# Storytelling
## for Social Change

A Message Brief

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Stories can be powerful in shaping how audiences think about social issues, and the role of public policy in affecting them. Stories can make complex and abstract problems visible in our mind's eye. They help audiences imagine how we "got here" on an issue, and to envision the range of solutions we have before us as individuals, as communities, and as a society. Importantly, stories also can call us all to action. But, like all forms of communication, stories and other tools must be considered relative to the broader policy context, public information environment, communication goals, and messaging strategy.

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In this message brief, we propose a set of considerations for a particular type of story, policy narratives, of the type often developed to support advocacy efforts. We also share what we found in two related studies exploring the effectiveness of narratives in support of early childcare policy. We engaged two audiences key to the policy dynamic: members of the general public and state legislators. Our findings reveal both strengths and cautions in this common approach. And, as we will describe, one communication tool does not always "fit all."

## The Power of Narrative

The literature on storytelling for social change tells us that an effective policy story, or "narrative," helps audiences imagine an issue, as well as how, when, and why it occurs.[1,2,3] It can also help people more fully consider the causes of and solutions for public problems,[4] and emotionally transport them into the conditions described so that those not already affected may have a felt sense of the problem.[5,6] By being able to envision the contexts in which societal-level problems develop and imagine oneself in the situations described, audiences also can consider the potential benefits and effects of proposed solutions, such as policy. As such, stories can serve as useful models for considering the urgency, mechanisms, and promise of policy solutions for specific problems, in ways that data and evidence, alone, cannot.

We need to tell the story of

*solutions.*

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that a common refrain in public policy work is that to engage audiences in the urgency, complexity, and importance of a problem, we must *tell the story of the problem*. More importantly from a policy perspective, however, we need to *tell the story of* ***solutions***. Through story we can illustrate and invite audiences to envision how the policy under consideration will change conditions and the lived experience of the problem for members of our communities. And importantly: stories also can convey just how we all can contribute to the solution.

Thus, stories can provide mental short cuts to understanding complex and sometimes abstract chains of events and causal factors. One might say "a (mental) picture is worth 1000 words." At the same time, and as our research findings illustrate, stories are not in and of themselves reliable strategies. If narratives are mismatched with audience and context they can, in fact, challenge the very outcome you seek to advance. In the sections below, we provide considerations — and cautions — to help communicators determine how best to proceed in this work.

## What's in a Story?

There are many literary criteria for what constitutes a "story." At essence a story is a message that describes:

- *Somebody, somewhere* (*community members; us*)
- For *some reason* (*shared value(s) reflected in the current problem*)
- Did *something* — in the case of a policy story, this might be something that illustrates need for, or which advances, implements, or hinders policy (*action*)
- With *some outcome* (*group benefit*)
- ... and *here's what you need to know* about it (the *"point"*)

A feature to note in the formula above is that policy stories are rooted in shared *values*.[7] Values are our deeply held beliefs about why something is good, bad, right or wrong, and are commonly shared across societies and social groups – even if the ways those values are ascribed to specific issues differs.[8,9,10] It is by tapping into what members of a society or community agree matters that makes a story resonate. As celebrated community organizer, policy advocate, and scholar of public stories, Marshall Ganz, explains:

> "Narrative allows us to communicate the values that motivate the choices that we make. Narrative is not talking 'about' values; rather narrative embodies and communicates values. And it is through the shared experience of our values that we can engage with others, motivate one another to act, and find the courage to take risks, explore possibility and face the challenges we must face."[11]

In other words, Ganz tells us that while data answers the what question, stories answer the "why question."[12]

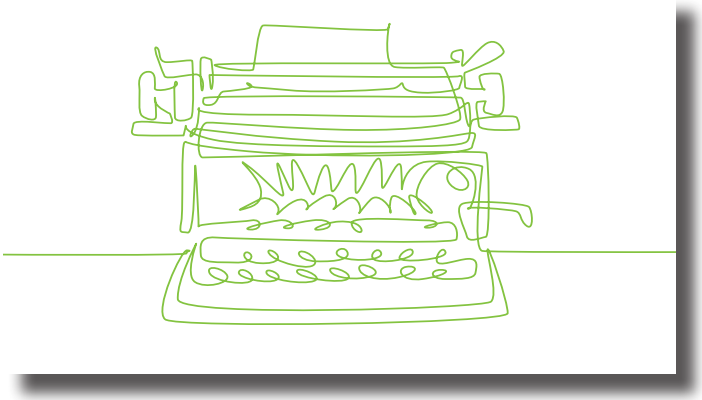
Arguably, the central value underlying strategies to address the uneven distribution of benefits and resources in society is *equity*. We borrow from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and colleagues in defining equity as everyone in society *getting what they need* to be healthy, succeed, and thrive, irrespective of who they are and where they live.[13] This means more effort will be required to ensure some groups receive a given benefit or resource, if that is what is needed to overcome roadblocks in their paths. Equity is notably different than *equality*, which requires that everyone in society would *get the same benefits and access*, irrespective of differing levels of need and uneven starting points.

