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MEDIA ACTION PLAN

From Mapping Narratives to Responding to Harmful Narratives

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INTRODUCTION

Public debates are often shaped by dominant narratives. These narratives influence how audiences understand reality, who is seen as responsible for certain issues, and whose voices are heard or ignored. In many contexts, harmful narratives about marginalised and oppressed communities circulate widely through political discourse, social media, and traditional media, reinforcing stereotypes, misinformation, and hate speech.

For journalists and media professionals, recognising and critically examining these narratives is an important step toward more responsible reporting. Mapping dominant narratives allows media actors to identify how certain stories are framed, who is represented and how, and what assumptions are being reproduced. This process also helps reveal the underlying messages that shape public opinion.
This Media Action Plan: From Mapping Narratives to Responding to Harmful Narratives provides a practical framework to help journalists and media workers identify dominant narratives in media coverage and public discourse, assess their potential impact, and develop strategic responses. Through the use of counter-narratives, which directly challenge harmful claims with facts and arguments, and alternative narratives, which offer new perspectives and frameworks for understanding social issues, media professionals can contribute to more fair and responsible reporting.

This action plan was developed within the Protecting At-Risk Activists from Threats and Attacks (PARATA: Grant Agreement 101214634) project, which aims to strengthen the resilience of civil society organisations (CSOs) and human rights defenders (HRDs) in Europe facing threats and politically motivated attempts to restrict the freedoms of assembly, association, and expression. By supporting learning, collaboration, and strategic communication, PARATA seeks to protect civic space and amplify the voices of groups that are often targeted by harmful narratives - including climate activists, migrant rights advocates, and LGBTQIA+ communities. It also addresses the intersectional dimensions of shrinking civic space by generating tailored solutions to protect diverse groups.

The project is implemented by a consortium of eight partners who leverage their national and regional networks to maximise reach and impact. This includes six CSOs from Germany (Green Legal Impact Germany e.V.), Hungary (SZUBJEKTIV ERTEKEK ALAPITVANY), Italy (ARCI APS), Portugal (Associação Academia Cidadã – AAC), Belgium (MEDIA DIVERSITY INSTITUTE GLOBAL) and Spain (ASSOCIACIO NOVACT), as well as two pan-European alliances, the European Civic Forum and Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe.

In this Media Action Plan: From Mapping Narratives to Responding to Harmful Narratives, you will identify dominant narratives and learn how to develop targeted alternative and counter-narratives tailored to different audiences.

READERS GUIDE

Chapter 1: Key Terminology

This chapter explains terms and concepts used throughout the document, including "narrative", "dominant narratives", "hateful narratives" and "hate speech". Understanding these definitions will help readers navigate the document and apply its guidance consistently.

Chapter 2: Dominant Narratives about Feminist and LGBTQIA+ Movements

Here, readers will explore the most common harmful narratives that target feminist and LGBTQIA+ communities. The chapter highlights stereotypes, misrepresentations, and recurring patterns in media coverage and public discourse, providing a foundation for designing effective alternative and counter-narratives.

Chapter 3: Dominant Narratives on Migration

This chapter focuses on how migration is portrayed in mainstream media and public debates. By analysing these narratives, journalists can better understand the assumptions and biases that influence public opinion and prepare targeted responses.

Chapter 4: Dominant Narratives about Climate Defenders

This section examines the narratives surrounding climate activists and environmental movements. It identifies common tropes and misrepresentations in media coverage, offering insights into the ways harmful narratives undermine advocacy and shape public perception.

Chapter 5: Developing Counter- and Alternative Narratives

The final chapter provides practical guidance on creating counter-narratives and alternative narratives. It offers strategies for addressing specific audiences, using facts and storytelling effectively, and reframing harmful narratives to amplify marginalised voices and promote inclusive public discourse.

