Immigrants Belong: The Toolkit

Guidance for Building Immigration Narrative Change on Digital

Contents

Immigrants Belong

Since the 2016 election cycle, immigration has become *the* focal point of partisan politics in the United States. News programs and political rhetoric regularly amplify dehumanizing, racist, and highly inaccurate portrayals of immigrant communities across mainstream media. While xenophobia has undeniably been a part of American public discourse since the country's inception,[1] new digital technologies have allowed for this rhetoric to spread and amplify at a historically new scale.

Despite the fact that 59% of registered voters believe that undocumented immigrants should have an opportunity to stay in the U.S. legally, and of those, more than a third (36%) believe that citizenship should be that path forward,[2] the immigrant rights movement is in danger of losing a generation of potential support. The narrative that informs the media around immigration is toxic, and it's being disseminated and amplified online.

No single organization in the immigrant rights space has the capacity or the resources to combat this digital anti-immigrant media machine alone. Only through partnership, collaboration, and research-informed strategy can our movement begin to impact the rampant anti-immigrant mis- and disinformation that dominates digital media.

This toolkit represents the culmination of an 18-month collaborative effort funded through

Tides called Immigrants Belong. Immigrants Belong is an innovative capacity-building initiative that is using inoculation strategies, digital storytelling efforts, and sociological research on media usage to build a better understanding of common fear-based tactics that can disrupt false and harmful immigrant narratives. The following toolkit outlines some of the core research that informed this initiative, along with step-by-step guides and exercises to help inform content production for storytellers who want to implement digital narrative change strategies in their work.

Through continued research, media engagement, and collaboration across the advocacy space, we at Define American believe that it is possible to make an impact in shifting the digital media narrative on immigration.

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[1] Lee, E. (2019), America for Americans: A history of xenophobia in the United States. New York: Basic Books.

[2] Pew Research Center (2024), Cultural issues and the 2024 election.

What Story Do You Want to Tell?
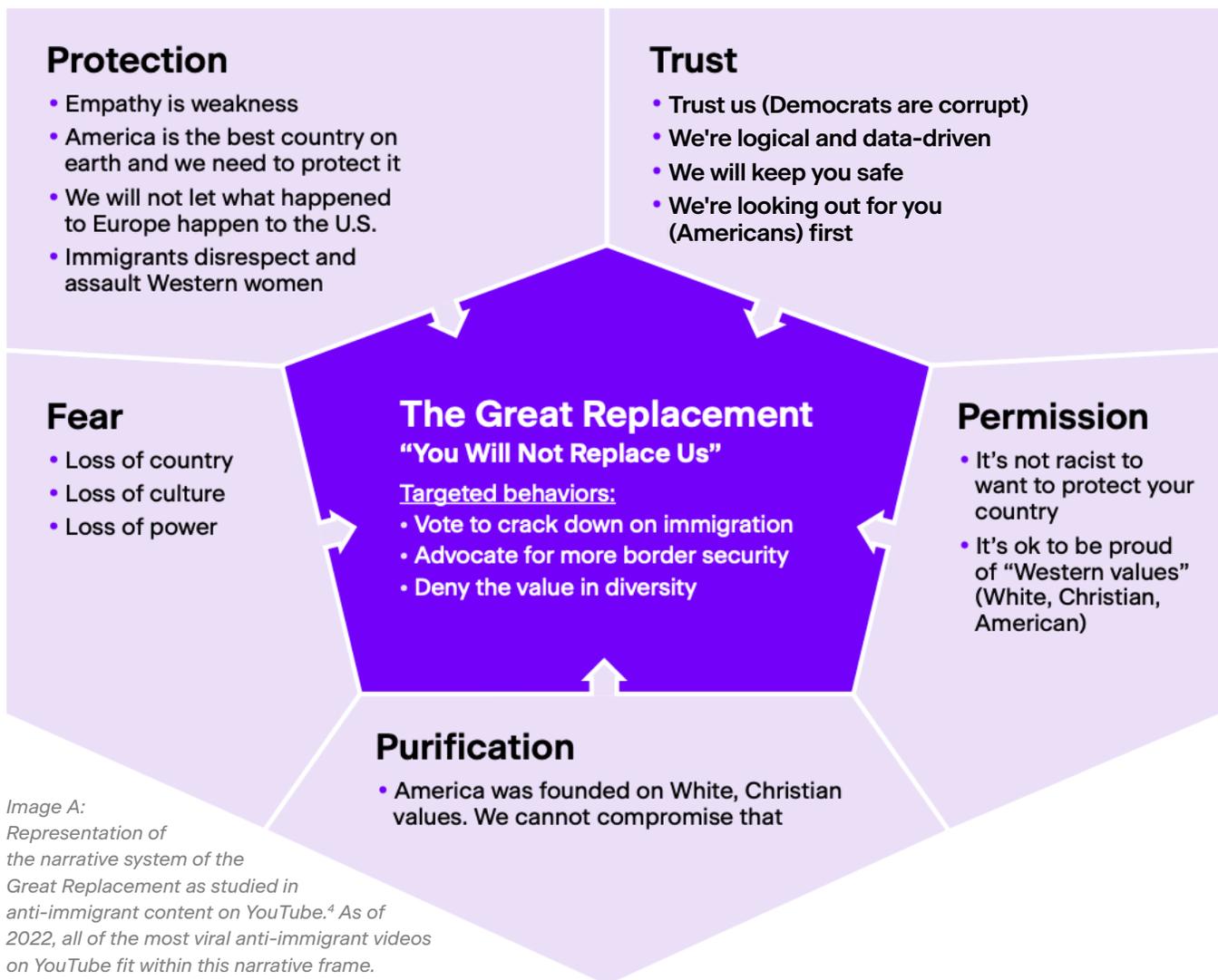
Defining Your Narrative Goal