*equity (n.):*

everyone in society ***getting what they need*** to be healthy, succeed, and thrive, irrespective of who they are and where they live[13]

Despite its centrality in the problems we experience, equity can be a challenging concept to convey in messaging. To fully process the idea of inequity in a policy context, audiences must be able to recognize and understand the roles of society's historical and current decision-making in creating the problem, the effects of direct and indirect chains of events that often span decades (or longer), how deeply entrenched social systems create disadvantage for entire groups, and that all of these, taken together, create roadblocks that prevent communities' access to benefits and resources that we all agree members of our society should have. Further, to address problems through policy, audiences must then see their own roles in resolving these problems, such as through how they vote, what initiatives they support, and what they ask their lawmakers and community leaders to pursue. Stories can help make these elements more concrete, and can highlight for audiences how and when we can make different choices and determine new outcomes. So, where to begin? As always in communication, it begins with strategy.

## Starting Point: Planning Your Strategy



Before planning a story, it is important to specify your overall communication goals and clarify the contexts into which you will be entering.[14] These include:

- Specifying what you are trying to convey, and why: What are your overall policy goals? How, specifically, does your communication strategy serve those policy goals? Who needs to act, how, and when, for your solution to get the consideration it needs?

- Identifying your solution: What solutions do you need your audiences to consider? What is essential that audiences understand to get to the next stage of consideration?

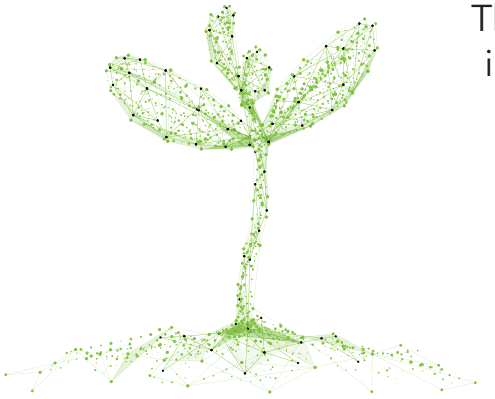
- Understanding your audiences and contexts: Which audiences, specifically, are you trying to reach, and what do you need each to take away from your message? What are your audiences' likely initial beliefs about the issue, and what elements will they need to consider at this stage? In what contexts will the policy decision be made, and how do those conditions affect the points you need to make?

- Itemizing the communication "work" you need the story to perform: What elements of your message may be best illustrated through a story to enhance key understanding and audience engagement in the issue?

Given these answers (and any others that underlie your intent for communicating about this policy at this time), now you can decide: which story, from among the many you *could tell* about this issue, is the *one to best support audience understanding of the proposed policy solution*? With these decisions made, you can begin to prepare your message.

## Building a Story

The idea of writing a story can seem daunting. And yet, we all tell stories about our experiences, or the conditions and happenings we have observed, each and every day. When tapping into our natural story-telling abilities in our policy work, it is important to select elements that illustrate what audiences will need to consider to take their thinking about this issue to the next stage.



This includes clearly linking the people represented in the story, the actions, and potential outcomes to relevant current and historical contexts. All too often, narratives will describe the circumstances and actions of specific individuals without explaining how their societal contexts have come to be and created the conditions they are experiencing. This leaves it to audiences to "connect the dots" on their own and determine how the proposed policy solution fits. Many people will connect the dots differently than you intended. Contextual stories draw those connections, so that the conditions requiring policy solutions are clear.

Some elements to consider in telling contextual policy stories:

The contours of the narrative: *what* happened (or is happening), to *whom* (which groups), *why* did it happen (what are the societal contexts that created or reinforced this situation), what is or would be the predicted *outcome with the solution enacted*, and *why is this important to who we are as a society* (i.e., why does this "matter" to all of us)?

Illustration of uneven "starting points" in this problem (the equity lens): Paint the picture through your narrative of how it is that some members of our community – or even entire communities – have been left behind on this issue, that these differences were not inevitable, and instead were created through societal-level decisions past and present. Describe the contextual barriers and hurdles that will be addressed through the policy and shared action.

