

Waging Nonviolence

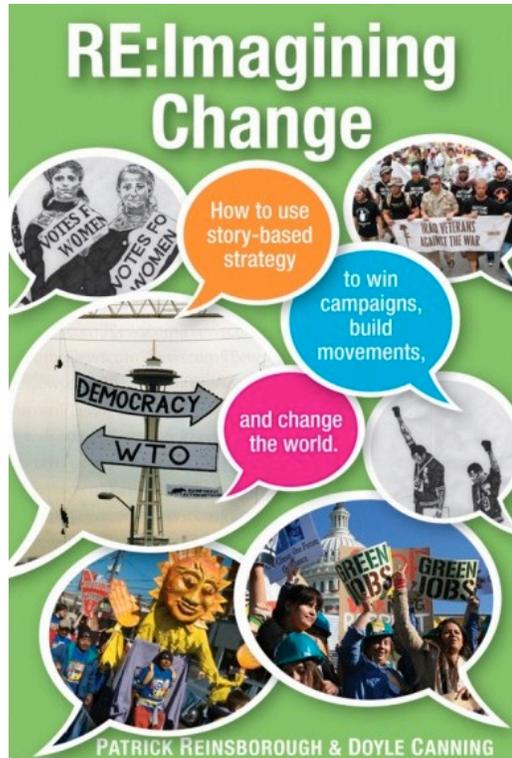
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SmartMeme pioneers social change storytelling

by [Bryan Farrell](#) | February 21, 2011, 1:48 pm



In the introduction of his autobiography Mohandas Gandhi avoids the conceit inherent in writing about oneself by saying, “I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth.” As with most things relating to nonviolence, Gandhi seems to have been the first to realize the importance of storytelling. He goes on to say, “I believe, or at least flatter myself with the belief, that a connected account of all these experiments will not be without benefit to the reader.” Nearly a century later, I’m sure few would disagree. We all know about Gandhi’s triumphs because he was so good about documenting them—a practice which facilitated their transmission to various peoples

and cultures through various mediums and formats.

While the world continues to learn much from Gandhi in regards to nonviolent strategy and living, little attention has been paid to the skillful storytelling that taught us in the first place. A group called [SmartMeme](#), however, is working to change that. Since 2002, it has trained over 2,000 activists and worked with 100 organizations, promoting what it calls a “story-based strategy” that uses “the power of narrative to advance a holistic vision of grassroots social change.”

Recently, SmartMeme released a book called *Re:Imagining Change* in which co-founder Patrick Reinsborough and co-director Doyle Canning explain their vision for social change. After reading this uniquely informative book, I contacted Reinsborough and Canning to learn more about their work.

In the following interview, these creative strategists discuss meme making, building a social movement to respond to the climate crisis and the role of technology in spreading messages.

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WNV: Can you explain the role of memes in modern society and why you chose to use that word to represent your organization’s focus on storytelling?

Patrick Reinsborough: We come to social change storytelling from the perspective that humans are narrative animals who make meaning of the world around us through narrative. Storytelling has always been a powerful tool for organizers and movement builders to name problems, unite constituencies, and mobilize people towards solutions. But how does a story become well known? How does a new idea spread? How can we challenge the assumptions that prop up the status quo and create momentum for fundamental social change? SmartMeme was founded to explore these kind of questions in order to help progressive movements communicate compelling stories about the more democratic, just, ecologically sane future so many of us are working to build.

We were interested in combining traditional grassroots organizing with new strategies to change the dominant culture. Our work isn’t just about telling new or historically marginalized stories, it’s also about changing the existing story—reframing issues and creating political space for new ideas.

If you want to think strategically about culture and power then it’s helpful to have some concepts to help you think about culture. The concept of memes comes from the world of evolutionary biology and is a way of looking at how culture replicates. SmartMeme adopted the term because we found it useful to describe the dynamics of how ideas spread in the current 21st century context of 24-hour news cycles, information warfare and saturation marketing.

A meme is like a gene of the culture that spreads from mind to mind, generation to generation; a contagious information pattern; an idea virus. Anything that can spread can be thought of as a meme: from cultural rituals like shaking hands to buzz words and slogans (Just Do it! No Blood for Oil!) to the latest fashion trend of pop song lyric. The definition we use in our story-based strategy trainings is that a meme is a capsule for a story to spread.

The term may be new, but crafting memes has always played a role in effective social change work. The right meme can often help a social change idea move rapidly through the culture: from creating slogans like “no taxation without representation” or “Si se Puede!” to naming new movements like “climate justice” or “peoples globalization” to crafting unifying symbols like the peace sign or the iconic Obama “Hope” image or promoting new cultural practices like recycling,

Clever memes are constantly being created to sell products, ideas, political candidates and policies. Particularly since the US media are so corporate controlled and shut out ideas that challenge the status quo, progressives have to make sure that ideas help spread themselves with potent memes. Unfortunately the right wing and their corporate spin doctors are much more effective at packaging their narratives into memes: anchor babies, death panels, tax relief, jobs vs the environment. These memes containerize and spread much larger, dangerous narratives (often rooted in the histories of racism and oppression) that try to skew the terms of the debate.

