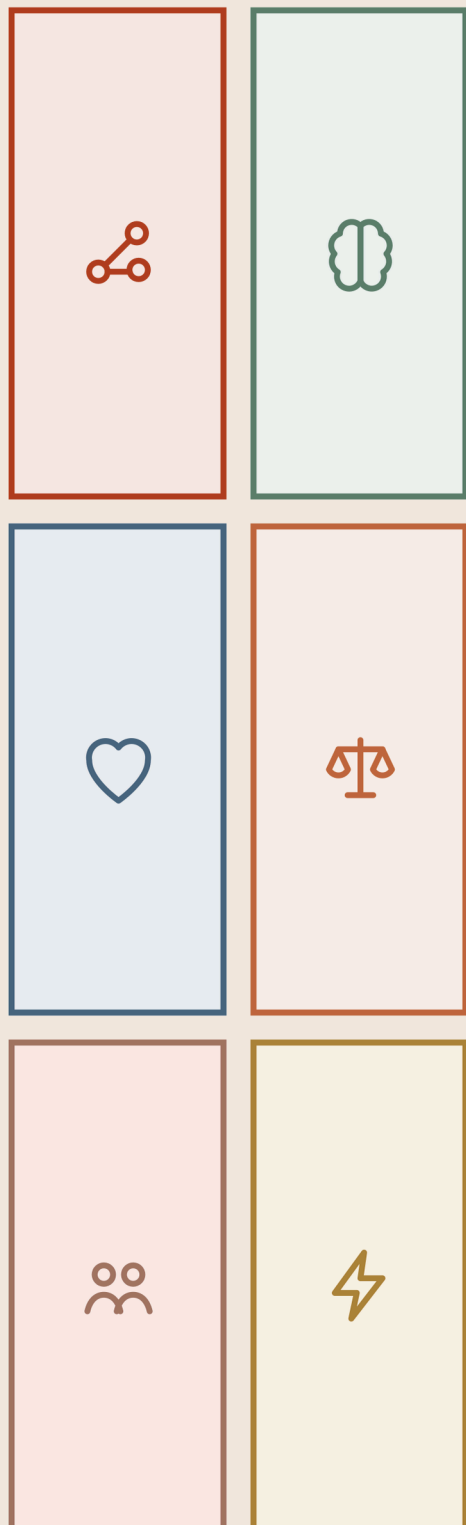




Feelings Over Facts

Embracing an Emotions-First
Narrative Strategy

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Executive Summary

Humans remember, believe, decide, and act with the emotional brain first. This memo reviews the neuroscience and social psychology behind that claim and makes the case for an emotions-first narrative strategy delivered through storytelling. The evidence points to four conclusions:

MEMORY

The brain keeps what makes it feel. Emotional, novel, and visual content is more effectively stored by the hippocampus and better remembered; neutral facts are quickly forgotten.

BELIEF

Fact sheets fight the brain's own defenses. Motivated reasoning shields existing beliefs, and repetition — not accuracy — is what makes a claim feel true. Beliefs shift when changing them feels emotionally safe, and when the message is repeated.

DECISIONS

Without something to feel, people struggle to choose. Fast gut emotional signals guide decisions before deliberate reasoning arrives; facts alone leave the pull toward a choice weak.

ACTION

High-arousal, activating emotions mobilize audiences to act when paired with a sense of self-efficacy. Messages land hardest when they are values-framed and reinforced by belonging and social proof.

Storytelling is the bridge that pulls these levers at once: stories evoke emotion, immerse the audience, lower counter-arguing, and are better understood and recalled than explanatory essays. The most effective communication centers a compelling story — clear heroes and villains, a high-stakes moral choice, and a concrete picture of a better future — and shows rather than tells, prioritizing visuals and feelings over words alone.

In this new algorithmically driven information environment, attention, engagement, volume, and virality are king — emotion unlocks attention and drives engagement online. We recommend that progressive political communicators **reorient their strategy to center emotions, stories, content, and repetition** because science tells us this is the way to unlock attention, memory, belief, decision making, and behavior change. Specifically, we recommend the following approach:

01 MAP THE EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE

Uncover the feelings, values, and beliefs held by your target audience.

