

Defining Responsible Storytelling in a Digital Era

Submitted by the Transparency and Accountability Initiative (TAI) to the World Economic Forum (WEF) working group on Mobilising and Inspiring Action with Technology. This brief was written by Jed Miller of 3 Bridges, digital strategist and lead author of TAI's 2018 report, "The Story Behind the Story," and draws on a live consultation convened by TAI and partners in November, 2019, as well as TAI's ongoing work supporting insight, learning and adaptation by donors supporting transparency, governance and more effective, responsible uses of digital tools.

For civil society, the processes of data sharing and advocacy storytelling are burdened with opportunity. The same burst of technological innovation that has improved the speed of information, and the access of communities to tools and networks, has also increased the vulnerability of communities and multiplied the number of mistakes organizations can make.

Although some such mistakes are conventional—such as a wasted multimedia budget or a Twitter feed with boring posts—the risks associated with digital mistakes are high and rising. Systems that allow activists to coordinate also enable corporations and governments to target protesters. A Congolese nurse in a video that secures millions in charitable donations may never see any of those funds (or even the video). We can be so eager to leverage digital tools to solve intractable problems that we sometimes enlist newer tools in older patterns of capacity development that lack sufficient grounding in strategy.

In a peer consultation and in recent research by TAI, civil society groups shared exciting and practical examples of digital advocacy, but these same colleagues also revealed an urgent interest in reducing technology-based asymmetries of power, in shortening tech hype cycles, and in using technology not in newer ways but in wiser ones: to promote people over institutions, and to prize learning at least as much the chance to claim success.

People aren't just asking what's possible in a digital era, they're asking what's responsible and appropriate to the stories and lived realities of others.

I. End the conflict between data and stories.

Data and storytelling are set in unnecessary opposition to each other in CSO communications, and this tension has been heightened by the digital takeover of advocacy communications. The advent of big data and new data visualization tools has not solved the problems of effective storytelling or framing; nor has the embrace of multimedia and video replaced the need for hard evidence in policy or advocacy.

Participants in TAI's November consultation in Washington, D.C., acknowledged that the problem of turning information into compelling advocacy is not new; it predates the first Industrial Revolution. But attendees—and guests from Accountability Lab, the Aspen Institute, Mobilisation Lab and the Open Gov Hub—all agreed that the digital era and the popularity of "data-driven" approaches have added new pressures to a longstanding debate over whether figures or feelings are more persuasive.

1. End the battle between facts and emotions.

Some consultation participants said that traditional stories fall short as advocacy tools—especially in the policy sector, where hard statistics carry great weight—while others complained that advocacy audiences cannot absorb data points, and require stories as a delivery system for information.

The greater consensus, however, was that the conflict between data and storytelling is itself a hindrance, and that advocacy is most effective when facts and feelings work in tandem. "No numbers without stories," said David Devlin-Foltz of the Aspen Institute, "and no stories without numbers."

To help bridge the divide between data-driven advocacy and stories unmoored from proofs, civil society has sought to build its capacity for data interpretation and data journalism, bringing inside our organizations the tools and skills to tell stories with data and through data.

WEF's January 2019 whitepaper, "Civil Society in the Fourth Industrial Revolution," notes several international projects to improve digital literacy, including some that focus on transforming not only staff capacity but organizational culture. Similar efforts like the Publish What You Pay Data Extractors program and the School of Data have worked to help organizations deepen their investment in data interpretation, not simply data tools, through staff development and long-term fellowships.

2. Make human voice a priority.

Authenticity is a fundamental part of effective storytelling. Even propaganda and misinformation succeed in part because they tap into people's feelings about what is true. Civil society storytellers strive to create a human connection between issue messengers and advocacy audiences. Another lesson from TAI's consultation and research is that technology, used thoughtfully, can amplify the human elements of policy and governance stories.

The Open Gov Hub recently collaborated with TAI and audio pioneers Storycorps to launch a podcast series, "Open Gov Stories", in which advocates and practitioners from around the world reflect on their personal histories in the open government

movement. Project lead and Open Gov Hub director Nada Zohdy said the audio interviews help to humanize the urgent but policy-centric work of open government. She told our consultation group that the intimacy of the Storycorps format—based on conversational interviews between two friends or colleagues—delivers a more powerful message than any "jargon and technical arguments."

