

*James Savage of the Fund for Global Human Rights, Julie Broome of Ariadne and Andrew Maisel of Open Society Foundations joined consultant Winifred Olliff of Human Rights Funders Network for a conversation to reflect on HRFN and Ariadne's recent Webinar series [Communicating Human Rights and Social Change: A Dialogue Series Among Funders](#) initiated by the Communicating Human Rights and Social Change community and co-sponsored by Ariadne, the Open Society Foundations, and Global Dialogue. The series included three Webinars that featured tactics and tools for communicating narrative change presented by grantmakers and narrative change practitioners around the world. This dialogue series fits within a larger discussion that is happening in the global human rights community around narrative change work and you can find links to more resources below.*

## **Why engage in this dialogue around narrative change now?**

Things happen in courtrooms or in front of legislative bodies, but there's not broad understanding and public support for what these organizations are doing. That's encouraged funders to think about how they can build that capacity in the sector.

— Julie Broome, Ariadne

Winifred: We'd like to better understand how each of you feels connected with work on narratives and how this fits in with the bigger picture of your work. Why do you think it is important for funders to be engaged with this topic at this time and what motivated you to get involved with this dialogue?

Julie: In the current context, human rights are facing a backlash and it's important for organizations to create a narrative that shows the value of their work. There's been a recognition over the past few years that human rights organizations and other types of social change organizations, because they're so busy doing their core work, haven't put as much time into communicating what they do and why that work is important in people's lives. Things happen in courtrooms or in front of legislative bodies, but there's not broad understanding and public support for what these organizations are doing. That's encouraged funders to think about how they can build that capacity in the sector.

Andrew: I agree! In the US context, we have the current political landscape along with rapidly changing racial and generational demographics. This has contributed to a growing othering

framework in the United States. It's critical for us to combat those deep-rooted narratives by creating our own narrative that is more inclusive and representative of the America we seek to become. This is an emerging space for OSF and philanthropy writ large. We can all gain from these dialogues when we step out of our silos and think about this from a human rights perspective and a global perspective. This allows us to think more strategically about what works and what doesn't, and those are tough but important conversations.

James: In the last decade or so, those who are driving attacks have realized the power of narrative and culture and made it a central plank of their strategies. There's a dawning realization among funders that this is actually a central issue. There is real appetite for understanding what some of the changes are that need to be made at the tactical, organizational, and field levels, and what our role as funders is in that. We are at the foothills of learning and doing, and learning by doing.

Winifred: It seems like part of what is driving this desire to be involved in this conversation now is a recognition of the urgent need for this work in response to the highly effective narratives that are working against us in our specific contexts and in the larger world. There's some acknowledgment that we need to step out of our issue areas and work together. Can you tell us more about the importance of coordination among funders?

Julie: We want to create narratives that are powerful and that are effective. Coordination on the funders' side to support this at scale and in a coherent way is going to be much more effective than many small initiatives.

Andrew: As we get more aware of the importance of narrative and culture change within all aspects of our work from advocacy to organizing, it's important to be on the same page definitionally. What are we talking about when we talk about narrative change? That's been surprisingly more of a struggle than we realized. [Andrew laughs.]

James: It's been both interesting and slightly humorous to see the number of conversations we're having with one another where we say, "We definitely need to do this!" Now, 2020 is the year when we need to actually do it and move forward. I don't think it's going to be one massive uber comms plan and metanarrative to rule them all. It's about finding the connectivity among initiatives and making sure there's dynamism, fluidity and resource sharing.

Winifred: Thanks, James! One of the really interesting things you just said was about how these conversations have been happening and seem to be gaining traction, yet it seems to be difficult for funders to take the next step to actually put these ideas into practice. Do you have any insight into why that's so challenging right now?

James: We're not agile enough to pivot to new approaches and new collaborations. It's one thing to brainstorm and ideate in an abstract space, and another to translate that into practice,

particularly when working with power dynamics and in new modalities. There's a question of having to internally advocate for time and money to work on it. Then there's the challenge of aligning grantees in a way that doesn't force their agendas. There are layers of challenges and it will take time.

