#):⁸⁰

The symbol of the monarch butterfly has been adopted by various migrant rights organizations, artists, and lovers of justice. It was not my idea, but an idea that’s been circulating for years—throughout the country and in Latin America as well. I was drawn to the butterfly because of the transformative nature of this creature. The monarch

butterfly represents the beauty of migration and the right that living beings have to freely move.

Visual connectors are an example of the shift in cultural tactics from errands to road trips. As tactics become strategies, organizations and creatives start visioning together, and the road map for long-term narrative and cultural change is drawn.

Whether small-scale or big, when embedded into a campaign and done well, cultural tactics can:

- Deliver campaign message(s) to educate, entertain, provoke.
- Share personal stories.
- Advance campaign towards victory or creatively spotlight a target of a campaign.
- Deepen connection of current community to campaigns and to each other.
- Activate current communities and engage new people into community.
- Create news hooks and visuals that can spread message/story of campaign for social media and media coverage.

Cultural tactics may include:

- The three Ps: *pivoting* off of cultural moments that inspire organizing or cultural intervention moments, *parodying* pop culture trends, or *pushing back* on trending pop culture moments.

⁷⁹ Interview with Beka Economopoulos

⁸⁰ Katherine Brooks, Huffington Post, ‘Migration is Beautiful’ Documentary: Artist Favianna Rodriguez Talks Immigrant Rights and Art’s Role in Politics

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/26/migration-is-beautiful-artist-favianna-rodriguez-documentary_n_2535690.html



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- Art and/or multimedia: delivering messages, creating visceral experiences, reaching and engaging new audiences, sharing and curating stories.
- Celebrities: endorsements and/or statements, showing up at events, tweeting to garner public and media attention.

2. Road tripping: Traveling to our vision

In 2012, The Hollywood Reporter [conducted a poll of television viewers](#)⁸¹ and found that viewers of shows like *Glee*, *Modern Family*, and *The New Normal* made them more likely to support gay marriage:

In the past 10 years, the THR poll of likely voters across the nation found, about three times as many voters have become more pro-gay marriage as have become more anti-gay marriage—31 percent pro, 10 percent anti.

Asked about how the shows influenced them, 27 percent said gay TV made them more pro-gay marriage, and six percent more anti. Obama voters watched and 30 percent got more supportive, 2 percent less supportive.

The poll also showed that 13 percent of Romney supporters watching these shows became more pro-gay marriage, while 12 percent got more anti.

This shift in the humanizing and mainstreaming of the gay community was no accident. Rashad

Robinson,⁸² former head of programs at GLAAD, says that as the “media and public relations arm” for the LGBT movement, culture was baked into the organization’s DNA. Upon Robinson’s arrival at GLAAD, high-level staff had already come out of entertainment networks such as Showtime and Logo. During his tenure, GLAAD had a multiple-spokes strategy with various departments targeting different cultural constituencies: a Hollywood department in Los Angeles, a news team in New York, a sports team that supported athletes to come out and to shape sports news, and even a religion department to help support the conversation on LGBT issues within the religious community.

“There are few bigger pillars than sports and religion,” says Robinson. “It’s how so many of us are socialized and find our place in community. When LGBT people are excluded, we are excluded from full participation in society.”

One of GLAAD’s big areas of investment was and continues to be training spokespeople: working with people to refine their personal stories for both the media, but also to take those individuals and stories into different writers’ rooms at television shows. “When Callie’s character was coming out on *Grey’s Anatomy*, we brought two lesbian women who had come out in their thirties into the writer’s room. When Rebecca Romijn’s character on *Ugly Betty* was coming out as trans, we brought a GLAAD staffer who is trans into the writer’s room and trained Romijn how to talk about the issue on the red carpet,” says Robinson.

⁸¹ Time Appelo, THR Poll: ‘Glee’ and ‘Modern Family’ Drive Voters to Favor Gay Marriage – Even Many Romney Voters <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/thr-poll-glee-modern-family-386225>

⁸² Interview with Rashad Robinson





Not that GLAAD's relationship with Hollywood is always smooth. In 2006, GLAAD launched their first [Network Responsibility Index](#)—which rates the television and cable networks on their LGBT content from Excellent all the way down to Failing—during the annual Television Critic's Association (TCA) “up front” weeks, which is the place for splashing new and current shows to advertisers. The publicity over failing grades put network department heads into a tizzy, but it also had an impact.