With its grassroots model for story collection, Storycorps helps civil society and others make information more readily accessible through the fast, low-tech medium of audio, and more easily relatable by delivering expert stories with a human voice. Audio is just one of the digital tools that civil society groups are enlisting to humanize policy and advocacy information. Over the last year, two of the leaders in online mapping have launched add-ons to make their map tools more story-friendly. Mapbox created a new "Interactive Storytelling" template to allow groups without the technology resources of a news organization or large NGO to annotate stories more easily, because "using maps as the canvas can make them more understandable, powerful, and memorable." The StoryMaps tool created by ArcGIS offers a similar hybrid between data visualization and narrative. (The Open Gov Stories platform, which is built on this system, is a demonstration of how a small staff with modest tech skills can use new, story-friendly tools to go beyond text to humanize development and governance initiatives.)

II. Change the definition of "stories" and the process behind them.

In TAI's storytelling report, "The Story Behind the Story," research revealed that advocates and their donors tend to work from a narrow definition of stories. Information is not a story without a "hero," for instance. Results are not results unless they are welcome and expected. And neither "process narratives" from our work—such as evaluations—nor cultural narratives that underlie social conflicts seem at first to offer good material.

But the research findings and our WEF consultation affirmed that the opportunities to activate stories and story tools for change increase when we look beyond impact case studies, "story arcs" or game-changing viral videos.

1. Diversify the meaning of "results."

Consultation members in Washington discussed the value of program data and outputs even when the results are not unqualified success—or when the outcomes are not demonstrable results. When we "allow space for failure stories," one group noted, we find ourselves with more stories to tell and, perhaps more importantly, more chances to distill lessons for future work.

By permitting—or even promoting—stories of incremental results, or of program adaptation, we can help shift our sector away from the prevailing myths, positive or negative, about the role of technology in advocacy. Stories of failure make

complexity and failure safer to reveal, especially when grantmakers and larger NGOs are willing to amplify those stories. In this way, stories are a tool not only for documentation and advocacy, but for adaptation by the civil society sector itself.

When we tell stories about unexpected outcomes, we also preserve a richer flow of information than by simply documenting binary successes and failures. TAI's research offers examples of more open-ended documentation approaches, including the "Most Significant Change" method, and efforts by non-profit data leader Guidestar (now Candid) to expand their grants information systems with "containers for all the story types," seeking to codify and normalize a wider range of project outcomes by building them into the infrastructure of grantmaking.

Two experts at the consultation event urged civil society to look beyond individual stories to the power of "narrative change" in advocacy. David Devlin-Foltz of the Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program called narratives "mental models" that frame our understanding of the world at a deeper level than any individual story. Michael Silberman of MobLab talked about using storytelling "in a systems change context." He said, "We're well trained to think about what kind of laws and policies we need to change, but we forget this equally important work to change the stories that define our society." Some environmental groups, for instance, have shifted their approach to the climate debate from questions of legislation to questions of mutual survival and the rights of species to exist.

Silberman cited the work of <u>The Narrative Initiative</u>, whose recommendations also informed TAI's findings on story. The Narrative Initiative has been identifying whether and how technology can track these deeper narratives as they influence discourse and culture. The <u>Media Cloud</u> search tools developed at MIT and the <u>Culture Hack</u> approach from The Rules are two examples of "narrative tech."

2. Reevaluate evaluation practices.

To establish new ways of describing our work and its results, civil society needs to explore and promote new models of evaluation—the practice that codifies our definitions of results, and influences program design and budgets for foundations, multilaterals, and the large and small organizations who depend on those funds.

We need an evolution in evaluation in part because evaluation is too often forced into competition with storytelling, as we heard during the TAI consultation and in prior TAI research. Communicators and advocates find it challenging to refine drier findings into compelling messages, while researchers, as one donor told TAI, "don't like being edited." As we work to turn data into shareable information, we should recognize that some information is not only trapped in PDFs, it's trapped in PhDs.

But we also need to rethink evaluation because too often the terms of evaluation set the terms of success—and the design of programs themselves—in ways that can

limit measurement of the most significant outcomes and obstacles. Furthermore, because evaluative activities so often lag behind program activities, evaluators are dependent on stakeholder accounts that are naturally imperfect, and susceptible to bias and self-interest.