Solution(s) to be considered: Identify the policy solution being proposed, clearly describe what it will do, specify who needs to act for that solution to come to fruition, indicate how it will remedy the contexts giving rise to the problem, and illustrate what will equitable outcomes will include.

Illustrate the benefits to be realized through the policy solution: Describe what broad, societal-level outcomes communities may expect to see as a result of the solution. Think beyond the details of program implementation to describe how the lived experience of this issue will be different and improved for groups in our society, and illustrate what it means for the broader community that members prioritized and addressed those affected by the problem.

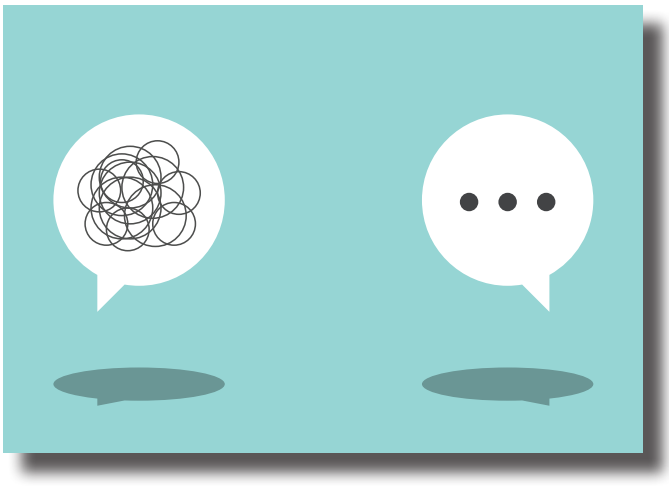
Shared responsibility: Problems addressed by public policy often are experienced by some members of society more than others, notably communities of color, people new to our country, our older neighbors, and other groups who are routinely marginalized. In telling this story, it is important to remind us all that the problem the policy is addressing matters to *everyone* in that our action or inaction defines the kinds of communities or society we are. Remind us that *we all must step up* to ensure that our fundamental societal systems – including housing, health, environmental protections, education, and economic opportunity (among others) – serve everyone, and are not leaving any groups behind. Depending on how the story will be used, communicators can help call audiences to issues through language that points to our *shared roles and responsibilities* in solving problems, as well as by showing how we all will benefit, together, when everyone has the chance to fully engage in society. For example, in a direct appeal, testimony, or opinion piece, your story could speak to



"our community," "our city," and "our state," and call upon "our participation," "us," and "we." In a news story, collective language like "local communities," "the state of…," or "Americans" helps cue us to think about our parts to play in the solution, while also calling each of us to action.

Provide a "visual" representation of data (in moderation): As described further below, overreliance on data or evidence can be a communication pitfall. However, using some evidence can be helpful if presented in ways that support your core values-based argument and with context that helps audiences interpret the data presented. First, choose only the most illustrative data and then use tools of comparison to help audiences understand whether the numbers are evidence of the problem being big or small or changing or not, by placing the data in familiar contexts and/or relating to other phenomena commonly understood and experienced.[15] For example, saying "this is the equivalent of …" another familiar outcome can help audiences imagine and interpret the evidence you are providing, so they may relate it to the argument you are making on behalf of the policy solution.

Some elements to watch out for:



Jargon: All fields have their own form of professional shorthand. These are words or terms that have specialized meaning and that are useful in ensuring precision in the work and that all involved are on the same page. To those outside the field, however, that specific meaning can be lost. The risk of using such vocabulary is that the terms can lead audiences to misinterpret – or completely miss – the meaning of the message being conveyed. [Think of a technical field other than your own and what it is like to be on the

receiving end of a message filled with words you typically use in other ways – or not at all!] Vocabulary that has different specialized meaning across multiple fields can be particularly problematic, as it is difficult to know which meaning is in audience members' minds as they interpret your messages. Rather than run that risk, move away from such professional shorthand and instead *describe* what has occurred and needs to happen.[16] If it is important to your goals for audiences to engage with the specialized term, describe what it means and then introduce the language.This may require you to add words and provide lengthier descriptions than you might otherwise. Consider it an investment in audience engagement, so those with whom you are communicating can consider *what you are saying* and not get caught on *how you are saying it*.

