

The Narrative Collaboratory: A New Era For Citizen Power

At the Narrative Collaboratory, we proceed from the premise that in American life today the dominant overarching narrative says that the system is so broken and the game so rigged that there is no point in participating in democracy. Our goal is to displace that narrative. The Narrative Collaboratory is entering its second year during a time in our country that calls for renewed commitment to civic engagement at every level. As we enter the next phase, our methodology is evolving. We are creating a mutual-aid society for narrative innovators. The primary format will be a “rotating credit club”, where select group members present a project or problem they’re working on, and the rest of the Collaboratory makes commitments to help, and offers ideas. As we go through this process, we are reflecting on past efforts, taking stock of our role during this critical civic moment, analyzing lessons learned, and looking ahead to an exciting new phase of work.

REFLECTING

During its first year, the Narrative Collaboratory was run out of the Pluribus Project. The Pluribus Project Narrative Collaboratory was a platform for generating and propagating new narratives of citizen voice and efficacy, coupled with the tools of power and action that others can use. Our method was to support experiments in narrative-making that can add up to a counter-narrative of citizen power, along with the tools for exercising such power.

Our efforts began by gathering extraordinary practitioners and thinkers to refine and revise a proposed strategy for generating new narratives of citizen power in the United States, and to develop specific ideas for new narrative ventures.

Based on what we learned, we issued an open call for proposals that creatively and effectively spread narratives of citizen power, and received more than 230 proposals in response. After extensive consultation and analysis, we supported [eight projects](#) with grants to each in the amount of \$25,000.

Our diverse range of partners included traditional media companies, artists and art advocates, grassroots organizers, and more. Projects ranged from video stories, action guides, local campaigns, student challenges, audience-engagement programming, and beyond.

For example, the Futuro Media Group won seed funding to produce videos in their “Humanizing America” series, which deconstructs stereotypes by presenting the human stories behind the American electorate. One episode featured tribal-rights attorney Tara Houska, part of a grassroots-resistance movement protesting the construction of the Dakota Access oil pipeline. The videos exceeded projections by garnering over 215,000 views with no advertising, and were shared over 8,000 times.

The Public Theater won seed funding for *Sweat*, a play by Lynn Nottage that tells the story of a city that has fallen victim to the “de-industrial revolution,” and a corresponding audience engagement program that inspires action. Lynn Nottage has since won a Pulitzer Prize for this play, which was picked up by Broadway. Over 14,000 people saw the production of *Sweat* at The Public Theater, and approximately 20,000 people participated in in-person engagement programming. The Public Theater’s digital audience expanded beyond their immediate following to 230,000 onlookers who saw and engaged in *Sweat* information, coverage, and media. In February 2017, there had been over 208,000 interactions with *Sweat* content on Facebook alone. In addition, there were 23,100 organic impressions of *Sweat* content on Twitter.

Upworthy won seed funding for a series of highly shareable multimedia stories to address both the need for civic engagement beyond voting, and the insufficient understanding of US history—and to connect audience members to action. In this series they featured the story of “Little Miss Flint”, 9-year-old community activist Mari Copeny, who entered the national spotlight after meeting President Obama. This story alone achieved over 812,000 online impressions, and together the story series climbed past 5,380,000 impressions.

The Narrative Collaboratory also developed partnerships to support creative ventures that generate narratives of citizen power and accompanying tools. We partnered with Starbucks on *Upstanders*, an original collection of short stories, films, and podcasts sharing the experiences of ordinary people doing extraordinary things to create positive change in their communities. This storytelling initiative reached over 80 million people.

Together, our grantees and partners generated and shared powerful stories, which collectively work to create a larger narrative of civic empowerment and to inspire citizen action.

TAKING STOCK

The Narrative Collaboratory was designed to be an experiment. We set out to find out whether and how ventures in narrative-making can impact public perception and practice. As the first year of the Narrative Collaboratory wound down, the United States was in the midst of the 2016 election and its immediate aftermath. Then, and still today, a disheartening narrative discouraging involvement in civic life rang loud and clear. We were left with the question: are we doing enough?