As one civil society leader told TAI, "When criteria—not only for success, but also for the range of possible outcomes—are set from outside the local project community, it becomes much harder to get an accurate story of results."

In the recently concluded Making All Voices Count project (also cited in WEF's January 2019 whitepaper), researchers advocated an adaptive, ground-truthed approach for INGOs seeking to measure the outcomes of technology for accountability. "Uncritical attitudes towards new technologies," they concluded, "risk narrowing the frame of necessary debates."

Seeking to acknowledge the complexity of accountability work—and the "hidden assumptions" that can limit practitioners—MAVC author Vanessa Herringshaw <u>asked</u> if there is a "mismatch" between "narrowly focussed, quantitative, case-control evaluations favoured by some funders, and the messier realities of system-wide, adaptive programming approaches?"

More civil society funders are recognizing the need for flexibility in reporting and evaluative inputs, including taking advantage of different media and technologies. For example, Open Society Foundations now offer a menu of grant reporting options—including the use of video content—and work with grantees to determine the appropriate measurement tools.

When it comes to program evaluations, another foundation officer told TAI simply, "Perhaps we are not asking the right question."

3. Let the story—and the grantee—lead.

For donors and advocates to broaden our understanding about possible outcomes requires a shift not just in expectations, but in the relationship between those who plan projects and those who work locally and day to day. At every stage of a technology project, we should be agile enough to incorporate ideas outside the limits originally defined for the work.

In TAI's storytelling research, multiple respondents—from large donors to developing world grantees—talked about the natural pressures that make it hard to adjust project plans in the face of implementation realities. This pressure is, at its root, a storytelling problem. Program staff may under-report challenges out of a fundamental insecurity: "the need to justify their paychecks," as one grantee put it. This same disincentive to reporting challenges reaches into donor offices. Several

program officers acknowledged a "top-down appetite for results" in their work. At every level of the civil society community, bad news does not travel upward easily.

But research suggests that when grant recipients take the initiative to share challenges with donors, honest conversations can yield effective changes to project plans and outcomes. In <u>one example</u> from Making All Voices Count, a South African technology platform to track public services did not gain sufficient traction to enable donor-supported research to move forward, but, by inserting an unplanned research phase into the project, the local team and its MAVC donors were able to gain missing insights and pivot their civic tech work.

Another organization operating in a low-income context told a similar story to TAI. "Three months into a project," they said, "we found what we had designed was no longer relevant. We raised it with the funder, and leaders sat down with us to discuss." The resulting meeting led to a midstream adaptation of the project. "They really appreciated it," the grantee added. "It was a positive surprise for us."

In both these examples, local groups took the initiative to help donor groups adjust their expectations. Foundations and INGOs have the opportunity to design technology programs and program evaluations to foster more truth-telling by local partners, but this adjustment requires higher-capacity groups to let lower-capacity groups lead the way.

At TAI's WEF consultation, evaluation expert David Devlin-Foltz encouraged international groups to "be humble about how we tell our stories." Another participant, videographer Chris Northcross, reminded colleagues simply: "Listen to where the story goes."

4. Shift the culture of grantmaking—and grantmakers.

If civil society is governed by how we define and measure outcomes, then the donors who fund research and evaluation govern those definitions through their choices. To set new standards for transformative, responsible digital strategies, donor organizations need to shift their technology grantmaking to foster greater humility about the power of tech, about the definition of success and, most importantly, about the primacy of donor voices in civil society culture.

As donors promote new tools that mitigate power imbalances, they should be mindful of the power dynamics in their own work: between under-resourced communities and the local organizations that support them; between local organizations and better-resourced INGOs; and between INGOs and the donors and governments on whose support they rely.

More transparent and accountable uses of technology require vigilance among INGOs and their donors over their own habits. Grantmakers can extend hype cycles

by offering attractive grants that focus narrowly on data capacity or storytelling tools, or they can turn from building grantees' capacity for technology to building civil society's capacity for change.

To shift grantmaking culture toward wiser technology decisions, donors can begin at home, by questioning their own assumptions and listening differently to grantees and also to internal advocates for change. At TAI's consultation, Michael Silberman of MobLab said resistance to change is common in organizations, and invited digital and storytelling experts to push from inside when they meet that resistance.