Digital media has revolutionized how Americans consume information. According to Pew Research, 83% of American adults watch YouTube, 68% are on Facebook, and nearly half are using Instagram.[3] In order to impact the media narrative around immigration, it is critical to address the incredible impact and importance of this digital revolution.

In the 2022 Define American report, *'Immigration Will Destroy Us' and Other Talking Points*, we studied an in-depth network of viral anti-immigrant videos on YouTube that exposed the patterns and tactics of the anti-immigrant movement in this country. One of the core findings of the report was that, regardless of what channel the content was published on, *all of the most viral anti-immigrant videos had messaging that fell within the cohesive narrative frame of the "Great Replacement Theory."*

What is the Great Replacement Theory?

The Great Replacement Theory can be traced back to French nationalist Maurice Barrès and his critiques of migrants starting in the 1890s. The theory explains how non-White foreigners will migrate en masse to White, Western nations, overwhelm their economies, and bring about the collapse of Western civilization. Current U.S. supporters of the Great Replacement Theory rely on census data that show the country moving towards more racial plurality as evidence for their argument. White nationalists then justify anti-immigrant rhetoric as a form of self-defense, since the ultimate result of the Great Replacement is believed to be a "genocide" of White people.

[3] Pew Research Center (2024), Americans' Social Media Use

Protection
- Empathy is weakness
- America is the best country on earth and we need to protect it
- We will not let what happened to Europe happen to the U.S.
- Immigrants disrespect and assault Western women

Trust
- Trust us (Democrats are corrupt)
- We're logical and data-driven
- We will keep you safe
- We're looking out for you (Americans) first

Fear
- Loss of country
- Loss of culture
- Loss of power

The Great Replacement
"You Will Not Replace Us"
Targeted behaviors:
- Vote to crack down on immigration
- Advocate for more border security
- Deny the value in diversity

Permission
- It's not racist to want to protect your country
- It's ok to be proud of "Western values" (White, Christian, American)

Purification
- America was founded on White, Christian values. We cannot compromise that

Image A:
Representation of the narrative system of the Great Replacement as studied in anti-immigrant content on YouTube.[4] As of 2022, all of the most viral anti-immigrant videos on YouTube fit within this narrative frame.

There are many different entry points to the narrative framework of the Great Replacement Theory, represented above as the bolded themes on the outer part of Image A. Some audiences, for example, may be experiencing fear of a perceived loss of their culture, while others might be more concerned with protection and national security. This illustrates the core difference between *stories*, *messages*, and *narratives*: a message may be conveyed in a story, but it takes many stories to construct an overall narrative.

The Butterfly Lab Narrative Pyramid

Image B: Diagram from the Butterfly Lab for Immigrant Narrative Strategy's report A Future for Us All - Part 1, *a project of Race Forward.[5]*

[4] Define American (2022), "Immigration Will Destroy Us" & Other Talking Points

[5] Chang et. al (2022), A Future for Us All - Part 1, Butterfly Lab/Race Forward, p. 9.

Define American views storytelling as the most powerful tool in the work of changing culture, and we believe that the culture around immigration urgently needs to change.

All of the stories and messages within this anti-immigrant framework point to a future where immigrants have destroyed the U.S. The variety of stories and messages driven by this larger narrative framework provides entry points for many groups and perspectives to be included in the modern anti-immigrant movement. The narrative cohesion that connects these various messaging strategies has had a powerful and devastating impact for immigrant communities.

Race Forward's Butterfly Lab for Narrative Immigrant Strategy, a three-year initiative launched in 2020, was designed to transform the public narrative around immigration by fostering stories that humanized immigrants and highlighted their contributions to society. By telling stories rooted in pro-immigrant narratives, the Lab aimed to create a paradigm shift away from harmful stereotypes. Their landmark research continues to inform the best practices that advocacy organizations like Define American rely on to support immigrant rights and advance racial justice. This work was instrumental in reshaping public perception, fostering policy change, and inspiring a more inclusive vision for society.

The pro-immigrant narrative system as developed by the Butterfly Lab, promotes a vision of a future where immigration contributes to a better country as a whole.

Narrative Positioning: Immigration vs. Immigrant

Anti-immigrant organizations will often emphasize the difference between immigrants and immigration in their rhetorical framing. The Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), **a Southern Poverty Law Center-designated hate group**, states on their website that CIS is "animated by a unique **pro-immigrant, low-immigration** vision…"[6] By separating individual "immigrants" from the political topic of "immigration," anti-immigrant groups create a permission structure to attack policies that could support immigrant communities. This rhetoric provides cover for coded racism and xenophobia in the name of attacking a process rather than the people it represents. In this toolkit, Define American simply uses the terms "anti-immigrant" and "pro-immigrant," because we do not respect the designation created by the anti-immigrant movement, and believe that vehement anti-immigration rhetoric often has anti-immigrant connotations.