For example, in writing about equity-based policies and planning for equitable outcomes, it is not uncommon for advocates and others to use the word "equity" without describing what that means in the context of the work they are presenting. The challenge is that "equity" has meaning in multiple fields (think about home "equity" or stock "equity," for example). Even within social and health policy, advocates do not always mean precisely the same things when they use the term. To assure audiences are all on the same page, describe what the equitable policy and outcomes look like: whom do they involve and what do they include? What is necessary to be "equitable"? Paint the picture so that you don't run the risk that audiences are not fully envisioning what you are proposing.

Individualized stories without context: The risk of stories that discuss individuals without placing them in their broader contexts and causal conditions – particularly those describing the socially and historically complex issues that health and social policies work to address – is that audiences will have a harder time seeing causal connections and fully considering the solutions we have before us. This means we run the risk of not engaging audiences in the solutions we are communicating. We also run the risk that audiences, not having this broader causal context, will cognitively blame those portrayed in the narrative for their own fates, which does not help those affected.[4] Contextual stories that show how specific societal conditions are responsible for creating such problems can help make those causal associations clear and the range of solutions more evident.



Overuse of data: The temptation in fields supported by extensive research is to rely on data and evidence to do the work of conveying the importance of an issue. Data are important, but they are not persuasive if the core message misses audiences' values concerns, and without the larger context and explanation – in other words, rarely do data truly "speak for themselves." Use data and evidence only as they directly support the goals, audiences, and contexts specified above, and do so in ways (as described earlier) that provide familiar comparison so audiences may consider what they mean to the issue. Remember that the "for some reason" part of a narrative is about *shared values*; data only play a supporting role to that core argument.

Incidental story details that invite judgment or misinterpretation: In building a narrative, communicators sometimes include background details about the interests, behavior, and values of those involved,

that may have nothing to do with policy issue at hand. Instead, they are offered to help "personalize" the story. The risk is that audiences may interpret these incidental character details as something relevant and try to weave them into their understanding of the narrative. For example, Jeff Neiderdeppe once conducted a study about social factors that shape childhood obesity. In describing a family, the story mentioned that the child liked to play video games and that his favorite game was "Doom." All audiences tested with this story interpreted this incidental detail as an indictment of the parents ("how could they let him play a first-person shooter game? They are bad parents!"), and the child's struggle with obesity in the story was seen as the fault of bad parenting and not the larger social forces the story aimed to highlight.[3] These findings point to the importance of both avoiding extraneous detail that could distract from the main messages, and pre-testing – if only informally – your draft narrative with members of the target audience, to make sure that you have assembled a story that makes the point you are intending to make.

*Make sure you have assembled a story that makes the point you are intending to make.*

These tips are intended to help you develop a narrative on your issue that helps connect the societal problem you are addressing to your policy solution. But, is this always an effective approach with all audiences? Does telling the story of an issue always help encourage policy support? We asked this question in the fall of 2019 in two separate but related studies. What we found surprised us, and highlights both strengths and cautions in this common advocacy approach.

## Telling the Story of Early Childcare: what we explored and what we found

We wanted to know whether a contextual policy narrative – one that pointed to inequities in society that prevent many families from accessing high-quality, affordable childcare for their youngest children – was more or less likely than either a standard non-narrative policy appeal or no message at all to encourage support for state-level early childcare policies among two audiences: the general public, and state legislators.[17,18] In the fall of 2019 we launched both studies: first, with the general public, drawing from an online survey panel and including 4,363 participants; and second, shortly thereafter, inviting all legislators in the National Conference of State Legislators database, ultimately resulting in 623 participants. Participants in both online survey studies were randomly assigned to a message or the non-message control condition, asked a series of questions prior to reading the message to assess beliefs and relative levels of support for the policies discussed, and then asked a series of questions after having read the message, to see whether and how beliefs and policy support may have shifted. Participants in the control condition were asked both sets of questions without also reading a message.

# Study 1: 4,363 members of the general public

# Study 2: 623 State Legislators

Those in the group assigned to read the narrative message were provided the following, which was crafted in the form of a news story using the principles described above and including third-person collective language (e.g., "parents and families nationwide"), as is the style in news reporting. Key features from these principles are annotated, to highlight how they were integrated into the story, shown on the next few pages.[19]

# Storytelling for Social Change

Alisha and Jason are parents of two young children and have to navigate ***an increasingly common challenge*** — trying to access child care for their children while both parents work to support the family.