In one instance, Fox brought Robinson and colleagues to preview a new pilot by Ryan Murphy called *Glee*, prominently featuring a teenage gay character. “I didn't think that show was going to last,” Robinson recalls with a self-deprecating chuckle.

Another major moment was in 2010, when GLAAD gave the major networks a sneak peak of their grades ahead of their release. Nina Tassler, the president of CBS Entertainment, used the TCA event a week later to announce three new gay characters on the network, including the hit show *The Good Wife*.

“We're disappointed in our track record so far,” Tassler [announced](#)⁸³ in reaction to the GLAAD grade. “We're going to do it. We're not happy with ourselves.”

Robinson contends that there has to be a balance of carrot and stick with the creatives and decision-makers in major pop culture arenas. “The carrot and stick have to be appropriate for your target. There has to be an incentive structure that makes sense. You have

to understand what their wants and needs are. The stick is appropriate as much as possible early on. If you don't use the stick—then you don't send a message about what is out of bounds. You use the stick to build power.”

Robinson, now the Executive Director of [ColorOfChange.org](#), is adapting the model he refined at GLAAD. With the mission of building power for the Black community, Robinson has moved the online organizing group from reactive cultural campaigns to focus on its own model of proactive carrot-and-stick cultural strategies. Over the last few years, ColorOfChange has won multiple campaigns, including forcing [Fox to stop airing](#)⁸⁴ its exploitive show *Cops* after 25 years to going after *Saturday Night Live* or moving the Oxygen Network [to cancel the show](#)⁸⁵ *All My Babies' Mamas* for its stereotypical and racist depiction of Black families.

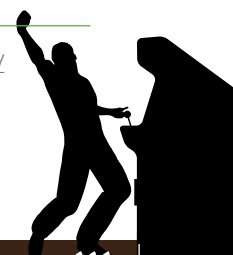
“If there are high-level cultural touch points that we don't engage or we allow to pass, it sends a message. When you can be used and abused by people in power, and no one speaks up, that sends a message to the next user and abuser.”

Meanwhile, ColorOfChange is also building relationships with diversity directors at various networks, bringing stories into writers' rooms at major television shows and even engaging the staff behind reality shows. The organization has a cultural strategy laid out through 2016, with targeted goals to expand their relationships and entrance into Hollywood, as well deeper plans to address systemic issues within the industry that influence the conception and

⁸³ Good Wife Gets Gay Character and Other LGBT Roles on CBS, The Daily Beast <http://www.thedailybeast.com/cheats/2010/07/28/good-wife-gets-gay-character-and-other-lgbt-roles-on-cbs.html>

⁸⁴ <http://colorofchange.org/press/releases/2013/5/6/colorofchange-applauds-foxs-cancellation-cops-afte/>

⁸⁵ <http://www.colorofchange.org/campaign/tell-oxygen-and-its-advertisers-dont-exploit-black-families/>



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perception of Black people. The tie that binds ColorofChange's culture strategy is "how people view the cultural power and humanity of Black people," Robinson says.

Inspired by the LGBT movement, some organizing groups are also starting to build long-term culture shifting strategies. "The LGBT movement's success blew open people's thinking about culture change work," says Ai-jen Poo,⁸⁶ director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance and co-director of Caring Across Generations (CAG), which is forging a long-term narrative and cultural shift on how Americans feel about aging and the value of caregiving. "People were resigned to marginality, with the belief that in some way progressivism and subculture were synonymous instead of contending for popular culture and hearts and minds broadly. But a whole generation of us watched the LGBT movement make what seemed culturally impossible only a short period ago, inevitable. It opened up people's imagination. I know it did for me."

Poo's first foray into cultural experimentation was when the [National Domestic Workers Alliance](#) (NDWA) pivoted off of the release of blockbuster movie *The Help*, which told the fictional story of 1960s black nannies and housekeepers in the midst of the Southern civil rights movement. NDWA saw this movie as an opportunity to capture the film's audiences and connect it to their work. It was also an opportunity for domestic workers to tell their stories of what it's like to be "the help" and what audiences could do to support the workers of today.