CHAPTER 1: KEY TERMINOLOGY

A narrative is more than just a single message. It's a story about how the world works, and it gives a meaning to events, defines who is "us" and who is "them", and tells us who is to blame, who is a victim, and who is a hero. When certain ideas are repeated over and over again - in media, politics, social media, everyday conversations - they become dominant narratives. When dominant narratives are presented as the only "right" perspective, these can fuel hate, division, and even violence against targeted groups.

Narratives are shared beliefs and interpretations of events that shape how communities understand reality. They weave individual stories and isolated incidents into a larger, collective tale about our identity, values, and the forces at play in the world. For instance, a narrative framing economic struggles as the fault of "outsiders" can dehumanise immigrants, turning them into scapegoats while rallying "us" against "them".

A hateful narrative is a simplified, emotionally manipulative story that dehumanises or vilifies a specific group, portraying them as threats, inferiors, or enemies responsible for society's problems. They thrive because they distill complex realities into simple, emotionally charged stories that tap into our deepest fears, biases, and cognitive shortcuts. Cognitive shortcuts are unconscious mental strategies that help people make decisions and solve problems more quickly by simplifying complex information. They allow the brain to save energy by relying on fast, intuitive judgments instead of detailed analysis. Rather than overwhelming us with nuance, they offer quick explanations.

Research consistently shows that facts and data alone rarely change minds. Without an emotional or social hook, statistics fall flat; people need narratives that resonate with their identity, values, or gut feelings. In fact, emotional appeal often trumps evidence entirely, and a powerful story can override contradictory facts, as seen in how misinformation spreads virally on social media. Studies in political psychology highlight fear, hope, and anger as the core emotions driving mobilisation.

Within these narratives, fear warns of threats and prompts defence; hope paints a vision of a better future; anger demands justice for perceived wrongs. Politicians and propagandists wield these emotions like tools, crafting stories that move people far more effectively than dry policy debates ever could.

The Council of Europe defines hate speech as all types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or status such as “race”, colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation.

CHAPTER 2 : DOMINANT NARRATIVES ABOUT FEMINIST AND LGBTQIA+ MOVEMENTS

Media coverage of feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements often reflects systemic patterns that distort public understanding and reinforce harmful stereotypes. Certain narratives are repeatedly amplified, creating misleading or exaggerated impressions of these communities and their activism. These narratives can provoke moral panic, shift attention from systemic inequalities, trivialise or ridicule legitimate advocacy, present discriminatory views as equally valid, or frame human rights as foreign impositions threatening local values.

In this chapter, we explore the most common harmful narratives, including: moral panic around "saving women and children", claims that men are the true victims of social change, trivialisation and ridicule of activists, false balance in reporting human rights issues, and the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ rights as "Western imports" or external threats. By identifying and understanding these narratives, journalists and media workers can more effectively challenge misrepresentations, provide accurate context, and amplify the voices and perspectives of marginalised and oppressed communities.

Moral Panic: "Saving Women and Children First"

Certain media narratives amplify alarming claims to evoke public fear and outrage. Examples include assertions that schools indoctrinate or sexualise children through curricula, or that trans women endanger cisgender women in safe spaces, all framed as threats to traditional families.
These stories rely on distortion and exaggeration - hallmarks of moral panic. In reality, educational policies prioritise age-appropriate content and inclusion for safety, while research confirms gender diversity poses no threat to societal stability or families.

The "Men Are the Real Victims" Narrative

This narrative flips the script, portraying men or "traditional values" as society's true victims. Common tropes: "Men suffer most today", "Where's straight pride?," "Free speech is censored", or "Traditional values are silenced".
Such claims misrepresent progress as zero-sum loss, and positions a dominant group as disadvantaged, creating a sense of grievance and urgency. However, evidence shows these claims are misleading.

Efforts to promote equality do not inherently disadvantage men, nor do they suppress free speech; they aim to expand rights and representation for historically marginalised groups.