Collective language

Alisha and Jason first started looking for child care following the birth of their second child, so that Alisha could return to work. It is clear that even with Jason working, Alisha also needs to work so the family can stay financially afloat. They explored the child care options ***in their community***, visiting the sites and speaking with the staff, but they were surprised to find there were no good options for their family. Alisha and Jason want to assure that they have chosen child care provided by qualified professionals, who will be able to provide enriching, safe, nurturing environments for their children while they are at work. Unfortunately, they found out that the hours were incompatible with their work schedules, and even worse, the available child care facilities that featured highly qualified and well-trained professionals were too expensive for Alisha and Jason to afford.

Collective language

Alisha and Jason are not alone. ***Parents and families nationwide*** recognize the challenge of finding enriching, safe, and high-quality care for their children that also doesn't break the family bank. Like Alisha and Jason, ***many parents*** must work full or part-time to meet the rising expenses of daily life. Some parents even have to make difficult choices between paying for child care and paying for other family necessities. ***In most states across the country, the annual cost of infant care is more than tuition at four-year public colleges.*** The high cost of quality child care, for ***many young families***, is insurmountable.

Collective language

Collective language

Visual data

Collective language

*All children, regardless of how much money their parents make, deserve a strong start and the opportunity to participate in engaging and stimulating social and learning environments. When these early learning experiences are lacking, children can start school behind their peers* – a gap that is hard to make-up later.

Equity appeal

With time running out to find a viable child care option for their children, Alisha and Jason's frustration grew. Fortunately, they found help for their two kids when *their city* passed a *policy that provided funding to subsidize the cost of child care for parents and families. This made quality child care accessible* so that Alisha and Jason could go to work with peace of mind, knowing that their children were in a safe and enriching environment. The *new city program* also *provided tax credits for child care centers, which allowed those centers to provide local child care professionals with a living wage, and to offer them additional training to provide nurturing, safe, and stimulating environments for children with a range of needs.*

Collective language

Policy solution

Collective language

Policy solution

*With help from this policy*, Alisha and Jason were finally able to find safe, quality child care at an affordable price. As a result, both Alisha and Jason were able to return to work with the confidence that their children were in good hands during the day, and getting a strong start in life. *When child care is of high quality and available to every child, the positive effects can endure into the early adult years - particularly for children whose families have the fewest financial resources*. *And the city stands to benefit too, as investments*

Policy solution

Equity appeal

Collective language

*in child care also support businesses and the local economy*. *Studies show that for every $1 invested in early learning initiatives, over $8 of value is returned to the broader community as a benefit.*

Collective language continued

Visual data

*We can all agree* that parents play a vital role in raising happy and healthy children. ***States and communities*** *can support them with policies that ensure everyone has access to the quality child care they need. Offsetting the costs of child care for hardworking families, increasing the number of affordable high-quality child care facilities no matter where families live, and providing necessary training and a living wage for the professionals who fulfill this important role* would go a long way toward improving the life of *American kids and families*.

Collective language

Collective language

Policy solution

Equity appeal

Policy solution

Collective language

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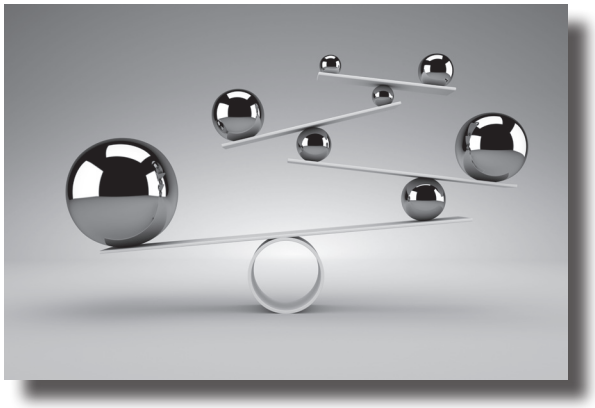
So, what did we find? In our first study, members of the general public were more likely to support the policies discussed after having read the narrative message, irrespective of self-identified political ideology or political party. And importantly, the increases in policy support were strongest among those who had initially been most opposed to these policy proposals. Thus, consistent with recommendations to include narratives in policy appeals, our findings suggest that the story helped these audiences see something in this issue that they had not been considering at the outset.

Our state legislator audiences, however, revealed a more complex picture: those in our sample who were initially most supportive of the early childcare policies remained supportive after reading the narrative message. This suggests that the narrative reinforced their initial beliefs. Unlike in our study of general public respondents, however, those state legislators most initially opposed to the

policies were slightly more opposed to the policies after reading the narrative message. Moreover, this pattern fell along lines of political ideology: those who identified as Democrats or moderates began and remained most supportive (Democrats even more so than moderates)[20], and those identifying as Republicans began and remained most opposed after having read the message.