The learning and "aha!" moment from that time has led Poo and the CAG team, including Bridgit Antoinette Evans, an artist and creative strategist who founded the company [Fuel](#), to make culture change a central tenet in their work. Caring Across Generations is working what I've dubbed the, "road trip" approach, finding different communities to stop and work with and identifying different modes of transport for stories and values into the cultural arena. This includes building relationships with culture makers in Hollywood, advertising, and entertainment to create long-term interactive cause-marketing campaigns such as [Thrift Stories](#) "that leverage young people's love for all things vintage and retro—classic music, fashion, films, food, and sports—to deepen the bonds they share with older generations." They are also working to create a cultural tipping point by building momentum around the holiday, [Grandparents Day](#), inspiring intergenerational storytelling as a primary mode of its celebration.

"We think of [culture change] as the means and goals, the strategy and the end point. We are committed to storytelling and the notion that we should be engaging the emotional life of people, the creativity, the imagination, and the heart side of hearts and minds," Poo adds. "This arena is strategic and has to be core to how you think about power or you are ceding the space. Telling the story of why things are the way they are in the world, on your terms, is exercising power, particularly when it creates emotional and imaginative momentum."

One particular social justice organization was born out of pop culture. [The Harry Potter Alliance](#), co-founded in 2005 by comedian

⁸⁶ Interview with Ai-jen Poo



and actor Andrew Slack to take on human rights violations in Sudan, has expanded in the years since to work on numerous civic education and activism projects on such issues as climate change, LGBT rights, immigration, media reform, and more. The HP Alliance has spread across 42 states and 24 countries (and growing), and have spread that far because they tapped into everything Harry Potter-related: podcasts, blogs, fan fiction sites, in-person events (rock concerts!). Building on that fandom, The HP Alliance created a community of people known as “Dumbeldore’s Army” (referencing the rebellion group Potter organized in the series) to do good and fight for justice in the real world like Potter himself would do.

“Youth are engaged in stories that point to their higher selves, but we don’t respect that,” says Slack.⁸⁷ “It’s uncanny to me that pop culture is viewed [by the progressive movement] as low culture.”

As one University of Southern California case study of the Harry Potter Alliance *noted*:⁸⁸ For members of the HP Alliance, the world of Harry Potter is a deeply meaningful myth that allows them to make sense of the world and of their role within the world. Current real-world problems—geopolitical and social issues—are framed by the context of the story of Harry Potter. A shared experience of immersion in a fantastical world fuels readers’ desire to, as Slack puts it, “be these characters, not just role play ... make this myth come to life.”

“The right has been so successful at mobilizing the megachurch. Why can’t we be so

successful as mobilizing the mega-cineplex?” queries Slack. “My wish is to effect a larger movement that correlates progressive activism and human rights activism, and connects that to fan activism. We’ve allowed fans to become engaged in the world of activists for the first time. We want activists to be first-time users of popular culture.”

The HP Alliance spun off the *Imagine Better* project, which is extending the same model to new fan worlds including the blockbuster book and movie series Hunger Games. In 2013 they launched the “*Odds in Our Favor*” campaign to take on the issue of economic inequality.

As the HP Alliance’s work demonstrates, connecting to existing fandoms can empower thousands of individuals to become part of the caravan driving towards culture change.

But it’s important to note that cultural campaigns don’t—or shouldn’t—happen in a vacuum. *The essential ingredient within the road trip model is that culture change is coupled with organizing, whether it be online, political, grassroots, local, or national.* They are more successful when interlocked with serious organizing, policy advocacy, and/or strategic communications efforts. Not all pieces of this work have to be firing on all cylinders at the same time, but they do reinforce each other’s ongoing and cumulative advancements.

At their very essence, road trips are proactively developing a long-term strategic path, with multiple and varied tactics, products, and interventions along the way. Road trips can support and interact with specific campaigns

⁸⁷ Interview with Andrew Slack

⁸⁸ Anna Van Someren, Case Study: Harry Potter Alliance

<https://sites.google.com/site/participatorydemocracyproject/case-studies/harry-potter-alliance>



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and continue on as the connective force between specific campaigns, but they don't live or die on the rise and fall of those campaigns. Ideally, they also should:

- Involve multiple stakeholders—individuals, nonprofit organizations, networks of communities, for-profits, cultural producers, creatives, organizers, academics, and more—throughout the lifetime of the work.
- Include culture makers and cultural producers as lead strategists.
- Inspire culture making, storytelling, and conversation among communities inside and outside of typical audience and community circles.
- Create the space for experimentation, iteration (and sometimes failure) of products, moments, and strategies that will ultimately add up to long-term success.