Civil society groups are also looking beyond our own sector to pioneer new models of storytelling and information dissemination. Many NGOs are using foundation funding to create permanent <u>internal newsrooms</u>. To foster homegrown storytelling, an increasing number of donors are <u>supporting local journalists</u> in under-resourced areas. And philanthropies are forging ambitious <u>partnerships with filmmakers</u> to tell advocacy stories to a wider audience, and to uplift local voices and local storytellers.

Experts at the TAI consultation also noted the urgent need for civil society attention and education regarding data governance. WEF's January 2019 whitepaper cites the collaboration between the UK government and the Open Data Institute to pilot "data trusts," and participants at the TAI consultation also mentioned the Data Governance Research Network founded by Duke University and Digital Public. We must mobilize to address the unstable ecosystem and missing infrastructure surrounding the mass collection of data, including by civil society. The regulations, norms, and, indeed, the stories we develop will determine the degree of harm society faces in the digital era and the strength of the remedies we are able to find.

As organizations develop a culture of awareness and humility in technology grantmaking, donors in particular have an additional responsibility to share knowledge with their grantee networks and the wider community. When donors adopt stronger habits of realism over hype and self-scrutiny over self-promotion, they grant permission to grantees, researchers and other decision-makers to modify their expectations of new tools and to "let bad news travel upward."

III. Listen responsibly to use tech responsibly.

Technologies for the collection and analysis of information are more powerful, distributed and omnipresent than they have ever been. The widespread use of the internet and mobile devices can also collect data passively and invisibly. Civil society, government and the private sector have largely embraced these new opportunities for research and evidence-based policy-making, but they are beginning to confront digital technology's capacity to accelerate disempowerment, oppression and harm.

When governments or corporations collect data on people, they increase the risk that the data's use will breach the boundaries of privacy or human rights. Indeed, we are in an era of unprecedented uncertainty in which neither the scope of technology's consequences nor the principles of right action are understood or agreed.

Civil society is working with increasing urgency to address the more dire risks of the digital era—including expanded state surveillance and the misuse of algorithms that deepen disparities in justice and public services. As we enlist technology to tell stories and interpret information, we must also safeguard our approaches against harms that are less immediate, but no less insidious—including the exploitation of audiences as marketing targets; the reduction of personal stories to generic tropes; mismatches between our dissemination tools and our most important communities; and the tendency of wealthier, higher-capacity groups to extract stories from poorer communities, rather than collaborating with lower-capacity groups on more equal terms.

Context matters even more as the risks of inequality and exploitation increase. In short, the final draft of your story may matter less than the steps you take to listen and learn.

1. Better delivery systems do not guarantee better impacts.

Digital tools enable advocacy groups to disseminate stories remotely and rapidly, and to favor the stories and the formats that are best suited to the digital medium: text and imagery that are easily read, easily shared and designed to spur "users" to pass messages along.

But the same systems that make email and social media powerful channels for advocacy messages rest on tools that, left unattended, corral audiences into "filter bubbles" that increase their vulnerability to misinformation campaigns, extreme polarization and non-state surveillance for market and media exploitation.

Some consultation participants said advocates need to interrogate our assumptions about audiences and their technology habits. For instance, the Rockefeller Foundation supported a pioneering <u>use of virtual reality</u> to tell stories about indigenous communities in Nepal, but a report of results focuses on the reactions of donor peers and teammates, raising the question of impact or replicability for lower-tech audiences and affected communities.

The open government movement is an instructive example of how to evolve from simple assumptions about the role of technology in structural change. As open government work has moved from infancy into adolescence, initiatives like the Open Government Partnership and the Sustainable Development Goals have moved away from an assumption that data and data platforms will herald an age of accountability, to a more mature approach that prioritizes political economy, local collaborations, and a more design-driven approach to when and how data drives effective policy decisions. Technology is not a magic wand in this more pragmatic

approach, but rather an area of opportunity that can support transformative approaches when deployed with responsible practices, <u>strong coordination</u>, and, as we heard in November from Accountability Lab and Open Gov Hub, an openness to low-tech (or "no-tech") approaches.