02 DETERMINE NARRATIVE OBJECTIVES

Identify the core feelings and beliefs that you desire in your audience.

03 DEVELOP NARRATIVE COMPONENTS

Identify the problem, villain, hero, solution and values framing to evoke desired feelings.

04 LISTEN FOR RESONANCE

Practice social listening, and identify the stories that are already landing and catching.

05 RIDE THE NEWS CYCLE

Amplify the key stories, visuals, clips, etc. that bring your narrative to life constantly.

06 FOCUS ON CONTENT + DISTRIBUTION

Reach your audience at scale with volume and repetition.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Our audiences remember, believe, decide, and act with their emotional brains — an emotions-first narrative strategy, delivered through stories, content, and repetition, is how we reach them in the modern information environment.



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INTRODUCTION

Humans are fundamentally social, emotional beings. In fact, **our emotional brain kind of runs the show** — impacting memory, belief, decision making, and action. As political and communications strategists, our jobs are fundamentally about influencing what people remember, believe, decide, and do. So if all these are driven by our emotional brain, but our narrative strategy doesn't cater to that reality, we're leaving our biggest lever untouched.

At the same time, the information environment has shifted drastically in the past two decades. The days when people received their information from a few channels of legacy broadcast media are over. The media ecosystem is disjointed and the algorithms can drive different people to experience wildly different realities online. Engagement and virality determine how much a message spreads, and it turns out that **emotions drive the algorithm too**.

In this paper, we walk through what neuroscience and social psychology tell us about how emotions drive memory, belief, decision making, action, and the algorithms — and describe how storytelling is the bridge that pulls everything together. Our goal is to show you the **science behind why we need to embrace an emotions-first narrative strategy**.