But no matter whether we're running errands or going on a road trip, having trusting relationships and knowing how to work well with creatives is essential to any culture model.

Cultural road trips are not done in isolation; they take caravans of people making their way together and range from partner social justice organizations to individual culture makers, current and growing community members, to companies and creatives in the for-profit world. We'll know some of our fellow travelers: They may have different skills and audiences and creative processes from us, but will work in some form of alignment. Some we won't know at all: They will be moving their own creative process and products that we won't (and shouldn't) have control over. As culture itself ebbs and flows, so do our relationships and partnerships with others on the road trips. Some may stop and stay in particular communities, while others will travel from stop to stop.





D. Building networks and working partnerships with creatives

On March 11, 2014, FunnyorDie.com released a new video⁸⁹ as part of its hit web series *Between Two Ferns*. With comedian and Hangover actor Zach Galifianakis as the semi-dumb and cringe-inducing host, these videos were known for their skewering and hilarious Hollywood celebrity interviews.

But this video was different. This video featured a different kind of celebrity: President Barack Obama. While known for his “cool” factor of fist bumps and Jay Z shoulder brushes during the presidential campaign, it was far more normal to see him in a presidential sit-down with 60 Minutes or CNN than a snarky web-based comedy show.

Obama was making a play to reach young people—the target audience of *Between Two Ferns*—as part of the effort to promote the Affordable Care Act to that demographic. While allowing Galifianakis to get his potshots in, Obama was also able to spread his message about the ACA.

Funny or Die became the [number one source of referrals](#) to Healthcare.gov. As of 3:30 p.m. on the day it was posted, the video had

accumulated 5.9 million views, and 19,000 viewers had continued to Healthcare.gov.⁹⁰ Twenty-four hours after the video was posted, more than 13 million people had viewed it, and 54,000 had gone on to visit Healthcare.gov. Overall, there were more than 890,000 visits to the government website on the day the *Funny or Die* episode was posted—a 40 percent increase over the day before.⁹¹

Scott Aukerman, director of *Between Two Ferns*, said the [experience of working](#)⁹² with the White House was surprising, “We kept expecting there to be more conditions or people trying to lean on us to make it more what they wanted it to be. It was very strange. Zach and I kept looking at each other to say, ‘They’re eventually going to try to control us.’ But, no, they trusted us, they said, ‘We’re trusting *Funny or Die* a lot here.’ They’re so

⁸⁹ Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis: President Barack Obama, <http://youtu.be/UnW3xkHxIEQ>

⁹⁰ Brian Fung. “Zak Galifianakis is now Healthcare.gov’s biggest traffic driver.” The Washington Post. 11 March 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-switch/wp/2014/03/11/zach-galifianakis-is-now-healthcare-govs-biggest-traffic-driver/?hpid=z5>

⁹¹ Adam Aigner-Treworgy. “Healthcare.gov gets 40% jump in traffic after Funny or Die video.” CNN. 12th March 2014. <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2014/03/12/healthcare-gov-gets-40-jump-in-traffic-after-funny-or-die-video/>

⁹² David Weigel, Slate, “The Director of President Obama’s *Between Two Ferns* Speaks,” http://www.slate.com/blogs/weigel/2014/03/12/the_director_of_president_obama_s_behind_two_ferns_interview_speaks.html





blown away the video that I think it worked out for them. It proves that when you let creative people do their thing, you'll get something good out of it."

"It proves that when you let creative people do their thing, you'll get something good out of it." Repeat that sentence three times. Or write it over and over on a blackboard Bart Simpson-style. In its very essence, this sentence points to how progressives need to build strong relationship networks and working partnerships with creatives, in order to:

- Understand the motivations, needs, challenges, and values that drive our respective work.
- Engage in information and insight sharing for planning and creative development.
- Conduct early and often shared visioning and strategy development with the appropriate creative partners.