Julie: It is always very difficult when you have foundations with different decision-makers, focus areas, and guidelines, to come together in true partnership and collaboration. This topic is new and foundations don't necessarily have well-developed approaches to this work. There is always that temptation to start from the beginning and to just try to do something. Part of the role that we as Ariadne or HRFN play is to ask people to step back and look at what others are doing. It takes a bit of time for people to start to look around and see what is already there and what can be built on.

## **What ideas do you hope people take away from this Webinar series on narrative change?**

While the issues we're tackling may be different, narrative and culture change is global. If we are not thinking about this as a global fight, we're losing.

— *Andrew Maisel, Open Society Foundations*

**Winifred:** So it seems like either it's a huge challenge to get this work resourced, or people are very willing to jump right in without fully taking in what people have already done in the area. What other main ideas do you hope funders and/or people doing this work take away from this Webinar series?

**James:** Anat [Shenker-Osorio] underscored the importance of evidence-led research to underpin this work, and I think this was reinforced by Thomas [Coombes] and Neil [Crowther]. That also goes beyond communications. César [Rodriguez-Garavito] explained how JustLabs and the Fund are working with the groups that are trying to embody that narrative, not just communicate it.

**Julie:** We can think about what we have in common rather than focusing on the details that divide us in these battles. That helps us get further away from the polarized environment in which we're trapped right now.

**Andrew:** Julie, I think you said it perfectly! We need to share a story of what we want to become, what our values are and what are we for and what are we against, while recognizing a past but also showing a path forward for all to thrive. That shared story is super critical.

**Winifred:** We've talked a lot about venturing outside of our own contexts and issue areas to encourage more collaboration and coherence. How do you see these connections across geographies and issue areas as relevant to this conversation?

**Andrew:** While the issues we're tackling may be different, narrative and culture change is global. If we are not thinking about this as a global fight, we're losing. The more we are talking to one another, the more we realize that the issues and contexts may be different but the work is the same. The rise of authoritarian populism in the US and abroad is one connection that is clear as day! So what can we in the US learn from what folks are doing in Europe and elsewhere to inform our strategies and our understanding of the world?

**James:** Reaching language communities of activists and funders outside of our anglophile bubble is a constant challenge that I think we've all got to be alive to. The resources that are going to narrative work in the US or Western Europe far outstrip what's being invested in doing narrative work in the other half of the world and in other languages. We need to up our game in that area as well.

**Winifred:** That is so important! The issues are interconnected and overlapping in so many ways, so the approach can't be just about zeroing in on this one issue, but should be about thinking about relationships among issues.

## **How do we move forward together in this work?**

We need to be asking ourselves what it means to do narrative work and for grantees to do narrative work at the tactical level. It's not about just expressing your narrative but about being your narrative. What's coming down the line? How will that change the nature of narrative work? It will change underneath our feet even as we're trying to get our act together and collaborate.

— James Savage, *Fund for Global Human Rights*

Let's talk about the future now! Where do you envision this work is headed in the future, what do you imagine the role of funders will be in supporting that, and what opportunities and challenges do you see on the road ahead?

**Andrew:** There will be more robust and more aligned funding around narrative change. There is already a growing awareness that narrative change is necessary for us to affect change in all aspects of the work we do.

**James:** We need to be asking ourselves what it means to do narrative work and for grantees to do narrative work at the tactical level. It's not about just expressing your narrative but about being your narrative. In time, I would like to see narrative and communications work recognized as being just as important as advocacy and being invested in and integrated in the same way.

**Julie:** There's a lot of momentum right now on the donor side. There's a lot happening right now, and part of the challenge is just linking that up. There are people talking to each other, and more and more people calling for those of us funding social change and human rights to have a more aligned and scaled strategy to respond to what's happening on the right. I feel like it will take off and grow if we can all keep heading in the same general direction of travel.

**Winifred:** What about challenges?

**James:** There's a lot of infrastructure and support that is needed. We've got so much more that needs to be done and that heavy lifting that takes time. I think there are substantial

roadblocks. Not to mention, what's coming down the line? How will that change the nature of narrative work? It will change underneath our feet even as we're trying to get our act together and collaborate. We've got to have agility and foresight. We need space for risk, experimentation, allowing for failure, and letting groups give it a go.