2. A story can be memorable without being simplistic.

The digital medium can encourage oversimplification. Many international NGOs already rely on imagery that reassures or startles viewers over stories that reflect the complex realities of development or governance. At the Washington consultation, several participants recommended that civil society go beyond "poverty porn" in our storytelling practices.

The CSOs who participated in TAI's storytelling research also complained about the sector's resistance to stories of complexity. One advocate said that the pressure to tell "presentable" stories often "takes reality away." To quote the Narrative Initiative, "Narratives are messy. Nonlinear, emotional and contradictory." Whether we are presenting data points, vivid personal stories, or more factual reporting, we face a choice between showing complexity or polishing complexity to something more "presentable." Digital tools can be used for either one.

3. Community habits are more important than technology opportunities.

Accountability Lab, who <u>foster integrity movements</u> driven by local groups, extol the value of in-person advocacy over digital-only methods, and the use of the visual and performing arts. Their advice during the consultation was to seek "low-tech wins." For many groups, "conversations under the tree" are more persuasive, more memorable and more accessible than SMS campaigns or viral videos, said Cheri-Leigh Erasmus, Accountability Lab global learning director.

Indeed, the danger in any "hype cycle" around technology use is not only that the tools will not deliver on their promises, but also that organizations will allow their strategy to be driven by the tech opportunity, instead of using tech in support of strategy.

When civil society enlists tools for information sharing, we should ask, Who is this for? Sometimes that means ensuring that our technology is best suited to our intended audiences—audio instead of video, for example, or murals instead of PowerPoint slides. And sometimes that means asking if our stories acknowledge the lived experience of our audience, or simply reflect and reinforce our own perspectives. Tools are an obvious way to enact privilege, but they are not the only way—and we should remember that storytelling is itself a tool.

4. Stories are not an extractive resource.

From its 2017 storytelling research through the recent WEF consultation on data interpretation and storytelling, TAI has been exploring how civil society creates impact stories, looking at not only the content and format of the stories we share, but also the planning, collaboration and habits that shape civil society stories.

One of TAI's key research findings was that how we collect stories is as significant as how we package or distribute them. Like any supply chain, the process of story collection and production can be efficient or broken, fair or compromised. In an interview, one CSO leader said that organizations can maintain authenticity in their reporting by prioritizing community relationships and local presence. "The closer you are to the community," they said, "the more you encounter the story culture."

When we devalue local collaboration our stories become "extractive." In her consultation presentation, Cheri-Leigh Erasmus called on civil society and its donors to ensure that the stories and voices we amplify are written and driven by the subjects of those stories—not merely by wealthy, outsider institutions. Accountability Lab advises advocates to "begin by listening, ensure we build trust over time and know that local problems require local solutions."

As we welcome technology's promise of greater access for more remote, less developed communities, how can developed nations avoid making the same mistakes with mobile phones or data tools that we've made in economic development or resource extraction?

5. Pass the microphone.

One important step to reduce the power imbalance between story-rich communities and technology-rich institutions for NGOs to support the capacity of local groups to tell their own stories. But "donor-delivered consulting is limited," as noted in TAI's 2018 storytelling report. Consultants and capacity development teams too often develop capacity "at" grantees instead of "with" them.

Accountability Lab asked civil society groups to help ensure that stories become "self-advocacy" tools, not simply surrogate capacity in the form of publishing tools or one-off communications trainings, which often come with burden of maintenance and skills-retention. MobLab, who champion people-powered campaigning, advise organizations to invest in movements by investing in the crowd, not in themselves. "The right people to be telling the story," said Michael Silberman, "are not you."

In one example of technology facilitating local capacity, consultation participants the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT) organized a <u>Data On the Streets</u> rally in 2018. The 2018 event signed up more than 1,200 people in three countries to check the on-site condition of public projects identified using published datasets.

The project resulted in nearly 2000 crowd-sourced photos, videos and infographics from Chile, Colombia and Mexico, according to GIFT.

The Who Tells the Story guide by research scientist Kate Marple suggests another model for changing the agency between communities and NGO storytellers. It offers a toolkit for telling stories with "meaningful input from the people those stories are about or who are most affected by the policy or issue in question."