We have carefully examined whether acting as facilitators of numerous small ventures is the best use of our expertise. We strongly believe that these ventures are critical to countering a dominant and dangerous narrative in our society that tells Americans it is pointless to participate in civic life because the game is rigged and their voices just don’t matter. However, we believe that we are well-suited to engage in another format, particularly in this post-election climate and so-called “post-fact era.”

We have decided that in our future work we will focus less on incubating specific experiments and more on forcing national conversation on the issue of “common narratives” and the possibility or difficulty of sustaining them.

Though the first year projects engaged an impressive amount of individuals around the country, the reality is that a reach even ten times as large would not alone change the dynamic. In our next phase, our work will not focus on volume. Instead, we will focus on finding the pressure points in the system. This is why we are creating a format that will allow us to bring innovative narrative-makers together in order to support each other and collaborate in ways that can scale sideways.

LEARNING

Learning from the first year with our grantees and partners has directly informed our decision-making. Major themes and ideas, related to generating stories of civic empowerment, spreading them, and using them as effective tools for engagement, arose.

In terms of crafting effective narratives of citizen power, the importance of relationships, trust, and dignity were reinforced. The reality is that many Americans in communities across the country are finding ways to come together and create real change. They may be a minority but they are not uncommon and they are still noticeably absent from the mainstream conversation. Getting these individuals to uncover their own story of citizen power, and then to share it, takes time and intention. Often, these individuals and their stories break stereotypes and cross dividing lines. Narrative innovators should seek these stories. They should meet these actors locally and face-to-face. These actors should be invited to share their stories as full participants and decision-makers, not just subjects. Finally, stories should feature individuals with a diverse range of backgrounds and experience, not just usual suspects or well-known professionals. This effort will help to restore trust in the relationship between narrative-makers and community members.

Once these stories are collected, they should be shared with a broad audience by narrative innovators. This requires that storytellers have the skills to break through the noise of massive amounts of news. Readers are more likely to engage with a story when they can relate to it. By representing individuals from a range of backgrounds and experiences in stories, narrative-makers can create more relatable stories. In addition, when the audience is introduced to the featured individuals, these individuals become humanized. Intersectionality of issues and experiences is fostered. Large issues and movements become tied to real people with relatable experiences. In this way, sharing stories creates an opportunity for unlikely actors to come together. As many narrative innovators share these stories, a new national narrative of civic empowerment is created.

Once an audience has been introduced to a narrative of civic empowerment, they have been primed to make the transition from an interested observer to a powerful actor. Narrative innovators should activate this group by harnessing their interest and preparedness, leading to greater participation in civic life. The audience should be presented with a concrete way to act, and narrative-makers should be trained to highlight these action steps.

LOOKING AHEAD

During the next phase of the Narrative Collaboratory, we will offer a mutual-aid society for narrative innovators. The Narrative Collaboratory is a national network of innovators creating new narratives of citizen power from across the political spectrum. Members include leaders from our existing partner organizations, and invitations will be extended to a wider network. We are building a mutual-aid system for these innovators in civic storytelling and organizing, and will incubate new projects and partnerships.

Our primary format will be a “rotating credit club”, where a few members of the group individually present a project or problem they’re working on, and the rest of the Collaboratory makes commitments of help and offers ideas. Occasionally, we will also work together towards a common goal, like creating a relevant toolkit for our own use and to share.

We intend to act as conveners in order to build bridges across diverse communities of narrative innovators. Acting together, we will be best equipped to confront the challenges and opportunities associated with creating narratives of civic empowerment.

In this new phase, we will continue our narrative work under the Aspen Institute's Citizenship and American Identity Program, separately from the Pluribus Project.

We are grateful for the work and input of our year-one grantees and partners, which helped us to develop the Narrative Collaboratory's new methodology. When we created the Narrative Collaboratory it was with long-term intention and a hope that we would eventually transition to this format.



The **Citizenship & American Identity** program focuses on the challenge of sustaining strong citizenship in America and coherent national identity in an age of demographic flux and severe inequality.

www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/citizenship-and-american-identity-program