In order to change the stories that shape the dominant culture we need new memes that open space for collaborative storytelling to challenge the “closed” narratives that reinforce exploitation and injustice. Our organization is named

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after the idea of smart memes, that is memes—such as powerful ways of framing issues, transformative ideas, or new cultural practices—that help re-frame debates, challenge assumptions and change the story about an issue. Smart also means networked, because since our memes are not backed by million dollar advertising budgets they can only go viral through people power and are most effective when they emerge from organized communities working for change.

WNV: How does smartMeme operate? Do you start campaigns, seek out campaigns to advise and work with, or wait for campaigns to come to you for help? What campaigns are you currently working with?

PR: SmartMeme is a movement support organization that focuses on building the capacity of social change leaders to apply a story-based strategy model to their campaigns. We develop curriculum and story-based strategy tools, we convene cross-sector strategy conversations and engage in R&D into new social change methods and experiments.

We do not run our own campaigns but rather partner with specific constituencies who are on the frontlines of critical struggles. Since we think most injustices today are symptoms of systemic problems we prioritize strategies, organizations and political moments that help advance an agenda of structural change. Some of the ways we do this is look for opportunities at the intersections between different issue areas where our narrative work can support broader alliance building, challenge underlying assumptions or reframe an important issue in the public consciousness.

We're working right now around the California budget crisis to help a statewide alliance of community groups articulate a new story about the role progressive tax reform can play in reviving the California dream for everyone. The fights around budget cuts are a key venue to challenge the right wing narratives around "big government" and trickle down economics and to address the structural issues of disparity of wealth and power.

For the last few years we've also been working to support the emerging climate justice movement. This is the movement demanding a just, equitable transition to a sustainable economy led by communities on the frontlines of fossil fuels' destructive impacts. We have convened strategy and alliance building sessions and deployed support teams to both Copenhagen for the United Nations COP-15 talks in 2009 and to Bolivia for the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. SmartMeme was in Cancún last month at the United Nations COP-16 climate talks supporting a delegation of North American climate justice leaders convened by the Indigenous Environmental Network and the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance. We continue to work on providing strategy and messaging support to our allies in the climate justice movement.

WNV: You were on [Democracy Now!](#) during the Cancún climate talks discussing the silencing of activists. Are there story-based strategies to get around such oppression? And what should the climate movement be doing to prepare for the next meeting?

PR: Story-based strategy is a very effective way to counter official repression. Particularly since many governments and the United Nations rely on public relations to legitimize their censorship of critical voices it can be very effective to

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expose their motives. For instance, as part of its crack down at the Cancún climate talks the United Nations expelled Tom Goldtooth the Executive Director of the Indigenous Environmental Network who was the head of a delegation of North American indigenous leaders representing climate change impacted communities. Through an effective story-based strategy the delegation was able to use the repression to leverage additional media coverage to expose not just the censorship but why their specific voices were being silenced. The members of their delegation were able to re-frame the situation from being cast as disruptive protesters to showing how as people living on the frontlines of the climate crisis they are also on the frontlines of the solution and their voices must be heard. They articulated their common sense political demands about ending fossil fuels addiction, protecting indigenous rights and the emerging framework of the Right of Mother Earth. They also exposed the irony that they were being kicked out even though as representatives of indigenous cultures they have come to offer traditional indigenous knowledge that is urgently needed to address the climate crisis. Thanks to some of this campaigning, Tom Goldtooth and others were readmitted to the United Nations talks.

In terms of where the climate movement goes from here, it is an interesting time. Although public attention to the issue has dipped in the United States, (which is a serious problem we need to confront) I think we're in the early stages of a massive new wave of social movement organizing to respond to the climate crisis.

The failures of Cancún have made it clear the importance of the other major climate summit that happened in April of this year: the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, Bolivia. This historic gathering which brought together 35,000 civil society members and representatives of over 40 governments and United Nations agencies produced a set of proposals for how to address the climate crisis. These proposals, known as the Cochabamba Protocol, were introduced into the UN process in the lead up to the COP-16 but struck from the negotiating text without any public discussion. Regardless, the Cochabamba Protocol will continue to be a guiding framework for what a science-based, rights-based international response to the climate crisis should look like.