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[6] Center for Immigration Studies (2024)

Interdependence
We recognize our interdependence with each other and with all life. We recognize that our fate is interconnected with each other's, and so we practice mutuality.

Safety
We collaborate as communities to ensure collective wellbeing and peace with justice. We build these solutions in community and use equity as our guiding principle, seeking to repair the harm against those most impacted.

Abundance
We recognize that there is enough for all if we live in alignment and the right relationship with the world around us, practicing love, care, community, and regeneration. When we center mindsets of sufficiency and generosity, resources can flourish into abundance. We call people toward an abundance of imagination, to make a leap with us toward our shared future.

Dignity
We believe in the inherent value and dignity of all life that exists. All should be able to exist and express their pride in being, practicing and transmitting their identities, such as their cultures, languages, and spiritual beliefs, as long as they do not harm or debase the dignity of others.

Belonging
We see each other, welcome each other, and call each other into community. We recognize and respect the diversity of our peoples and communities, acknowledging differences as invigorating and powerful assets that push us toward transformation. We see each other's joys and struggles with clear eyes, and care for each other as if our own. We recognize the ways that systems have oppressed and harmed people differently and make equity our central practice.

Freedom to Thrive
We believe all beings should thrive and that communities and cultures should have equal agency to make decisions about their lives, relationships, communities, and futures. In balance and alignment with our world, we should be able to pursue our dreams, engage in quality and fulfilling work, and live with joy, dignity, and love, regardless of race, national origin, gender identity, class, caste, religion, and ability.

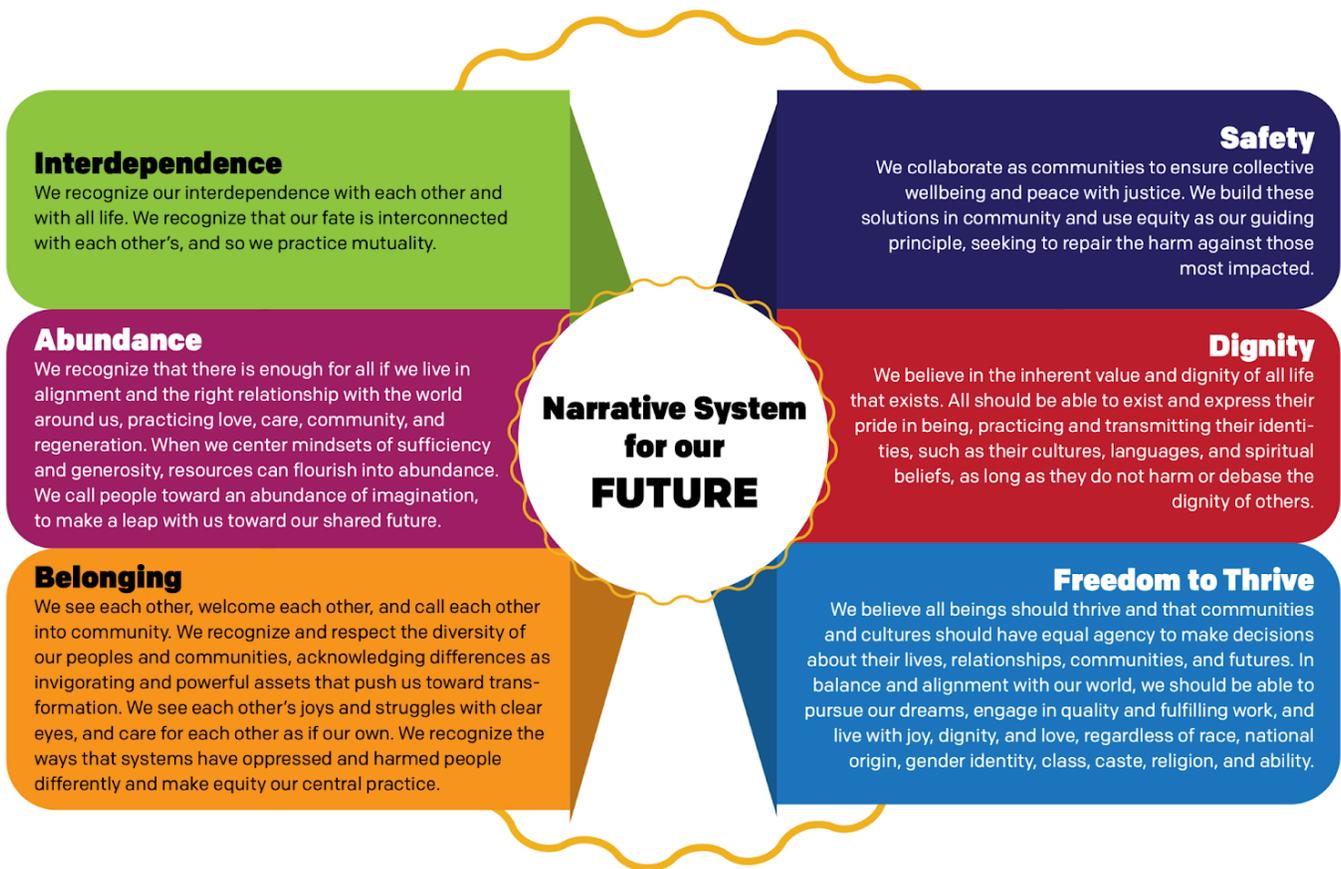**Narrative System for our FUTURE**

Image C: Diagram from the Butterfly Lab for Immigrant Narrative Strategy's report A Future for Us All – Part 2, a project of Race Forward.[7]