*But wait* (we hear you asking): *aren't stories supposed to be effective in garnering policy support?* Yes, we found they both were – and they weren't – depending on the audience. This is where the intersection of goals and strategies factors in.

As we said at the outset, it is important to recognize that in any communication context, one tool or technique is unlikely to "fit all." While both general public audiences and state legislators must assess whether an issue is urgent and important, state legislators must do so while also considering ideas in the contexts of practical tradeoffs, implementation needs, and political and social histories: in other words, they need to determine whether and how a new initiative might "work" relative to what they understand to be available resources and other existing priorities. The legislative environment also is transactional, meaning initiatives and actions are considered in relation to one another. Legislators also must consider what their constituencies want and will support and must integrate those perspectives into their thinking. And, they often have prior experience with issues and legislative track records on similar or related policy proposals that factor into their thinking.



General public audiences, by contrast, often are considering issues from the lens of their own lived experiences, as well as those they can envision. They are evaluating what the policy outcome would mean both to them, and broadly, to the type of society they want

to see. They do not, however, need to determine how a specific proposal would fit into the larger canon of existing polices, nor the details of how it will be funded.

So, are these contextual differences precisely what led to the differences in outcome across these two studies? Unfortunately, we cannot know. And, of course, each individual's considerations of a message are unique and personal. What we can see is that we had one story with two very different audience groups (and accompanying contexts), assessed in overlapping intervals of time, and yet with outcomes that differed greatly. So, what does this work tell us?

It suggests that as we plan our communications strategies, we must:

- Know our goals, audience, issue history, and contexts. Each situation differs, and messages must be tailored to that environment
- Recognize that there is no one "right strategy" that will reliably be effective with all audiences.
- Adjust messaging strategy to best serve our overall goals and policy strategy. For example, if working to advance the early childcare policy proposals, above, communicators might focus on first reaching the broader public audiences and constituencies who can, in turn, convey to their state legislators their support for this issue.

Telling stories can help us to convey shared values and shared responsibilities. Stories can also invite audiences to think differently about issues, although they may not be able to overcome context or deeply entrenched attitudes or identities. Our research reinforces that while storytelling has a strong evidence base in the communication literature, there are no uniform answers, nor guarantees of success. Storytelling must be evaluated as part of the overall policy advocacy strategy, and tailored to where specific audiences are on the issue at that time.

## Funding & Other Disclosures

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## Human Subjects & Preregistration

This research was deemed exempt by the Institutional Review Boards at both sponsoring universities (Cornell University and Portland State University). All respondents provided electronic informed consent prior to participation. Details are available from the Cornell University Institutional Review Board for Human Participants. The preregistered full study instrument, including message prompts and survey items, are presented on the OSF website (https://osf.io/mg4zk/?view_only=9aa62661343b4f629979a5160ed1fe04).

## Endnotes

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*Power, and Change* (Week 2, p. 17). Downloaded from https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/ganzorganizing/files/what_is_public_narrative.pdf.

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14 Wallack, L., Woodruff, K., Dorfman, L., & Diaz, I. (1999). *News for a change: an advocate's guide to working with the media*. Sage.

15 Berkeley Media Studies Group calls this practice "social math." See, for example, http://www.bmsg.org/blog/using-social-math-to-support-your-policy-issue/.

16 An exception would be if that professional/technical word or term is important for audiences to know, as for example if that language is to appear in an upcoming ballot initiative or other public decision on which they need to act. If that is the case, paint the picture first to illustrate what is happening, and then introduce the term that people need to know.

17 Niederdeppe, J., Winett, L. B., Xu, Y., Fowler, E. F., & Gollust, S. E. (2021). Evidence-Based Message Strategies to Increase Public Support for State Investment in Early Childhood Education: Results from a Longitudinal Panel Experiment. *The Milbank Quarterly*. [Note: in this study we also explored a fourth type of message, an "inoculation message," intended to help build preemptive resistance against an anti-policy message. Because this was not also part of the state legislator study, we are not discussing that approach here.]

18 Winett, L. B., Niederdeppe, J., Xu, Y., Gollust, S. E., & Fowler, E. F. (2021). When "Tried and True" Advocacy Strategies Backfire: Narrative Messages Can Undermine State Legislator Support for Early Childcare Policies. *The Journal of Public Interest Communications*, 5(1), 45-45.

19 All messages used in both studies can be located through

these two open-access research articles.

20 Fiscal moderates' initial policy support and post-message responses both were greater than that of social moderates.