Those of us working inside the US—the largest historic emitter of greenhouse gases—have a unique responsibility to challenge the further expansion of the fossil fuel infrastructure. When we ask ourselves, “Where is progress being made on keeping carbon out of the atmosphere?” It's not the federal legislative strategies that compromised themselves into failure. It's not in the international negotiations. It's not in the heavily greenwash-oriented personal lifestyles shifts. Rather it's in the organizing happening everyday in fossil fuel impacted communities as ordinary people fight against the poisoning of their communities, erosion of their rights and destruction of their ecosystems. The progress is coming in stopping mountaintop removal coal mining in Appalachia, blocking refinery expansions in Richmond, California, fighting hydrofracking in the northeast or Tar Sands pipelines in the Northern Plains. These types of struggles led by the communities most impacted are pointing the way for us all toward the kind of grassroots, bottom up, translocal movement that can unplug the fossil fuel industry and begin re-stabilizing the climate. The climate crisis is a grand intersection of so many different issues that there are frontlines everywhere. Now we need to build movements that can turn those myriad frontlines into turning

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points in the transition from our current planet-destroying trajectory towards a more sustainable, just and hopeful future.

WNV: Where do you see your work with smartMeme and the promotion of storytelling fitting in to the developing field of civil resistance—a term that has been popularized by the school of strategic nonviolence, whose promoters includes [Gene Sharp](#)?

Doyle Canning: Obviously, our work owes a great debt to this field and we’ve been shaped by the theory and practice of strategic nonviolence. What we’ve set out to do with SmartMeme is to create a community of practice where we are innovating these ideas for a new generation that is shaped by the digital age and by unprecedented ecological crisis, and deeply exploring the intersection of narrative and movement building in the 21st century.

The co-creation of a shared narrative has always been part of how a social movement actualizes itself and reshapes power relations. The framing we chose defines the meaning of a movement, and the iconic images of social change become the imprints on our collective imagination that shape our sense of political possibility. From the proclamation of “I am a Man” by Black sanitation workers in Memphis, to the foreshadowing of Otpor with “He is Finished!”, to the color memes like the latest “jasmine revolution”—narrative is what makes a movements’ message stick and spread. SmartMeme’s mission is to educate social movement actors in how narrative operates, and teach organizers to layer narrative onto their power analysis in order to assess what can shift the story to give nonviolent movements a strategic advantage.

WNV: As much as good storytelling is a sound strategy, it could also be seen as something inherent to what is often called the school of principled nonviolence. Gandhi called his autobiography “The Story of My Experiments with Truth” and Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech is the story of his vision for a racially united America. How is a story-based approach to activism more than just a strategy? How does it fit in to the greater tradition of nonviolence?

DC: SmartMeme comes out of the tradition of social movements working for systemic change, and so our approach is grounded in that context and wedded to specific set values. Advertisers, PR flacks and the Pentagon certainly know the power of narrative to shape public attitudes and policy and bombard us with their stories every day. We want to be quite clear that we are not simply advocating for activists to mindlessly mimic those tactics. While using effective frames and catchy memes is tactically advantageous, we are trying to build a deeper analysis amongst our community about the power of story to make meaning on the personal, cultural and political level—and how this is a fundamental function of a social change project. Great leaders and great movements succeed by making ideas meaningful enough for people to take serious risks in order to step into a new story that reflects their values and vision, and this is the essence of the nonviolent tradition.

WNV: What was your take on the [Malcolm Gladwell New Yorker piece](#)? With the way memes are so heavily associated with the internet you must have a strong opinion as to the potential of organizing through social media. How do you see storytelling evolving in the activist world, particularly with the advent of social technology?

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DC: Overall, I appreciated his contribution, but I think the discussion around it was un-necessarily polarizing. Obviously the revolution will not only be tweeted. Anyone who thinks Twitter alone will somehow bring on a revolution is unschooled in the history, theory and practice of how social movements form, grow, and succeed. But Twitter does offer a platform to spread information through networks quickly, and this is useful. In fact, some of the first Twitter prototypes came out of the streets of the antiwar movement in the US as tactical tools inspired by the ways movements in the Philippines and elsewhere used text messaging to coordinate. “TxtMob” was an app that was incredibly useful to me personally in deploying affinity groups and journalists at the RNC protests in New York in 2004 and the 2005 inauguration action Turn Your Back on Bush. This technology evolved into Twitter, and a commercial enterprise, but its applications are still clearly relevant to nonviolence movements.

Obviously, social media and the internet is one of the primary ways that ideas spread and people connect in our age, and will continue to be—so for smartMeme, it’s a no brainer that we must engage. But people do get enamored by this awesome development, and lose the larger strategy context for a social movement to build its power and influence. Our contribution to the conversation is always strategy, strategy, strategy and message, message, message: What is your goal? Who are you trying to communicate with? How do they get their information? What is your message? And what do you want them to do when they get the message? Depending on the answers to these questions, social media may or may not play a major role in your strategy.

But however you are trying to spread your message, you need a message—we would say, a story. This often gets lost in the frenzy of new technology. A clever app is incomplete without an audience, a story, and a vehicle to harness participation. There is a timeless, back to basics mentality that needs to remain at the heart of our work as we experiment with these new technologies. So we emphasize this, but also say this wave is here and we’re either riding it or we’re getting subsumed by it. The digital age offers movements great new opportunities and access to a scale of communication that is truly exciting. Any organization that is not figuring out how to best take advantage of these opportunities is losing out and risks becoming irrelevant.



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