Upon examination, the Butterfly Lab's narrative framework counters the Great Replacement Theory narrative framework. One narrative system paints a triumphant vision of how immigrants will build a better future for all, while the other paints a dire picture of a future where immigration has destroyed the country. **In both cases, the core narrative frame is determined by how we define a positive future for this nation.**

In terms of narrative strategy, it is just as important to address the onslaught of mis- and disinformation attacking immigrant communities online, as it is to promote a positive vision for a pro-immigrant future.

Strategies for *combating negative* messaging and *promoting positive* messaging are both needed.

Next, using the two narrative systems on page 5 (Images A and B), we provide an exercise for identifying a message that supports narrative change.

[7] Chang et. al (2023), A Future for Us All - Part 2, Butterfly Lab/Race Forward, p. 9

Defining Your Messaging Goal

When developing content that centers shifting a narrative, it is essential to first clarify the narrative change you want to make. Define American believes that it is critical to address the powerful anti-immigrant narratives that dominate so much discourse in this space, *and* to promote a positive vision of a pro-immigrant future. Below, we provide one powerful method to combat anti–immigrant messages, and promote a positive immigration narrative.

1. **Define what you are COMBATING**

   Is there an anti-immigrant message that you are hoping to **combat**?

   Please refer to the Great Replacement Theory narrative framework (Image A) on page 5 for guidance. For example, if you choose the theme of "protection," the message should include a protection theme, such as "Immigrants will cause an increase in crime, and we need to protect our communities."

   What message are you hoping to combat?

   _____

   _____

2. **Define what you are PROMOTING**

   Is there a pro-immigrant message that you are hoping to **promote**? This message should be the inverse of the anti-immigrant message.

   For example, if you choose the anti-immigrant message, "Immigrants will cause an increase in crime, and we need to protect our communities," then your positive narrative intervention could be "Immigrants will help to keep our communities safe."

   What narrative are you hoping to promote?

   _____

   _____

3. **Define your messaging goal**

Now, combining your answers to #1 and #2, describe the messaging shift that you hope to create. Use this template:

MESSAGE SHIFT: To combat the message that (answer to #1) _____

_____ ,

we want to tell a story that showcases how (answer to #2) _____

_____ .

By choosing a message from the Great Replacement Theory narrative framework, you just identified a shift you would like to see around this particular message. By using this framework, you can build narrative strategy into messaging and storytelling projects.

Creating inoculation content

Once a messaging goal has been identified, there are many different ways to tell your story. One powerful storytelling tool in combating mis- and disinformation is inoculation. **This article produced by American University and Jigsaw** outlines how to create inoculation content, which can be used to combat anti-immigrant mis- and disinformation. Further resources for pre-bunking can also be found on **Jigsaw's website**.

Attitudinal Inoculation

1. Introduce an emotional warning about misinformation.

2. Equip users to spot and refute the attack.

3. If misinfo appears again, users can identify it as misinfo.
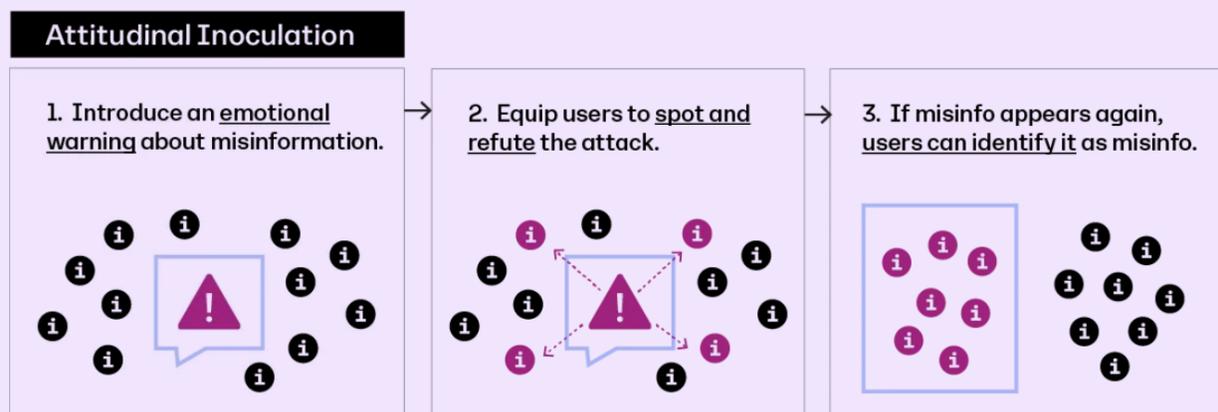
Image from Jigsaw

Who Do You Want to Reach?