Trivialisation & Ridicule

The media often stereotypes activists, especially feminists, as irrational or extreme: "Feminism hates men", "A radical minority terrorises everyone", or "Why protest? You have all the rights".
These narratives trivialise and ridicule activism, making legitimate demands for equality seem exaggerated or unnecessary. By exaggerating emotions or focusing on extreme examples, the media distorts the public's perception of feminist movements.
In reality, feminism advocates for equal rights and opportunities for all genders. It is not about hating men, nor does it represent a radical minority controlling society. Protests continue because inequalities and systemic barriers persist, even where legal rights exist. Recognising and debunking these stereotypes is key to understanding the real issues feminist movements address.

False Balance

Some media outlets present human rights as "just opinions", platforming discriminatory views equally with evidence-based advocacy. Common examples include:

- Presenting human rights as simply "another opinion" rather than fundamental principles.
- Platforming openly discriminatory views to appear neutral.
- Giving equal airtime to women, minorities, or marginalised and oppressed groups and to those who oppose their rights, creating a false sense of equivalence.

This approach, known as false balance, misleads audiences by implying that evidence-based human rights and discriminatory claims carry equal weight. In reality, human rights are not opinions - they are standards grounded in law and international norms. Treating opposing discriminatory views as equivalent risks normalising harmful ideas and obscuring systemic inequalities.

The “Western Import / External Threat” Narrative

The "Western Import / External Threat" narrative frames LGBTQIA+ rights as foreign-imposed, non-traditional ideology funded by outsiders. It frames EU/Brussels pressure as an external imposition on local values, linking it to global elites and NGOs like Soros or USAID. This fits into broader anti-rights mobilisation, where online hate speech spills into real life, strengthening right-wing groups.

CHAPTER 3: DOMINANT NARRATIVES ON MIGRATION

Media coverage of migration often relies on recurring patterns and narratives that misrepresent migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, creating fear, division, and misunderstanding. These narratives can distort public perception, dehumanise individuals, and obscure the complex realities driving migration. In this chapter, we examine the most common harmful narratives and the ways they shape public discourse.

Use of Incorrect Terminology

Media reports often fail to distinguish between migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, which can lead to confusion and misrepresentation.

Refugees (as defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention) are people who, due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, are outside their country of nationality and cannot or, due to fear, do not wish to seek protection there. Refugees leave their country involuntarily and sever all ties with the state they have fled. Five elements determine refugee status: 1) being outside the country of origin or habitual residence; 2) a well-founded fear of persecution; 3) the persecution itself; 4) relevant grounds for persecution; and 5) lack of protection from the home state.

Asylum seekers are individuals who have fled their home country, crossed an international border, and applied for recognition as refugees in another country but are awaiting a decision.

Migrants leave their country voluntarily, often seeking work, education, or family reunification.

Also, adjectives such as "illegal" continue to be used to describe persons ("illegal immigrant") instead of, e.g., the process of entering a country without authorisation.

There is no universally accepted definition of irregular migration. However, it's often used to mean travelling from one country to another, outside of official rules and regulations. Many people are forced to take irregular (i.e. unofficial) routes because there are no safe routes available.

No person should be defined as illegal simply for a journey they took to seek asylum. “Undocumented” is a more accurate term, highlighting the circumstances forcing people to use unofficial routes rather than criminalising the individual.

Exaggerated Language and Dehumanisation

The media often employ sensationalist language to depict migration as threatening: terms like “wave”, “flood”, “horde” create imagery of natural disasters or mass invasions. This not only dehumanises migrants and asylum seekers but also cultivates fear among the audience, portraying migrants as an “enemy” that must be repelled.

Economic Framing

Migrants are frequently presented as a “burden” or “drain” on society, while the positive impacts, such as filling labour shortages, are overlooked. Coverage rarely addresses the exploitation many migrants face, including poor working conditions, low pay, and limited rights.
Coverage also often fails to engage migrants directly or give them space to tell their own stories. Instead of being treated as sources or individuals with lived experience, migrants are frequently spoken about rather than with. This results in narratives that overlook their perspectives, reduce them to statistics or abstract groups, and miss the complexity of their experiences, motivations, and contributions.

