

## Storytelling

Written by Center for Media Justice  
Friday, 08 May 2009 14:14

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Once you've identified your frames and messages, you might be tempted to string them together in a press release and consider your work done. But no one likes to be lectured, and no one is moved to action through messages alone. Frames and messages must be communicated through images and narratives that people can identify with.

We all learn through stories. Think of folk tales and epic legends -- like David and Goliath or Star Wars. Stories like these have mass appeal because they're about sympathetic characters caught up in conflicts we can all identify with. As audiences, we root for the "good guys" and hope the "bad guys" learn their lesson. These lessons connect to "morals" that appeal to widely held values of right and wrong: it's wrong for powerful giants to bully little people; it's wrong to build empire by wiping out entire villages (and planets) or destroy their way of life. Solutions follow from these morals: strategy and smarts can be mightier than size and brawn; forming alliances for the common good is better than authoritarian military rule.

By packaging your frames and messages in a well-framed story, you can convey history, political context and institutional solutions through morals that move audiences to action.

While stories have often been used as mechanisms for social control, organizers can use stories to show that progressive change is necessary, possible and irresistible. Follow these steps to creating stories and symbols that communicate change.

- **Develop a "big idea" frame.** If you haven't already, try coming up with a big idea frame that captures your values and the change you want to make (see the how-to on "Framing and Messaging"). Your story frame should convey this big idea frame.
- **Create a story frame.** All good stories contain four main ingredients: characters, conflict, setting and solutions. Ask yourself: Who are the main characters? Who are the good guys? Who are the villains? Who are supporting characters? What scene are you trying to set? What's interesting about the scene, what's the conflict, new development or unexpected plot? How does the story get resolved? What's the moral? What are the solutions and who's responsible? What images illustrate this story?
- **Develop images and symbols to illustrate the story.** What photos or symbols capture this story in one graphic? Don't think literally, think in metaphors. For example, Little Red Riding Hood's red cape was a symbol of deviance. In social movements, the Black Power fist is a symbol of collective resistance and cultural pride.
- **Add a news hook.** What anniversaries, holidays or developments in local, national or international news can you hook your story to? For example, if your story is about the need for new legislation to protect against racial profiling, you could hook your story to Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, October 22nd National Day of Protest Against Police Brutality, or recent local cases of racial profiling.
- **Identify your main characters.** Identify people in your community whose personal experiences reinforce your story frame and who are willing to share their story. Often the people most affected by your issue are your powerful spokespeople. Refine your story frame together, by asking them to tell you their personal stories and adjusting the frame to reflect the reality of their lives.
- **Test your story through role-plays.** Practice telling the story to your cousin, sister or

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mother - anyone who's not involved with work on your issue. Ask them what they think the moral of the story is, who they sympathize with and what action they feel moved to take, if any. Revise your story based on their responses.

Published on: October 8, 2006

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