Understanding Immigration's Moveable Middle

Define American partnered with Harmony Labs to dive deeper into the media habits of audience groups that fall within the Moveable Middle, focusing on those with the potential to shift their perspective towards pro-immigrant attitudes and actions.

In Part One of our report series, "*Move Them or Lose Them: Strategies for Deepening Engagement with Moveable Audiences*,"[8] Harmony Labs looked at a year's worth of media consumption of the Moveable Middle and distilled findings into four distinct audience segments. To measure the audience values that form the foundation of this research, Harmony Labs used surveys that explore attitudes on race, gender, place, and class, along with core values. For more on the methodology, **check out the full report**.

Four Moveable Audiences

Building on a foundation of critical insights established by previous studies from the Butterfly Lab, More in Common, the American Immigration Council, the Norman Lear Center, and others, Define American, and Harmony Labs mapped out a comprehensive view of narrative influence, audience engagement, and narrative strategies for moving the middle toward pro-immigrant and immigration attitudes.

Across news, TV, film, and social media, we examined:

- Who is the Moveable Middle?

- How might narrative exposure affect their beliefs, values, and attitudes regarding immigrants and immigration policy?

- How do immigrants and immigration show up in these ecosystems?

- What media content ecosystems about immigrants activate the audience?

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[8] Define American & Harmony Labs (2024). Move Them or Lose Them | Part 1 - Knowing the Audience.

Harmony Labs identified four key audience segments within the Moveable Middle that are open to pro-immigrant perspectives and are moveable:

- **Taking Responsibility**
  Social rule-followers, interested in culture and invested in their local communities.

- **Following The Plan**
  Church-goers who respect authority and are interested in helping others.

- **Doing My Own Thing**
  Autonomous pleasure-seekers interested in fun, play, relaxation, personal growth, and fandoms.

- **Getting It Done**
  "Do it yourself" go-getters, interested in action and practical solutions.
  Over a quarter of this audience are immigrants themselves.

Where do they get their information about immigrants?

Our research reveals that these four audience segments do not look to national news for their information about immigrants and immigration. Instead, social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and Instagram are shaping their worldviews, along with programming on streaming services like Netflix and Disney+. Engagement on digital and social platforms is mission-critical to shifting U.S. audiences to be more pro-immigrant.
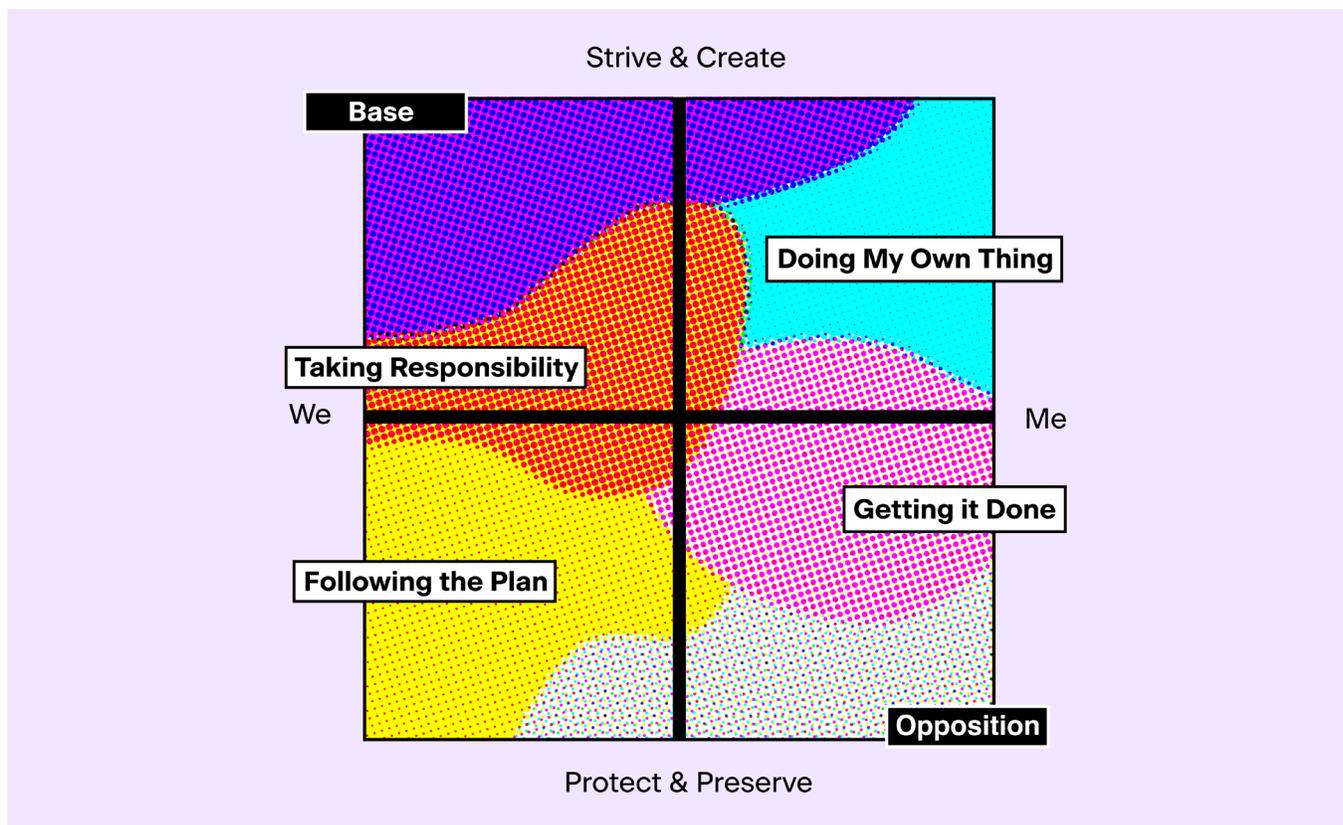
The four audience segments in the center are the Moveable Middle. Source: Harmony Labs.