Criminalisation and the “Migrant Metonymy”

Every large group contains some violent individuals, yet the media often highlights isolated acts by migrants to paint the entire migrant population as inherently dangerous and lawless, fostering widespread fear and resentment. Such coverage frequently skips crime statistics that debunk claims of migration-driven crime spikes.
While an article about a European who commits a crime will examine the crime in question, an article about a migrant who commits a crime can put an entire community on trial. The “migrant metonymy” effect treats one person labeled “a migrant” as a stand-in for all migrants, blurring distinctions and generalising blame.

Reducing Migrants to "Others"

The media often portray migrants as a single, homogenous group that is fundamentally different from citizens of the host country.
In reality, the only thing many migrants share is having moved to the same country; they come from diverse backgrounds and, regardless of their immigration status, often have similar hopes, concerns, and aspirations as the local population.
Language plays a key role in this "othering". Using pronouns such as "us" and "them" can present communities as monolithic, emphasising difference and separation. References to "they" and "them" reinforce the idea that minorities are outsiders, excluded from the national community. In this way, media and public discourse can subtly set groups against one another, creating social divisions through the words they use.

"-Stan" Rhetoric

Public discourse sometimes manipulates place names in order to evoke fear or hostility towards Muslim communities. One example is the addition of the suffix "-stan" to Western cities, such as "Londonistan", "New Yorkistan" or similar expressions referring to other cities. The suffix is associated in the public imagination with Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan or Afghanistan, and its use implies that these cities have been, or are becoming, dominated by Muslim populations.

Such rhetorical framing reinforces the idea that migration or demographic change represents a form of takeover. By describing European cities or regions as "colonised", "occupied", or "invaded", these narratives portray Muslims as aggressors while positioning non-Muslim Europeans as victims under threat. This language can fuel hostility and resentment by invoking imagery of conquest and loss, even though these claims distort and misrepresent social realities.

CHAPTER 4: DOMINANT NARRATIVES ABOUT CLIMATE DEFENDERS

Climate defenders and environmental activists play a crucial role in raising awareness about urgent ecological crises and advocating for systemic change. Yet media coverage and public discourse often rely on recurring narratives that misrepresent and discredit these movements. These narratives can frame activists as irrational, disruptive, privileged, naive, or even dangerous, diverting attention from the substance of their arguments and undermining public understanding of climate issues.

In this chapter, we explore the most common dominant narratives targeting climate defenders, including portrayals of activists as "crazy" or extreme, as a privileged or spoiled elite, as a threat to ordinary people, and as acting outside democratic norms. By understanding these narratives, journalists and media professionals can better contextualise coverage, challenge misrepresentations, and amplify the perspectives of those advocating for environmental justice.

Portraying Climate Defenders as "Crazy"

Another recurring narrative in media and public discourse is the attempt to discredit climate activists by portraying them as irrational, extreme, or "out of touch with reality". Labelling activists as "crazy", "fanatical", or "hysterical" shifts attention away from the substance of their arguments and instead frames them as emotionally unstable individuals whose concerns do not deserve serious consideration. This rhetorical strategy undermines legitimate climate advocacy by ridiculing those raising the alarm about environmental crises.

The idea of portraying activists as "crazy" or "insane" is also reminiscent of a decade-old climate denier strategy. As said in the Green European Journal, in 1998, Big Oil trade association American Petroleum Institute published an "action plan" aimed at exploiting the "uncertainties" in climate science. The plan, developed by Exxon, Chevron, Southern Company, and representatives from conservative organisations, stated: "Victory will be achieved when those promoting the [Kyoto] treaty on the basis of existent science appear to be out of touch with reality". Today, similar tactics persist in public debates about climate action.

