

## Systems Storytelling Initiative Synopsis of Community of Practice Session #6, May 25, 2022

The tone of the 6th CoP session was influenced by the mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas, the day prior. Though CCL System Storytellers hail from all corners of the globe and only a small fraction of CoP members are American, the mood was somber and the tragic event - which made headlines across the world - influenced the discussion about how our global human family consumes stories.

**David Bornstein** of Solutions Journalism Network opened the 6th COP meeting by reflecting that in local newspapers across the world, in languages including Turkish, Mandarin, Japanese, and Spanish, as well as across the English-speaking world, “billions of people woke up this morning to read that one story.” As the COP members expressed anguish and grief for the individuals and families affected, we reflected on how this tragic story of suffering is part of a much larger pattern of what kinds of stories become mass media events. We take in unhealthy and even toxic information over and over again when we consume cable news and refresh our social media news feeds. That negative news bias, over time, becomes the overwhelming “signal we are sending” about the state of the world and humanity’s actions in it.

And yet there is also a huge appetite to share stories that have a more positive, hopeful orientation. When David Bornstein wrote the New York Times column *Fixes* for several years, readers consumed and widely shared his stories about difficult social problems - such as the foster care system and homelessness and preventable illnesses - because his columns also talked about creative ideas and proven solutions to address the problem. Through that key insight, the Solutions Journalism Network was born. As David explained:



News is usually about non-normal stuff. A news story is never, “The airplane landed.” It’s something unusual or destabilizing. When journalists understand that what they’re mostly reporting on are negative deviants - the worst police departments, the most corrupt companies - they understand it’s possible to look at the positive deviants as well, and cover people on the other end of the curve who are doing surprising things.

There is more room in journalism for stories that move the signal from fear, paralysis, and despair to credible, rigorous hope. We started with three people and are now a team of 50. We've worked with more than 600 news organizations around the world and trained close to 30,000 journalists. We have a database of 13,000 stories that we've gathered from partners and close to 2,000 news organizations have adapted a "Solutions Journalism approach," which we basically define as reporting that covers how people are responding to a problem and what we can learn from that. People are getting the message that we need to adjust the way we communicate with each other in this many-to-many, eight billion to eight billion world. We need to change the signal.

**Dec. 20, 2020:** "For 140 years... [The Kansas City Star] disenfranchised, ignored and scorned generations of Black Kansas Citizens ... reinforced Jim Crow laws and redlining...robbed an entire community of opportunity, dignity, justice and recognition."



Something that has shifted our work dramatically in the last couple of years is the integration of asset-framing to news coverage. Asset-framing was coined by Trabian Shorters, who founded Black Male Empowerment (BMe). The essential idea is, if you don't introduce people through the lens of what they care about, their capacity, their aspirations and only introduce them through the lens of their deficits, then you cannot help but stigmatize them.

Journalism has a long history of stigmatizing minority communities, and as an industry we are now facing this reckoning. And it's powerful to see what journalism students and newsrooms across the country are doing with an asset-framing mindset. Our broader aim is to switch the signal. There is so much adaptive resilience and hope and genuine decency and kindness. That is truly the signal that we live in. It's who we really are, at essence, yet it is largely missing from the conversation, especially when we talk about reforming systems and inviting people in to bring their love, their care, and their talent to change the world.

Then **Cynthia Rayner** presented her learnings from researching her book, **The Systems Work of Social Change**:

When we started our research five years ago, we asked questions about what are the day-to-day practices that expose and shift beliefs, values, assumptions? In other words, what are the day-to-day practices of doing the deep work of systems change? One theme that started emerging was that systems work is less about solving problems and more about allowing communities to reveal their own desires and dreams for themselves.

## Systems work principles

Aim to build responsive & representative systems

FOSTER CONNECTION



EMBRACE CONTEXT



RECONFIGURE POWER



*Responsiveness and representation - that came across clearly in every social change organization we spent time with. And we identified three principles: fostering connection, embracing context, and reconfiguring power. Again, this is about applying those principles every single day to make the system more responsive to and representative of our needs.*


*As we've been speaking to different audiences, including funders, social change organizations, and community groups, the most exciting thing for us is that system leaders are grateful to see the work they're doing put into language they can grasp. We knew it was there. We could see it. People just weren't talking about it in this way, especially in conversations with funders and policymakers in board rooms and conference rooms.*

*For us, it was really important that we put this out there as the actual work of systems change, the deeper work. Relationships are at the core of changing systems. They are the fundamental unit of change. So where that is leading me to is an exploration of collective agency.*