PART I

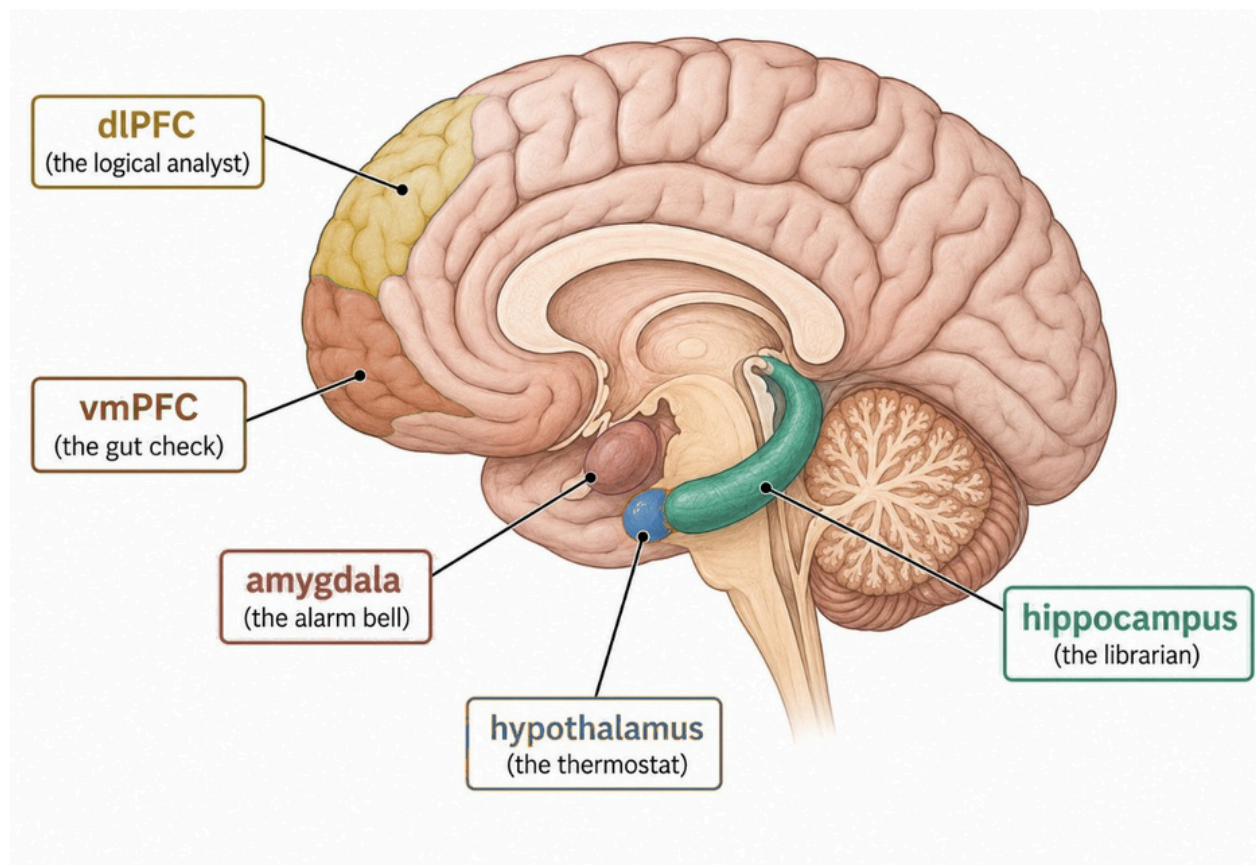


Why Center Emotions In Our Narrative

Our emotional centers are some of the most ancient parts of the brain and have been necessary for our basic survival and continued evolution. Our emotional responses are faster than anything else so we often act on gut feelings faster than our rational brain can process. Our brains prioritize emotional significance in our memory, attention, and actions. Appealing to the emotional brain is at the core of any effective narrative strategy.

Brain basics 101

Human behavior is driven by a complex interplay of different brain regions and the connections between them. As we talk through how emotions impact memory, belief, decisions, and action, these brain regions will show up again and again.



AMYGDALA: the alarm bell

rapidly triggers emotional reactions to stimuli and tags emotional intensity



HIPPOCAMPUS: the librarian

files information into memory



HYPOTHALAMUS: the thermostat

turns your emotional state into your physical state



DORSOLATERAL PREFRONTAL CORTEX (dIPFC): the logical analyst

slow, cold, deliberate logical reasoning center, can override or regulate your gut emotional response



VENTROMEDIAL PREFRONTAL CORTEX (vmPFC): the gut check

relatively fast gut emotional signal to guide decisions and judgments



How emotion unlocks memory for our messaging

Our brains encode and store valuable knowledge through our memory systems including semantic memories (general facts and knowledge), episodic memories (events in time), and procedural memories (skills and habits). We know from extensive neuroscience research that **emotion facilitates**

multiple memory systems — strengthening what we experience (episodic), what we learn (semantic), and, under some conditions, what we practice and repeat (procedural). Mechanistically, the activation of the amygdala (the alarm bell) directly enhances memory formation through its actions on the hippocampus (the librarian)¹. Viewing emotional content activates the amygdala, and **emotional content is consequently better recalled than neutral content**². Emotion tags a memory as more important and as a result, those memories can subsequently shape how people interpret situations, make decisions, and behave.

Emotional arousal

A physiological response — positive or negative — triggered by emotional content, which enhances memory and readies the body to act.