Favianna Rodriguez of CultureStrike encourages the social justice field to think of culture as ["rain readying the crops."](#)⁹³ and articulates the symbiotic relationships that can happen between organizers and creatives:

You go to the theater, watch sports, or listen to music, and culture just happens to you. You're not expecting to debate the merits of a political message when you listen to music or read a book. You're more open to how culture is going to transform you, so you walk into it with an open heart. Culture creates a ripe environment for issue-based organizing or "get out the vote" efforts. This is why it's so important for us to work in unity. We need to understand timing politically to know when it makes sense for

cultural interventions to happen.

The role of art and artists in society includes continuing cultural traditions, introducing new ideas, and building a collective identity for a community, adds Carlton Turner of Alternate Roots. "The imagination is the barrier between what we're fighting against and what we're fighting for," he says.

"Transactional relationships with artists are not about shifting culture, but adding an important detail to a message so it seems inclusive, but it's not. Most organizers don't see artists as part of the community, but see artists as entertainers. In addition, many organizations bring in an artist in the hopes that using this artist will shift the consciousness of the opposition. When you do that you miss the boat completely," Turner says. "The role of artists is to shift your cultural consciousness, for you to become the thing you want to see in the world, versus telling people what they ought to be doing and using an artist to convey that message."

Progressive organizations and allies must build working partnerships with artists, creatives, and storytellers in our communities—geographical, identity, and ideological—as well as reach outside our comfort zone to build relationships with creatives and producers who operate in the for-profit, pop culture spaces. These relationships will strengthen and inspire our own communities, while painting our stories and values as the dominant public narrative.



D. Building networks and working partnerships with creatives

Valuing relationships with creatives

Creatives, artists, or culture makers—whether they hail from local communities, are strategic allies within the national progressive movement, or work within for-profit cultural sectors—require the same relationship building, understanding of mutual interest and needs, and relationship investment as any other ally or collaborator.

Too many organizations think of working with culture makers as hiring them to design a flyer or perform at an event. While useful in the right context, limiting the strategic role that creatives can play in both campaigns and culture change work is a mistake.

“A lot of organizers see art and culture as extensions of communications tactics or decorations of talking points,” adds Liz Manne. “The truth is that creativity can bolster near term campaigns and make them more successful. But the real juju is with systemic cultural change.”

Artist-activist [Gan Golan](#), the mastermind behind [Goodnight Bush](#) and [The Adventures of Unemployed Man](#) says that relationships with creatives need to start with respect. One problem is that too often artists are underpaid or not compensated at all for their work. “The progressive sector lags behind the private sector in terms of respect and financial payment,” he says.⁹⁴ Creatives are “treated worse in the social justice realm than in Hollywood. The progressive sector is making choices on what they pay for and what they don’t.”

As Rodriguez noted in a callout to nonprofit organizations in a 2013 Facebook post:

Dear folks who ask artists to work for free:

I get all your emails. I just ignore most of them.

I often make art when and if I am paid for my work, or if ‘ for a great social justice issue that is not well funded. Or if it’s for a huge cause I love and believe in. My art is my craft and it is the labor I give to the world, and it’s how I sustain myself. Just like you sustain yourself.

“Exposure and promotion” does not help artists pay their bills. It does not help us make time for working on more art. On the contrary...

“A good cause” is no longer enough for me, not when some nonprofits use the artists’ work that is created to then fundraise for their campaigns.

Please respect artist labor by compensating artists and not using them for promoting companies, causes, and campaigns that YOU get paid to work for. If you don’t work for free: Why do you ask me to?

With much respect,

Favianna (after 15 years of being in the game)

One organization that does try is Turner’s organization, Alternate Roots, which works to support artists in the South, many of whom make less than \$20,000 a year and face

⁹⁴ Interview with Gan Golan





the dangers that come from speaking out on controversial subjects. Alternate Roots offers direct financial support to artists, a variety of professional development support mechanisms, and small to larger collaboration and convening opportunities for artists to build their networks and break down isolation.

Pull out a seat for creatives at the strategy table

In addition to compensation, every creative and cultural producer interviewed adamantly contends that creatives and cultural organizers should have seats at the table from the start of the strategy process.