Taking Responsibility

Social rule-followers, interested in culture and invested in their local communities. Their heroes take the lead on solving personal and family-centered dilemmas, which is also how they see themselves.

Values
Order and Equity

Attitude
Neighborly and Conversational

Tone
Light-hearted, Dramatic, Aspirational

More Likely to Be
- Age range: 35-50 and 65+
- Race/Ethnicity: Black, Latine, Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI)
- Gender: Women

Platforms

Media They Love

Yahoo! Finance (Yahoo), The View (ABC), The Kelly Clarkson Show (NBC), Real Time with Bill Maher (HBO), Workin' Moms (CBC), Bridgerton (Netflix), Snowfall (FX), Insecure (HBO)

Following the Plan

Church-goers who respect authority and are interested in helping others. Their heroes take charge, protect the community, resolve conflict, and restore safety. They imagine themselves to be part of their heroes' support team.

Values
Order and Helping

Attitude
Predictable and Comfortable

Tone
Heartwarming, Clear "Good" vs. "Bad"

More Likely to Be
- Age range: 50+
- Race/Ethnicity: No significant differences found
- Gender: Women

Platforms

f

Media They Love

Chicago Med (NBC), Law and Order: SVU (NBC), Grace and Frankie (Netflix), America's Got Talent (NBC), Mrs. Harris Goes to Paris (Universal Pictures), Heartland (CBC), The Chosen (The CW)

Doing My Own Thing

Autonomous pleasure-seekers interested in fun, play, relaxation, personal growth and fandoms. Their heroes are rebels who challenge conformity and forge their own paths—the qualities that they themselves aspire to.

Values
Adventure and Isolation

Attitude
Irreverent and Fun

Tone
Aspirational, Satirical, Offbeat

More Likely to Be
- Age range: 18-50
- Race/Ethnicity: No significant differences found
- Gender: Women

Platforms

Media They Love

Vice News (Vice TV), The Kardashians (Hulu), Rick and Morty (Adult Swim), Avengers: Infinity War (Walt Disney Studios), Euphoria (HBO)

Getting It Done

"Do it yourself" go-getters, interested in action and practical solutions. They resemble their own heroes—jacks-of-all trades that uses common sense to restore order and safety.

Values
Achievement and Order

Attitude
Loyal and Protective
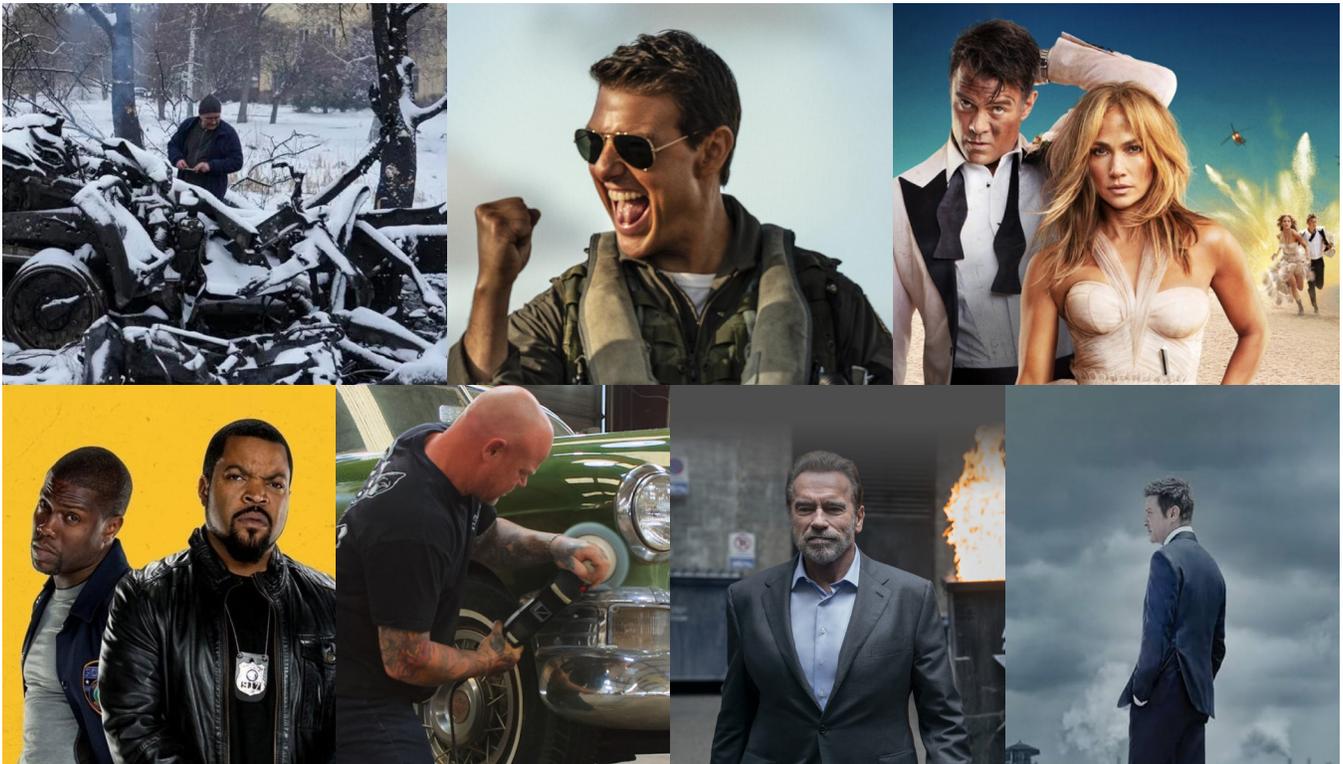
Tone
Suspenseful, Gritty, Action-Packed