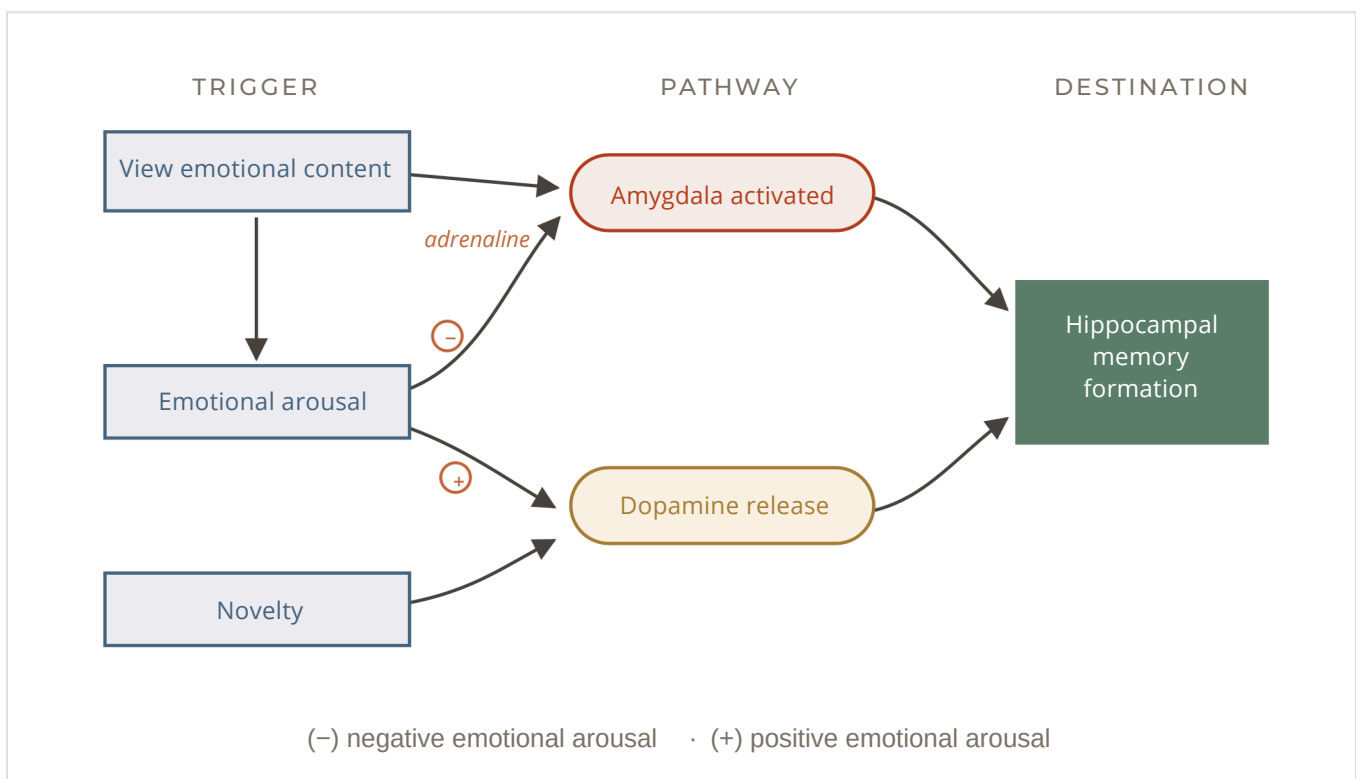
Viewing emotional content can also cause emotional arousal — both positive and negative — which also enhances memory³. Negative emotional arousal (fear, stress, anger) causes the release of adrenaline and stress hormones, which activate the amygdala to enhance the memory of negative experiences⁴. Positive emotional arousal (joy, excitement) causes the release of dopamine, the reward chemical, which directly modulates the hippocampal memory center to enhance the memory of positive experiences⁵. In short, **whether an experience threatens or delights us, the brain treats it as worth remembering** — but via two different chemical routes to the same hippocampal destination.

Novelty also enhances dopamine, which enhances memory formation⁶. This explains why ads and content that provide new information tend to be more likely to go viral. In practice, this means that an element of **genuine surprise or new information**

spreads more effectively online and independently boosts memory through the dopamine reward pathway. Format matters too: actual **images are remembered better** than information delivered as text alone, the well-documented picture superiority effect⁷.

 Picture superiority effect

Images and video are remembered better than the same information delivered as text alone.



Taken together, this points to **four distinct, science-backed emotional levers** for making our content memorable:

1. the raw sensory experience of emotional content,
2. the physiological arousal that follows,
3. the simple element of surprise, and
4. the visual nature of content itself.