Climate Activists vs. Ordinary People Narrative

A common media narrative portrays climate activists as people who make life harder for "ordinary citizens". Coverage frequently focuses on disruptive protest tactics, such as roadblocks or demonstrations that delay traffic, framing activists as responsible for preventing people from getting to work, medical appointments, or important personal events. In this framing, the emphasis is placed on the inconvenience caused by protests rather than on the climate crisis or the issues activists are trying to highlight.
This narrative also constructs a divide between activists and the wider public. Climate defenders are often portrayed as privileged outsiders or extremists who do not represent "ordinary people". At the same time, they are sometimes framed as being opposed to jobs, economic growth, or prosperity. Such portrayals simplify complex debates about climate policy and economic transition, and can obscure the fact that many activists are themselves concerned with protecting livelihoods, communities, and long-term economic stability in the face of climate change.

The "Undemocratic Activists" Narrative

Another common narrative portrays climate activists as acting outside democratic norms, arguing that their methods undermine democratic processes. Critics often claim that civil disobedience, such as road blockades or disruptive protests, is inherently undemocratic, suggesting that activists are imposing their views on the public rather than engaging through legitimate political channels. Media coverage may also emphasise the argument that widespread protest is turning the public against the climate movement, or that activists are "holding the public to ransom" through disruptive tactics.

This framing overlooks the long history of civil disobedience as a recognised form of political participation. Many social and political movements, from civil rights campaigns to struggles for democratic freedoms, have relied on protest and non-violent disruption to bring urgent issues into public debate. While critics argue that those concerned about climate change should rely solely on institutional channels such as petitions or elections, activists often point out that such mechanisms can be slow or ineffective when facing an urgent global crisis. Presenting civil disobedience as inherently illegitimate therefore risks dismissing an important form of democratic engagement.

The "Spoiled Elite" Narrative

Another common narrative seeks to discredit climate activists by portraying them as privileged members of a detached social elite. Activists are often described as "spoiled" or naïve middle-class youth who are out of touch with the everyday concerns of ordinary people. In this framing, climate activism is presented as a hobby or lifestyle choice of a privileged minority rather than a response to a global environmental crisis.
This narrative is also reinforced by claims that climate change is primarily a "first world problem" and that climate activism reflects the interests of a liberal urban elite. Such portrayals overlook the fact that the impacts of climate change are often felt most severely by communities in the Global South and by economically vulnerable groups.

The "Naive and Unrealistic Demands" Narrative

Another narrative portrays climate activists as naive and out of touch with reality, suggesting that their demands are impractical or impossible to implement. Critics often argue that activists fail to understand how the economy works or underestimate the complexity of global energy systems and economic structures. This framing presents climate proposals as unrealistic ideals rather than as serious policy discussions.
The narrative is frequently reinforced by emphasising the age of many activists, portraying them as young and inexperienced individuals who lack the knowledge needed to engage in complex economic or political debates.

The "Extremist or Dangerous Activists" Narrative

Another narrative portrays climate activists as dangerous, irresponsible, or even extremist actors. Media coverage sometimes frames protest actions, particularly those involving property damage or disruptive tactics, as evidence that climate defenders are vandals or potential threats to public order. In more extreme cases, activists are labelled as radicals or even "terrorists", language that seeks to delegitimise the movement and portray it as inherently dangerous.

CHAPTER 5: DEVELOPING COUNTER- AND ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

Counter-narratives and alternative narratives play an important role in challenging harmful public discourse and supporting more responsible journalism. In contexts where hate speech, stereotypes, and disinformation circulate widely, journalists and media workers are often among the first actors who can interrupt these narratives and reshape the way stories are told. Understanding how narratives work, and how they can be challenged or reframed, equips media professionals with practical tools to respond to harmful messaging. By working with counter-narratives and alternative narratives, journalists can move beyond simply reporting problematic statements and instead contribute to dismantling harmful myths, and amplifying perspectives from marginalised and oppressed communities.

Counter-narratives explicitly challenge dominant, harmful narratives - for example, portraying migration as a crisis, threat, or burden. They work by questioning assumptions, exposing oversimplifications, and correcting distortions. While essential, counter-narratives are inherently reactive and remain tied to the framing they oppose.