More Likely to Be

- Age range: 18-34
- Race/Ethnicity: Black, Latine, AAPI and Indigenous*
- Gender: No significant differences found
- Identity: Immigrants
  Small sample size for Indigenous people

Platforms

Media They Love

Forbes Breaking News (Forbes), Top Gun: Maverick (Paramount Pictures), Shotgun Wedding (Amazon Prime Video), Ride Along (Universal Pictures), Tex Mex Motors (Discovery Channel), FUBAR (Netflix), Mayor of Kingstown (Paramount+)

Defining Your Audience

YOUR TURN!

1. Looking at the narrative goal that you defined in Exercise #1, which audience (based upon their values listed below) do you think would be most receptive to your narrative goal? Circle one.

   Taking Responsibility
   Neighborly, Conversational, Order, Equity

   Doing My Own Thing
   Adventure, Independent, Irreverent, Fun

   Following the Plan
   Order, Helping, Predictable, Comfortable

   Getting It Done
   Achievement, Order, Loyal, Protection

2. According to our research, which social media platforms does this audience generally engage with? Circle your audience and their preferred platform(s).

   Taking Responsibility

   Doing My Own Thing

   Following the Plan

   Getting It Done

3. What is the tone of the content this audience prefers?
   Circle your audience and their preferred content tone.

   Taking Responsibility
   Light-hearted, Dramatic, Aspirational

   Doing My Own Thing
   Aspirational, Satirical, Offbeat

   Following the Plan
   Heartwarming, Clear "Good" vs. "Bad"

   Getting It Done
   Suspenseful, Gritty, Action-Packed

4. Given what you now know about this audience, describe a piece of content featuring immigrants or an immigration-related theme that you think would appeal to them.

   For Example: Following the Plan might look like a heartwarming video from a family-oriented lifestyle Facebook page, on which parents teach their children how to spot mis- and disinformation online.

How Will You Reach Your Audience?

Working Effectively with Social Media Influencers

All of the hard work put into creating a careful narrative strategy, landscape analysis, and audience-targeted messaging will go to waste if your content does not have adequate online distribution. Time and time again, we have seen well-planned and beautifully executed advocacy content receive little to no attention on social media. This is not only demoralizing, it can also be a waste of limited funds and valuable time. In a field where both of those resources are in short supply, low engagement with narrative change content on social media is unacceptable.

To ensure that your content receives the viewership that it deserves, consider partnering with a social media influencer. In **Define American's 2022 research into immigration narratives on YouTube**, we discovered that audiences on social media place an extremely high level of trust in the social media influencers they follow. When you combine audience trust with tailored messaging, influencers can be powerful allies in narrative change.

Core Principles for Producing Engaging Content with an Influencer Partner

1 **Align Values and Messaging**

- **Choose the Right Influencer:** Ensure the influencer's values and audience align with your nonprofit's mission. Authenticity is key: followers can sense when partnerships are inauthentic. Select influencers who have a genuine interest in or connection to your cause.

- **Consistent Messaging:** Clearly communicate your key messages, but allow the influencer to present them in their own voice. This creates more authentic and engaging content that resonates with their audience.

2 Prioritize Storytelling Over Selling

- **Emphasize Human Stories:** Focus on impactful, human-centered stories rather than just promoting donations or actions. Encourage the influencer to share personal experiences or stories related to your cause to create an emotional connection.

- **Show Impact:** Highlight the real world impact of your nonprofit's work. Influencers can tell their audience how their involvement (donations, volunteering) will make a tangible difference.

3 Keep It Simple and Actionable

- **Clear Calls to Action:** Ensure that the content includes a clear, easy-to-follow call to action, whether it's donating, signing a petition, or sharing content. Make steps as simple as possible.