These levers work through different mechanisms in the brain, but all converge on the same target: **a stronger, longer-lasting memory in the hippocampus.**

THE TAKEAWAY

The most effective and memorable content is evocative, emotional, and surprising.

PART I · BELIEF



Why fact-based arguments don't persuade

If memory runs on emotion rather than pure logic, it follows that belief does too — and the research shows that we should **ditch our fact sheets, and lead with emotion** if we hope to persuade and change beliefs.

Our brains have built a mechanism to protect us from the emotional pain of being wrong:

motivated reasoning. When people encounter information that is counter to a deeply held belief, their brains reject it and work to protect the existing belief instead. A 2006 fMRI study during politically charged reasoning tasks found that conflicting **information is registered as a threat** and activates the regions of the brain that are associated with processing pain and discomfort (anterior cingulate and insula). During motivated reasoning, it is the gut check center of the brain (vmPFC) that lights up to protect us from that threat⁸. What this means: when a new fact threatens a belief, the brain doesn't run a logic circuit to evaluate it; instead, it runs an emotional regulation circuit to protect us from the emotional distress of being wrong.

Motivated reasoning

When information counters a deeply held belief, the brain rejects it and works to protect the existing belief instead.

So it follows that our narrative needs to lower the psychological cost of changing our beliefs in order to avoid triggering motivated reasoning. **A values-framed message sidesteps this defense mechanism** and has been shown to increase persuasion, specifically by increasing the perceived congruence between the position and the audience's existing moral values⁹. And yet, advocates overwhelmingly default to arguments grounded in their *own* values rather than those of the audience they are trying to move.

The **illusory truth effect** throws another wrench into how the brain develops our beliefs. The more often people hear a claim, the more true it *feels* — regardless of whether it's actually true. Repetition makes information easier for our brains to process (known as processing fluency), and the ease of processing gets misinterpreted by the brain as truth. fMRI data consistently link the illusory truth effect to heightened activity in the gut check center (vmPFC)¹⁰, which is activated in motivated reasoning. This means that **our belief in what is true is an emotion-driven process**.

So what does this mean for our narrative work? Trying to win an argument with a fact sheet is fighting the brain's own defenses because motivated reasoning triggers an emotional shield and **repetition matters more than accuracy for belief**.

Illusory truth effect

The more often people hear a claim, the more true it feels — regardless of whether it's actually true.

Processing fluency

The ease with which the brain processes information — repetition makes a claim easier to process, and that ease is misread as truth.

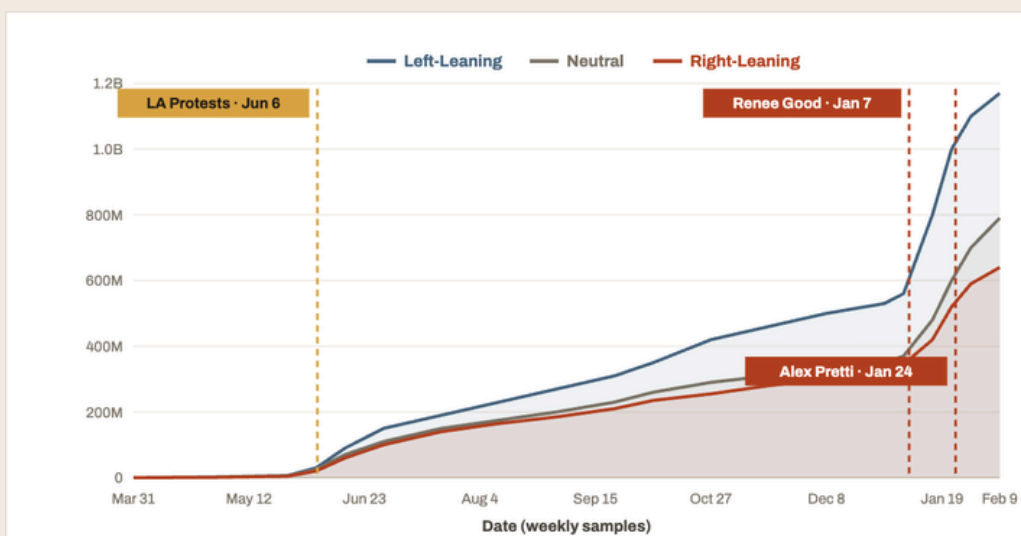
THE TAKEAWAY

If we want people to believe something, we need to make it feel emotionally *safe* to believe by grounding it in values, and we need to say it — and show it — again, and again, and again.