**Andrew:** The scary thing for philanthropy is the reality that combating deep-rooted toxic narratives is a long-term generational fight. We as funders need to have that understanding and the funding endurance necessary to support the work that needs to be done over many grant cycles.

**Julie:** I think that's a really important point and, unfortunately, I don't know any foundations that have a funding cycle long enough! [Julie laughs.]

**Winifred:** This theme around coordination seems to be coming up over and over again: this idea that funders need to be in this together over the long haul. [Winifred laughs.] That's hopefully where we're going with this future vision!

## Resources about narrative change

To accompany this dialogue, we are providing links to some resources about narrative change. This list is by no means comprehensive. Please email [engagement@hrfn.org](mailto:engagement@hrfn.org) if you know of resources that should be added to this list.

[Research by Anat Shenker-Osorio](#)

[Resources on Communicating Social Change compiled by Jennifer Lentfer](#)

[A Guide to Hope-based Communications by Thomas Coombes](#)

[Series on Positive Narratives to Mobilize for Change from Open Global Rights](#)

[Resource library from the Narrative Initiative](#)

## About us

### **James Savage, Global Fund for Human Rights**

James joined the Global Fund for Human Rights in February 2016 as program officer for the Enabling Environment for Human Rights Defenders program. From 1999 – 2016, James worked for Amnesty International UK, where he led the organization’s work for and with individuals at risk, including human rights defenders and most recently, served as director of its Human Rights Defenders Programme. He has also worked in a variety of human rights campaigning and activism roles with AIUK including mobilising youth, student, and trade union activists. In 1994, James became involved in human rights activism with Peace Brigades International (PBI), taking a variety of roles working in PBI’s UK national group and International Office, and from 2002 – 2003 as a field volunteer for PBI in Colombia, which involved accompanying and supporting human rights defenders at risk from intimidation, stigmatization, or attack. Currently, James sits on the Advisory Board of the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the University of York and the Funders Initiative for Civil Society (FICS) a collaborative donor initiative on civic space. He is co-editor of several academic journals special issues including the Journal of Human Rights Practice’s “Protection of Human Rights Defenders” and the International Journal of Human Rights’ “Critical Perspectives on Security and Protection of Human Rights Defenders,” as well as co-author of ‘Power and Protection,’ a multimedia resource from JASS (Just Associates). He holds a BA in History from University College London and a master’s degree in Latin American studies from the University of London. James works out of the Fund’s European office in London.

### **Andrew Maisel, Open Society Foundations**

Andrew Maisel is an acting program officer with Open Society-U.S. at Open Society Foundations. Maisel works on the grant making portfolios related to racial justice, narrative change, and the Soros Equality Fellowship. Maisel previously served as senior policy associate focusing on federal criminal and racial justice advocacy efforts for the Open Society Policy Center. Prior to joining Open Society, he worked for Amnesty International USA and the field office of United States Senator Russ Feingold (WI-D). Maisel holds a dual degree in political science and history from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a MPP from Georgetown University. He lives in Washington, D.C.

### **Julie Broome, Ariadne**

Julie became Director of Ariadne in June 2016. Prior to that, she was Director of Programmes at the Sigrid Rausing Trust. She worked at the Trust for seven years in a number of capacities, most notably Head of Human Rights, before becoming Director of Programmes in 2014. Before joining the Trust she was Programme Director at the CEELI Institute in Prague, where she was responsible for conducting rule of law-related trainings for judges and lawyers from countries undergoing transition. Previously, she was a Programme Manager for Central and Eastern Europe with the American Bar Association's Rule of Law Initiative, and a Programme Associate at the Henry M Jackson Foundation in Seattle.

### **Winifred Olliff, Human Rights Funders Network**

Winifred Olliff is an independent philanthropy and management consultant who supported engagement at Human Rights Funders Network from September 2019 through January 2020. Her consulting practice focuses on growing and strengthening international networks and on experimentation with tools and techniques to enable funders to share power and more effectively support grantees. She has been active at the intersection of technology and civil society throughout her fifteen-year career in the nonprofit sector. Before launching her consulting practice in 2019, Winifred was engaged as Senior Program Officer at the Wikimedia Foundation, with a focus on innovations in international participatory grantmaking practice and organizational effectiveness.