“Creatives think in terms of narrative, not in messages and talking points. Narrative is how we actively connect with the rest of the world,” Golan says.

“If you are mapping out campaign strategy and messaging, and you have options between different tactics and one lends itself to more visual messaging and storytelling of what’s happening within the culture—go with the cultural and visual strategy,” Economopoulos says. “This allows us to develop a multimedia, multipronged campaign that plays out across media and on the ground with grassroots pressure.”

Golan says that to unleash the power of the arts and creatives, social justice groups should think of “creatives” like investigative journalists and offer direct experiences with affected communities.

There is also a difference between hiring artists and storytellers to develop products for organizations and campaigns and providing creatives with stories and experiences that inspire their work. Artists and storytellers

live and breathe culture, they have their own processes and needs, and they understand who their audiences are. Along with relationships that seed artists with our stories and values, they will produce work that we don’t control at all times and may not always be to our liking. Creatives are independent and authentic validators and connectors to certain communities—sometimes better than our own organizations. Their work can help start additional waves of cultural response and buildup that help propel ideas and stories into the cultural conversation.

Long-term, trusting relationships and working partnerships between organizations and social change artists are the heart of culture change work.

Building bridges to pop culture drivers

We don’t have to like a lot of pop culture—I’m no Justin Bieber fan—but we can’t pretend it doesn’t exist. When megastar Beyoncé dropped her self-titled album on December 13, 2013, with no forewarning, beyond the awe at her upending every known promotional trick in the book, long and divisive debates on how Beyoncé used her song lyrics and videos to [represent feminism followed](#). Through this debate, Beyoncé [catalyzed a conversation](#) about female sexual empowerment and feminism in a way that most of us could only dream about.

Not every cultural moment is Beyoncé big. But every cultural product and experience is a potential brick in the house of larger cultural transformation.

Erin Potts of Revolutions Per Minute says that the progressive movement needs to expand the types of cultural leaders and artists we



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work with—not only the people who are raising their hands. For example, Hollywood is a key industry to connect to, with the immediacy of storylines that generate buzz and action to consistent narrative arcs that become accepted beliefs within the large portions of the cultural landscape. Currently, social justice organizations generally look to Hollywood and other pop culture sectors for the quick celebrity endorsement, if they look at all. While that can be a powerful tactic (i.e., *errand*) for a campaign to raise awareness and generate buzz, it's not a long-term strategy for advancing change through culture. There is also a difference in getting a celebrity to do a callout of an issue on social media (which can be a big campaign moment) and getting a creative invested in the issue over time.

"I get calls all the time from progressive organizations and funders saying, 'I need an artist next week. I need someone to warm up a crowd.'" Potts says. They are, "conflating a celebrity with a cultural strategy... a long, thoughtful, integrated strategy within our work."

Part of that strategy development is to understand the potential bridge-building opportunities in the cultural landscape. Culture makers reside in multiple areas, many of them breaking new ground in the intersection of storytelling and audience engagement.

In early 2014, USC Annenberg and UCLA co-hosted their annual conference "[Transforming Hollywood](http://www.transforminghollywood.tft.ucla.edu/2014/03/indie-tv-creators-fans-pilot-new-shows/)." Topics for discussion revolved around how storytelling (and the business of making money through content) is evolving in a digital age, including business models that are harnessing (and sometimes supporting) online storytellers; the

tensions of older and newer distribution models (think cable vs. Netflix) and the value, impact, and role of engaged audiences. Attendees also heard [firsthand from people who are breaking](https://storify.com/tracyvs/transforming-hollywood)⁹⁵ the storytelling boundaries, such as the brilliant minds behind *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and Issa Rae, the creator and star behind the sensational web series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*. [To dive more into the conversations and observations of the 2014 Transforming Hollywood Conference, check out this [Storify](https://storify.com/tracyvs/transforming-hollywood).⁹⁶]

At the conference, Jamie Byrne, head of content strategy at YouTube, explained that through their data analytics, it's clear that videos with a point of view, real authenticity, and are personality-driven can harness massive conversation and engagement on a topic. And as scripted content continues to grow on YouTube, audiences feel more intimacy and connection to those content creators than they do to characters on network television.