Emotionally Resonant Content Helped Shift Attitudes on ICE

From summer 2025 through early 2026, a concerted and coordinated effort to disseminate emotionally charged viral videos of ICE encounters helped to transform public sentiment on ICE and Trump's immigration policies. After protests broke out in Los Angeles in June 2025, communicators staged a narrative intervention to **reframe and humanize the impact by sharing emotionally resonant first-person footage and stories** of the people and families being abducted by ICE. Engagements on ICE encounter videos tripled between August and October¹¹, which helped to prime the American public with a foundational narrative about ICE terrorizing our communities.

In January, the murders of Renee Good and Alex Pretti by ICE agents became a national inflection point. 73% of Americans reported seeing video of Renee Good's murder — including large majorities of both parties¹². Critically, research found that **viewing the video changed how people interpreted what happened**: Independents and Republicans who were shown the video were significantly more likely to say Renee Good *did not threaten* ICE agents. This suggests that a viral emotionally charged video did more than inform awareness — it actively shifted perception. By early February 2026, approximately 60% of Americans disapproved of ICE and 40% approved (-20), a 29-point shift in public opinion against ICE in one year¹³. The intentional amplification of ICE footage created an emotionally resonant national conversation that changed beliefs.



Cumulative engagements with ICE-related content across left-leaning, neutral, and right-leaning sources, March 2025 - February 2026. Source: Magnitude Media



How emotions drive decision-making

The decision-making process in the brain is a complex conversation between the several different brain structures we've mentioned. But that conversation is won – more often than not — by fast-moving emotional and physiological responses, with deliberate reasoning frequently arriving too late to change the outcome^{14,15}. Decades of research back this up: **our default mode of processing is fast, automatic, and emotionally driven**, and the slower, deliberate reasoning system only steps in occasionally.

Moreover, **humans struggle to make decisions without emotions to guide us**. Patients with damage to emotional regions of the brain (amygdala, ventromedial prefrontal cortex) exhibit deficits in decision making¹⁶. Even though these patients retain their intelligence, memory, and ability to reason, they can't reliably make good decisions because the emotional “gut” that helps steer our decisions isn't working.

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio noticed this firsthand in his patient “Elliot” who had damage to the emotional parts of his brain. Elliot felt paralyzed by every decision he had to make because he had no gut feelings to guide him¹⁷. He could logically reason through his options, but he was incapable of actually making a decision without his emotional gut. Damasio described this predicament as “to know, but not to feel.”

THE TAKEAWAY

Giving someone every fact and figure they need to make a decision isn't enough — without something to *feel*, the pull toward a choice is weak.

⚡ Evoking Emotions to Drive Action

Arousal and efficacy for action

How a message is framed directly impacts the emotional response it generates. “Gain-framed” messages focus on what might be gained by an action, while “loss-framed” messages emphasize what would be lost by not taking an action. A meta-analysis of 25 studies found gain-framed messages reliably produce positive valence emotion, and loss-framed messages reliably produce negative valence emotion. It is specifically that induced emotion that predicts how persuasive the message is — the stronger someone’s emotional reaction to a gain- or loss-framed message, the more persuasive¹⁸.

🔗 *Gain-framed message*

A message that focuses on what might be gained by taking an action.