## Storytelling as a Practice

### To Build Collective Agency

- “Making meaning out of complexity”
- Iterational: Remembering and revisiting the past
- Practical-Evaluative: Contextualize future projects within present constraints
- Projective: Activating the imagination to “see” alternative possibilities



*With respect to the word “collective” - collectives act as containers for new relationships in communities, in organizations, even in broader movements. And they also hold complexity - not on an intellectual level, but in an emotional way. By embracing plurality and different ways of thinking, collectives can build relationships and trust and stay together through conflict. I call this “staying together while learning,” and for me this has become the mantra of systems work.*

*With respect to the word “agency” - we tend to think of agency as acting on something. In fact, agency has so many more dimensions: how we visualize the past, how we deal with habits and norms and rules, the way we look at the future and the realm of imagination. All of these things are happening all the time when we are figuring out how to act. So we can actually influence all of these things.*

-----

Building on these two interventions, CoP members then brainstormed an open-ended conversation. **Themes that emerged included:**

## **1. What if the storytelling profession (e.g. journalism) had a theory of change?**

*If we think about journalism as a non-profit, how would we describe their theory of change? Most news organizations have a mission statement something like, we spur reform through sustained spotlighting of wrongdoing. In other words, their theory of change is that the world will get better if we show people how horrible things are. That makes no sense! People feel overwhelmed by negative information, shut down, don't see other people with empathy, etc. The world will get better when we are aware of the problems and we know what to do about them.*

## **2. Framing matters**

*Framing solutions-oriented stories as “good news stories” is not compelling. People say they want that, but it doesn't compete with traditional news. When you frame it as knowledge journalism - helping people understand ideas, patterns, and insights - that's not only competitive; it actually outperforms traditional news.*

*A solutions framing still implies that we're solving a problem, which means that we're framing the world as a problem to be solved. Is there a way to approach our understanding of the world outside of problems?*

*When we move away from looking at what's wrong, we can focus on an alternative future we want to create. Inviting questions helps people raise the ceiling on their vision and their dreams. That's the energy we need to drive the conversation.*

### 3. Hacking how our brain works to flip the script

*From an evolutionary psychology perspective, story and narrative is a foundational piece of how our brains work. We've evolved to be able to work, remember, and transact in relationships, in small groups, "in" groups, and "out" groups. In other words, we think in story. The same is not true of systems. Thinking about complex systems is hard because it is hard for our brains to think in systems. In a way, telling stories about systems means taking a skill our brains are very evolved in doing - thinking in story - and using that as a way to hack the systems problem.*

*Humans are the only species that can think about the future - but we're actually really bad at it. Our brains have evolved to do what we do now relatively recently on an evolutionary scale. As we try to grasp the weight of historical events and think about the future and the gravity of so many problems we're facing, we need to recognise that this is very hard in terms of how our brains work. This is a process of evolution and learning collectively.*

*We have an ancient evolutionary bias to focus on gossip, on negativity, on the bad things that people do. It's wired into our brain development. Flipping that bias, uncovering the care and creativity and resilience in any community, requires intention. Ask around in your community: what are two or three things you've seen in the last year that give you an indication of what our community can become?*

### 4. Stories exist in the past, present, and future

*Storytelling doesn't exist in the present; it brings in the past and the future. When I think about that relative to systems, there's so much of an orientation right now in systems that does not bring in the past. People are starting to talk about history, past context, trauma that has been created. As we relate storytelling to systems, we need to be explicit about the continuity of past, present, and future.*

*We are always at a confluence of stories. We're in a place where a story is ending. We meet a story that is ending with a story that is happening now. And if we've just arrived, we are part of a story that is just beginning. In that confluence of all of those things, the present, the past, and the future live together all the time, side-by-side. How do we work with that?*

*In many cultures, the space where two rivers meet, where you have a confluence of rivers, is often a very sacred and powerful place. If we thought about our storytelling practice as being in that space where there is a confluence of stories, what does that mean for the work we do? What does that mean for how we engage? What does that mean for how we listen?*



## 5. Storytelling as collective agency

*What kinds of stories create collective agency? The way you tell a story creates the capacity for conversation or inhibits it. Traditional journalism, by virtue of its reductive, binary, conflict-oriented narrative structure, often inhibits it. Stories that are invitational, on the other hand, can create the relational container for collectives. Many times, I have seen the outcome of a story be a space, a container for relationships. We desperately need stories that help us see into each other's hearts.*