Personalities from YouTube, Vine, and the like are gaining thousands to millions of dedicated fans and becoming celebrities, with all the branding, screaming fans, and influence that comes with fame. That means the conversations, framing, and opinions on issues progressives care about reaching millions of people—especially young people—are happening in new cultural arenas. Meanwhile, new fiction series—both low-cost and expensive—are being unspooled outside the traditional network television model. How-to, slapstick, comedy, music, romance and sci fi, fiction and non-fiction videos are being created at record levels. This content can be specific for niche audiences, but with shareable platforms can cross over to reach millions.

⁹⁵ <http://www.transforminghollywood.tft.ucla.edu/2014/03/indie-tv-creators-fans-pilot-new-shows/>

⁹⁶ <https://storify.com/tracyvs/transforming-hollywood>





Some new content platforms are also working to find and harness up-and-coming creative talent while engaging their audiences to be part of the decision-making process. [Amazon Studios](#), the content production arm of Amazon, has an open call for writers to submit pilot ideas. After ordering pilots, they bring in their audiences to vote and help decide on which shows should be brought to series.

A clear realization from the conference was that progressive organizations have very little experience with online storytelling. As millions of viewers supplement their traditional TV diet with online content, imagine the opportunities for storytelling, reach, and engagement that the social justice movement could open the door for. How? By developing the right relationships and support mechanisms (yes, that means financial) with a diversity of online storytellers.

Meanwhile, the behemoth video game industry is certainly a ripe area to connect to but seems hard to crack. To start, there is a mighty cohort of values-aligned video game creators that social justice organizations could be proactively developing relationships with. Many of them attend the annual [Games for Change festival](#),⁹⁷ where gaming aficionados gather to talk about the current and future industry, behavioral analysis and psychology of what influences values and actions, and the art and science of social change games.

They are exploring many of the same questions we are, but working in an industry that reaches and engages audiences, especially young people, through stories and entertainment

outside of our own expertise. There are [ripe opportunities](#)⁹⁸ to learn about each other's work, share stories and audiences, and do major visioning together.

Initial relationship development will not be a piece of cake. Understanding the needs, desires, and best ways to communicate our values and stories to these potential partners is a first step.

"One of the reasons I am not politically involved is that I'm demoralized. So much (of progressive politics) is about just trying to capture a news cycle. F*** the news cycle," says Bushman of the Lizzie Bennet Diaries. "I want to tell great stories."

"People in popular cultural institutions that control the popular cultural discourse speak a really different language. They are generally really shy talking about or are not into policy and advocacy," adds Poo of Caring Across Generations. "There are language barriers between us and them. We need interpreters to leverage the work. TV script writers have power and reach that changes and influences policy or understandings."

Building the pipelines of relationships and working partnerships with creatives is an essential element of any successful cultural tactic and strategy. It requires:

- Valuing and respecting their expertise and the important role they play in strengthening communities and powering movements.
- Providing fair financial support of their work.

⁹⁷ <http://gamesforchange.org/festival/>

⁹⁸ Tracy Van Slyke, The Culture Cast: Playing to Win at Games for Change (listen to the podcast) <http://tracyvs.tumblr.com/post/83813184522/the-culture-cast-playing-to-win-at-games-for-change>



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- Bringing the right set of creatives to the table at the beginning of the strategy and/or campaign development process.
- Knowing that once we've built relationships and shared our stories with creatives, we will need to take a step back and not try to control all the outputs.
- Understanding the pop culture landscape including both the established and new cultural arenas.
- Realizing that seeding our values and stories into pop culture will require our understanding their needs and language.

The options are wide open. The opportunities boundless. It's the strategic decisions and investment in the relationship and trust building, ongoing collaborations and partnerships, and the financial investment that will define the extent and influence of our culture change work.





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So, all these pages later, we've started to answer the why and what of how the progressive movement as a whole can invest in culture change. To move from constantly chasing narratives to consistently changing them, we need to be collectively connecting to pop culture and integrating creative activism, as well as embracing the artists and culture makers within the heart of our movement. The Culture Change Triad model lays out three major investment needs. The next steps are determining the who and the how.

What's your role?