Alternative narratives go a step further by offering a new framework for understanding reality. They change how issues are framed and interpreted, enabling marginalised or oppressed groups to imagine and develop new stories. Alternative narratives often emerge through dialogue and personal contact with people holding different perspectives, fostering empathy, understanding, and more inclusive storytelling.

Alternative narratives proactively tell inclusive and constructive stories that do not centre dominant frames at all. They highlight lived experience, agency, creativity, work, and belonging, allowing migration, feminist, or LGBTQIA+ issues to appear as part of broader human stories rather than their defining feature.

For example, intersectional framing strengthens these approaches by showing how migration intersects with gender, labour, sexuality, class, culture, and stigma, resisting overly simplistic explanations. Together, alternative narratives and contextual, intersectional approaches have the greatest long-term impact: they reshape the narrative landscape, reduce audience fatigue, avoid reinforcing harmful binaries, and create space for empathy, identification, and nuanced understanding.

Choosing between a counter-narrative and an alternative narrative depends on several factors. There is no single approach that works in every situation, and journalists and media workers need to consider the specific context in which a harmful narrative appears.

Which approach to choose?

Choosing between a counter-narrative and an alternative narrative depends on several factors. There is no single approach that works in every situation, and journalists and media workers need to consider the specific context in which a harmful narrative appears. What strategy to choose depends on:

- The specific challenge you face – Is the goal to directly challenge misinformation or hate speech, or to shift the conversation toward a different perspective?
- The target audience – Who is the message intended for? People already influenced by the harmful narrative, those who are undecided, or the broader public?
- The hateful narrative itself – How widespread and influential is it? Does it require a direct response with facts and arguments, or is it more effective to reframe the conversation entirely?

Different narratives require different approaches. In some cases, directly confronting a harmful claim with a counter-narrative may be necessary. In others, creating an alternative narrative that shifts the focus and highlights different voices and experiences can be more effective in promoting long-term change.
An effective response to harmful narratives always begins with understanding the audience you are trying to reach. Not every message is meant for everyone, and not every group will be receptive to the same approach. Before responding, journalists and media workers should consider who they want to influence and what kind of impact they hope to achieve.
When designing narratives, three common audience-related mistakes often occur. The first is speaking directly to the hatemongers - individuals or groups who are deeply invested in spreading hateful narratives. These actors are usually not open to dialogue or persuasion, and engaging them directly often only amplifies their message or gives them additional visibility. In most cases, communication efforts are more effective when directed toward audiences who are still open to reflection or change.

The second mistake is trying to speak to everyone. When a message is designed for a broad and undefined audience, it often becomes too general and loses its impact. Without a clear audience in mind, narratives risk becoming vague and ineffective, failing to resonate with anyone in particular.

The third mistake is neglecting the audiences we could actually reach. These are people who may not strongly support hateful narratives but who are exposed to them and may be influenced by them over time. This group often includes individuals who are undecided, curious, or open to different perspectives. Focusing on these audiences can be particularly effective, as they are more likely to engage with new information, reconsider assumptions, and contribute to shifting public conversations.
Based on the grouping (invested actors, believers, opportunists, bystanders / undecided, allies, affected groups) and understanding created by the Council of Europe, audiences exposed to hateful or harmful narratives can be broadly divided into several categories. Understanding these groups helps journalists and media workers decide how to respond, what tone to use, and which narrative strategy may be most effective.

1. Invested Actors

Invested actors are individuals or groups who actively produce and spread hateful narratives. They are strongly committed to these views and often use them strategically for ideological, political, or social influence. Because their position is deeply entrenched, they are usually not receptive to counter-arguments or dialogue. Engaging directly with them often risks amplifying their message rather than challenging it effectively. For this reason, communication strategies usually focus less on persuading them and more on limiting the reach and impact of their narratives.

2. Believers

Believers are people who genuinely accept and repeat hateful narratives, but they are not necessarily the original creators of those messages. They may have been influenced by misinformation, stereotypes, or repeated exposure to certain narratives in media or political discourse. Unlike invested actors, believers can sometimes be reached through well-structured counter-narratives that provide factual information, context, and alternative perspectives.