A CSO founder interviewed by TAI said bluntly, "Donors tell success stories that tend to help the donor look successful, even when the success was a grantee's success. It would be great if donor storytelling focused more on helping grantees to sustain their own work for the future."

Civil society organizations—as we seek to hold power to account—can lose sight of the power imbalances that haunt our own work. As we collect and deploy data, how do we protect data subjects from the unintended consequences of being digitized? As we seek others' stories to fuel our advocacy, how do we resist the habits and rewards of making ourselves the story? The dangers of storytelling are not unique to the digital era—storytelling increases exposure and degrades context in any medium. But as digital information becomes more mercurial and consensus more elusive, civil society bears a more urgent responsibility to safeguard the sovereignty of other people's data and stories.

IV. Recommendations

To maximize the opportunity of the digital age and the proliferation of data streams and data tools, civil society and the donors supporting it must be vigilant about the new risks of the "Fourth Industrial Revolution"—permanent surveillance, loss of data control, weaponization of attention—and we must be equally mindful of the old habits that hobble effective advocacy and storytelling: asymmetries of power, inauthenticity, and misplaced enthusiasm for technology as a solution instead of as a medium.

Because the digital ecosystem widens and accelerates positive and negative effects, the burden of responsible adoption of these tools is great. Our sector should broaden its definition of responsible data practices from protecting only privacy to protecting the authentic voices of the communities whose stories we seek. And because donor organizations have a disproportionate influence on NGO practices, TAI advises donor agencies and foundations to be especially deliberate in how they balance technology adoption with self-scrutiny, for faster cycles of learning and adaptation.

To support good stewardship of the digital opportunity, those consulted pointed to several principles to guide civil society groups, advocates, donors, researchers and practitioners:

- "Listen to where the story goes," even if that means telling stories we did not plan to tell.
- * Redesign evaluation practice to elevate incremental progress, permit failure and codify the limitations of digital solutions. "Ask the right question."
- Ensure the sovereignty of communities over their stories the same way we strive to do for their data or their land. Avoid "extractive storytelling."
- Develop risk awareness as enthusiastically as technology capacity. Prioritize trainings on misinformation, data security, and data rights on equal footing with other capacity development efforts.
- Donors should not just give grants, they should grant power. In capacity development for technology use, organizations should prioritize the transfer of sustainable know-how; implementation literacy, not only data literacy.
- ❖ Be humble and learn. To make "digital" more than a buzzword, organizations may need to adopt different processes and habits—from embracing low-tech, to agile evaluation practices, to co-designing programs with communities or grantees.
- Donors in particular, as they evolve, need to make their experiments in vulnerability visible, and to reward other groups for similar practices.

The digital revolution has already offered devastating lessons about unintended consequences, along with the more mundane disappointments of "inflated expectations and hype," per WEF's January 2019 whitepaper. But despite the ground truth shared by Accountability Lab, that often "low tech wins," civil society still faces pressure "to search for use cases for these emerging technologies," as WEF noted. Some may be very valid, some may be a distraction.

Revolutions, historically, leave a stigma on the habits and structures that precede them. Technology hype cycles similarly overvalue the potential of emerging methods and tend to devalue the tools and practices that developed in the past, often through multiple cycles of trial, error and refinement.

Civil society technologists lament the capacity gaps that impede adoption of valuable new tools, but as we push ahead to close that gap, we should also note the gap between the new methods and the approaches we are leaving behind, which may be better suited to local realities—and even to our own capacities. This "wisdom gap" can further widen the more familiar, persistent gap between tech opportunities and local skills.

Consultation participants emphasized the value of locally-informed advocacy strategies, and stories created by and for the communities most affected by any social challenge. To act on their advice, organizations must temper our impulse to embrace the new with a thoughtful examination of our habits of information collection and story development. TAI's research has shown that the process by which advocates create stories determines how authentic and ultimately persuasive our stories can become.

Because their interests and decisions help steer the civil society agenda, donor groups can shape the culture of storytelling and communications across the wider sector. As donors adopt stronger practices of listening and higher tolerance for technology mistakes or unanticipated outcomes, their adaptability will naturally create greater permission for other civil society actors to acknowledge challenges, lessons and unknowns. The civil society sector will adjust to new digital realities more rapidly if we document and celebrate the ways we have not yet gotten our own story straight.

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