While the opportunities to engage with culture change work are wide open, that doesn't mean an organization or sector has to do or invest in everything. For some, embedding cultural tactics into a campaign is a clear first step. Others may be ready to embark on a road trip journey. Another organization may see their role as neither, but as a resource to capture and move stories and inspirations to a variety of artists and storytellers. Or an organization can play the role of a creative supporter, by providing direct financial assistance to creatives and storytellers within or outside the progressive sector.

It's important for any organization that is making culture central to its DNA to:

- Have a vision and clear description of how integrating cultural strategies and practices will propel your work forward, whether for campaigns or big-picture narrative shifting.
- Articulate the theory of change that defines your investment and role in culture work.
- Take a look at the Culture Change Triad model and based on your vision, goals, resources, and ability to experiment—determine what your role(s) can be in the progressive culture change space.
- Stay on the pulse of the audiences and communities you reach now and those you want to reach in the future. Make sure





to listen to them to help inspire and shape cultural strategies and products.

- Develop a network of relationships with creatives, allies, and strategists to share and build visions, stretch imaginations, share lessons, and start to plot individual and joint strategies.

It's all about the money, money, money

It's not as if nonprofit social justice organizations, whether they are local or national, are rolling in the dough. Culture change, creativity, and media production (and even the communications to support the work) take a lot of resources and time, especially to do it well.

This is a critical time for additional and ongoing conversations among organizations, creatives, funders, and allies to share experiences, lessons, and strategies that demonstrate that culture change is not an extra but a critical component of community building, organizing campaigns, and long-term movement success. It's also incumbent upon savvy individuals and organizations to examine and evaluate alternative funding and economic models that can support this work. From Silicon Valley to the world of journalism and nonprofit media, there has been a lot of testing and developing of alternative revenue models to support culture change.

To harness the opportunities and create the right strategic paths for specific organizations and the movement itself to invest in culture change, there is a need for increasing support from a diversity of resources.

Impact and experimentation

Culture itself is an experiment. It's a hotbed of voices, values, and visuals. No one is ever going to control all of it, and we'll always be on a learning curve. But we can partner with the right people—behavioral psychologists, technologists, creatives, and more—to help us create short and long-term swings in cultural conversations and frames of the issues, communities, and values we believe in.

But with any experimentation and risk, comes failure. Or more often what happens with culture and media work, that not all planned goals and benchmarks are reached, but surprise lessons and accomplishments are achieved. Experimentation—whether that means taking the first step into culture work or unleashing a five-year cultural strategy—means that risk and/or perceived failure is to be expected.

But as more and more funding becomes tied to impact assessment, risk taking and experimentation can become mitigated. I deliberately did not use these pages to talk about how to evaluate the impact of culture. There are many debates, articles, reports, summaries, and conversations about media, arts, culture, and impact. Organizations such as [Media Impact Funders](#), [Active Voice Labs](#), and [BritDoc](#) are constantly assessing and investigating how creatives, organizations, and funders can test, understand, and apply definitions and metrics of impact to media, arts, and cultural products. To spotlight the debate and resources, Liz Manne and I, with the input of many other culture makers, media producers, and media impact experts [started compiling impact assessment resources in one place](#).

Art in and of itself doesn't always need an impact measurement device. And while it is



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important to understand the impact of social change culture work, we need to remember that culture rarely evolves around the axis of one project or one cultural moment. While quantitative data (e.g., number of eyeballs reached, links clicked, actions taken) is essential to assess goals and tactics of a particular strategy or project, it would be a mistake to think that this is the sum total of understanding culture change impact. Cultural investments and strategies can also have myriad goals: Some are internal to building and bridging specific communities, others are about driving external political, policy, or corporate change. Social justice change and impact will also go hand in hand with corresponding organizing, communications, and policy work over time.

When taken together, the transformation will be ongoing and cumulative, and cultural and political shifts will happen over time.

To support experimentation, dynamic creative tactics, and long-term culture change strategy, organizers, creatives, scientific researchers, data experts, and community members need to work with our allies and supporters to continue the impact conversation, from articulating the current best practices and limitations to what frameworks accurately reflect the dynamics of long-term culture change.

But what's most important is not to get so lost in the impact debate that we forget to invest in the creative individuals, strategists, and organizations that are experimenting and making culture change.

Last, but not least, remember that while culture change is actual work that we have to do, it's rooted in the stories, art, and experiences (and fun!) that speak to the souls and hearts of everyday people.