3. Opportunists

Opportunists spread harmful narratives when it benefits them socially, politically, or professionally, even if they do not deeply believe in them. They may use such narratives to gain attention, mobilise supporters, or increase their visibility. Their behavior is often strategic rather than ideological. Addressing opportunists usually involves exposing manipulation, highlighting inconsistencies, and reducing the incentives that make spreading such narratives advantageous.

4. Bystanders / Undecided

Bystanders or undecided audiences are people who are exposed to hateful narratives but have not formed a strong opinion. They may passively consume information without actively supporting or challenging it. This group is particularly important because they represent a large portion of the public and are often the most open to influence. Well-designed narratives, clear information, and responsible media reporting can help shape their understanding and prevent the normalization of harmful narratives.

5. Allies

Allies are individuals or groups who already oppose hateful narratives and support equality, inclusion, and human rights. They may already be engaged in advocacy, journalism, activism, or community work. Communication strategies for allies focus on strengthening their capacity, providing them with accurate information, and encouraging them to amplify constructive narratives.

6. Affected Groups

Affected groups are communities directly targeted by hateful narratives, discrimination, or exclusion. These groups often experience the real-life consequences of such narratives. In narrative work, it is important not only to defend these groups but also to ensure that their voices, experiences, and perspectives are visible. Alternative narratives are particularly important here, as they allow affected communities to tell their own stories and challenge stereotypes from their own standpoint.

Understanding these different audience groups is important for developing effective narrative strategies. Not every group requires the same response, and successful communication depends on recognizing who can realistically be influenced. While invested actors are unlikely to change their views, other groups, particularly believers, opportunists, and bystanders, may still be reached through carefully designed narratives. For journalists and media workers, this means focusing efforts where they can have the greatest impact: preventing the spread of harmful narratives, informing undecided audiences, and amplifying the voices and experiences of affected communities.

Practical Steps:

When developing counter- and alternative narratives, it is helpful to begin by reflecting on past communication and editorial choices. Consider whether previous coverage might have unintentionally reinforced dominant narratives, and identify patterns that simplify, stereotype, or misrepresent communities. Ask yourself: Who is representing the group in this story - is it someone or a movement that has already been widely featured? Am I portraying these individuals as relatable and human, or unintentionally distancing them from the audience? What emotions might this story spark in those who read or see it, and do these reactions support understanding or fear?

It is also important to approach storytelling with open questions rather than predetermined answers. For example, instead of immediately framing a story around someone's migration status or activist label, start with questions like "Who is this person?" This shift in perspective allows the story to highlight lived experiences, agency, and humanity, rather than reducing individuals to labels or statistics.

It is also valuable to critically examine existing editorial habits and common labels. Reflecting on how coverage is usually structured can highlight where narratives become simplified or misleading, and identify opportunities to introduce more nuanced and accurate storytelling.

Centering people with lived experience as active storytellers, rather than treating them only as sources or subjects, strengthens the authenticity of narratives. Their perspectives can guide the story and ensure that the voices of those directly affected by migration are represented fully and fairly.

Experimenting with different storytelling formats - such as first-person accounts, audio features, or longform pieces - can create space for nuance and deeper engagement. These formats allow audiences to encounter the human rights story you are focusing on as one part of broader human experiences.

Every editorial choice carries ethical and political weight, from framing and language to images and placement. Being conscious of these choices allows journalists to resist reproducing harmful narratives and to actively promote fairness, inclusion, and accuracy in coverage.

Collaborating across borders and disciplines can also help avoid narrow or siloed perspectives. Working with journalists, researchers, and civil society organisations (CSO) from different contexts can enrich stories, provide comparative insights, and ensure a more holistic understanding.

Finally, narrative work should be approached as a long-term practice rather than a one-off campaign. Continuously developing skills, building trust with communities, and experimenting with new approaches strengthens the ability to consistently challenge harmful narratives and foster inclusive, empathetic storytelling.

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