- **Less Is More:** Focus on one core message per piece of content. Overloading the audience with too many details or asks can dilute the effectiveness of your message.

4 Incorporate Interactive Elements When Appropriate

- **Engage Audiences:** Content should encourage interaction. Use polls, Q&As, challenges, or giveaways where the audience can participate. For instance, the influencer can ask their followers to share personal stories, comments, or ideas related to the cause.

- **Live Collaborations:** Leverage live-streamed video to engage in real time. Interactive live content, like a Q&A with an influencer about your nonprofit's work, can deepen audience involvement.

5 Provide Creative Freedom

- **Trust the Influencer's Expertise:** While it's important to convey your campaign's message, give the influencer creative control over how they communicate your message. They know how to best connect with their audience.

- **Flexible Formats:** Be open to different content formats, whether it's a heartfelt video, a humorous reel, or a podcast episode. Influencers know what will engage their specific audience best.

For a complete step-by-step guide on how to work with influencer partners, please refer to this guide: **Tips for Working with Social Media Influencers**.

Planning an Influencer Collaboration

YOUR TURN!

Using your answers from the previous two exercises, construct a basic project plan for your influencer-led narrative change product.

1. What is your narrative goal? (Answer #3 from Exercise #1)

2. Who is your target audience? (Answer #1 from Exercise #2)

3. What content might your target audience want to watch? (Answer #5 from Exercise #2)

4. When thinking about an influencer to partner with, what are the most important factors to prioritize for your audience? Examples: an influencer's lived experience, their tone, the type of messaging and content they create, etc.

Now that you have established a narrative goal, target audience, and an ideal creative vision for your project, you are ready to put this research into practice! Plan your narrative change digital project below:

Project Plan

Budget

What is your overall budget for your project? The scale of the budget will inform your production process.

Overall budget: _____

Budget Breakdown

1. What size audience are you hoping to reach with this content? While some influencers may want to partner pro-bono or at a highly discounted rate, generally, if you work with a more popular influencer, it will increase the influencer fee.

    _____

2. Do you have internal staff that can support a production process? This could include talent management, a producer, or an editor.

    _____

3. If you do not have staff that fits the above description, *don't get discouraged!* There are many models for influencer collaboration, and they do not all require staff with production backgrounds. Do you have the resources to hire a producer or bring on a production partner? Please note: Many influencers will handle production entirely themselves. If there aren't in-house staff or partnership funds, the best route is likely to work directly with an influencer who can handle all production needs.

    _____

4. Do you plan to boost this content with paid media, or allow for organic engagement?

    _____

5. What are your overall metric goals for this project?

    _____

Fill out the sample production breakdown table below to guide your overall production budget. Please note: If a social media influencer produces the content themselves, the influencer fee should be the only production cost.

Item(s)	Budget	Notes
Influencer fees		
Production costs		
Production partner		
Paid promotion		
TOTAL (Overall Budget)		

Timeline

Timing the publication of your content is an important element for any campaign. Map out key calendar dates or launch moments for your organization's work in the table below. Please note: An influencer collaboration can be a valuable boost to incorporate into your pre-existing editorial calendar. It can also be advantageous to coordinate an influencer post with other events such as holidays.

Date	Event	Product

Project Question Checklist

Once you have established your budget and timeline, there are many more detail-oriented questions that will arise during the project's production. Below is a checklist to keep in mind as you move forward with your project. Not every question will be answerable at the beginning of the process, and some of the answers may be informed by your influencer partner. However, all of the questions below are important elements to consider throughout the production process.

1. What platform are you most interested in targeting? Please note: It's always good practice to post content on multiple platforms, but we recommend prioritizing one platform to optimize production for that platform's style.

    _____

2. Considering the target platform for your post:

    ▪ How long do you want your content to be? _____

    ▪ What format on the platform is best for your project?
      For example: Reels vs. posts on Instagram.

    _____

3. Are there opportunities for you to post the content on multiple channels, or to use assets from your project in multiple formats (video, audio, stills)?

    _____

4. Do you want to include any logos, hashtags, or tags?

    _____

5. What copy do you want to include with your post?

    _____

6. If you are doing paid promotion, what are your goals?

    _____

7. Are there other communications assets that you will be using to promote your content on social media? For example, your company website, emails to a listserv, a press release, etc.

    _____

For further guidance on developing social media influencer led-content, consult **this step-by-step guide** developed in partnership with Invisible Hand. With your project plan established, the guide will walk your team through each step of the influencer collaboration process, from choosing a partner to boosting a final social media post.

Conclusion

In this toolkit, we endeavored to include the top resources and insights collected from the past 18 months of collaborative learning and storytelling with the Immigrants Belong Community of Narrative Practice. However, the work of building infrastructure for narrative change in the digital space is just beginning. As the internet continues to reshape nearly every aspect of our society, we must continue to adapt to quickly changing new technologies and landscapes, and consistently address the new challenges that they present. Our work is only just beginning.

Special thanks to our partners who have contributed to, supported, and inspired this work:

- Harmony Labs
- Invisible Hand
- Race Forward's Butterfly Lab
- Tides
- The Immigrants Belong Community of Narrative Practice