🔗 *Loss-framed message*

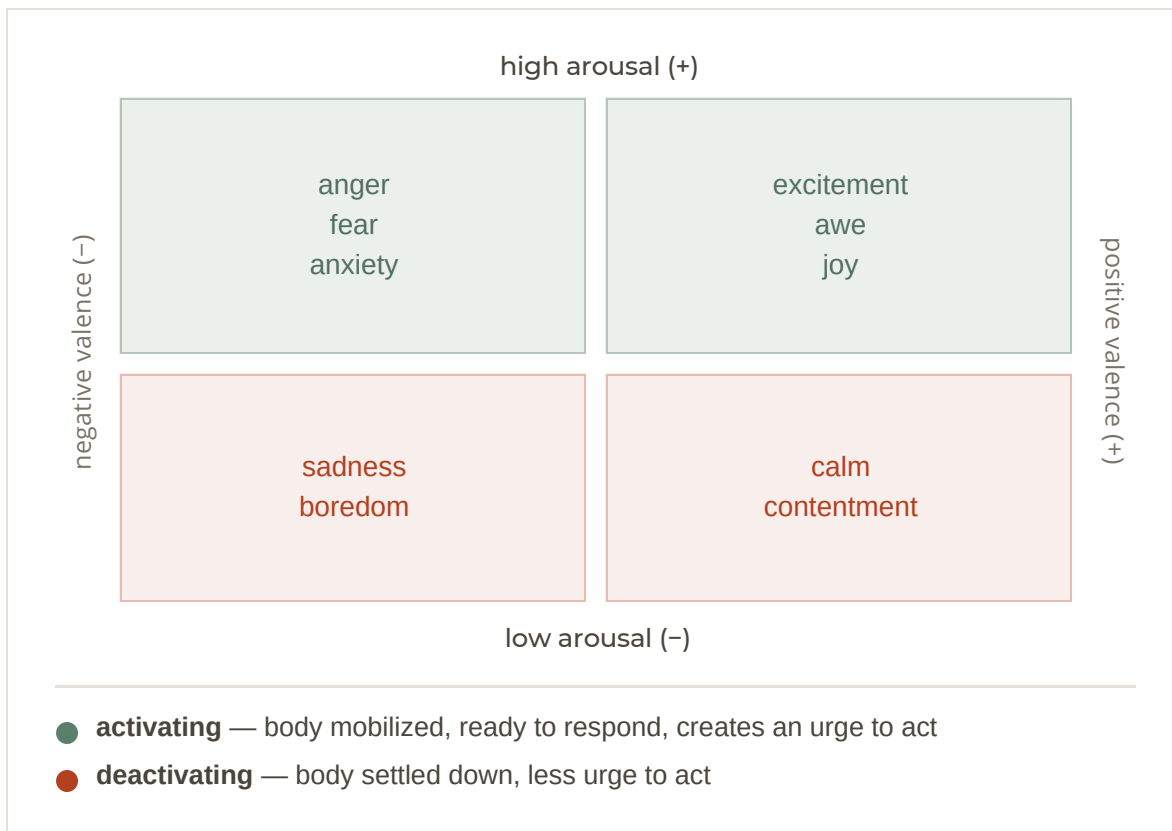
A message that emphasizes what would be lost by not taking an action.

This is important because emotional content gets privileged processing in our brains. **The brain prioritizes allocating attentional resources to things with emotional significance¹⁹** and begins to prepare for action by invoking greater activity in our brain’s motor cortex²⁰ — even before someone

🔗 *Action tendencies*

Emotions put the body in a state of readiness to engage in action — before we’ve consciously decided to do anything.

has consciously decided to do anything. The researchers who study this describe emotions as “action tendencies” that put the body in a state of readiness to engage in action²¹. Physiologically, this involves the hypothalamus (the thermostat) triggering the release of adrenaline in response to emotional content. The elevated heart rate, quickened breathing, and alertness that follows mobilizes the body and makes it ready to act (and also remember — see previous section). Not every emotion creates the same type of response in our bodies though. Some emotions (anger, excitement, hope) are activating and put the body in a ready-to-respond state, while others (sadness, boredom, contentment) settle the body down.



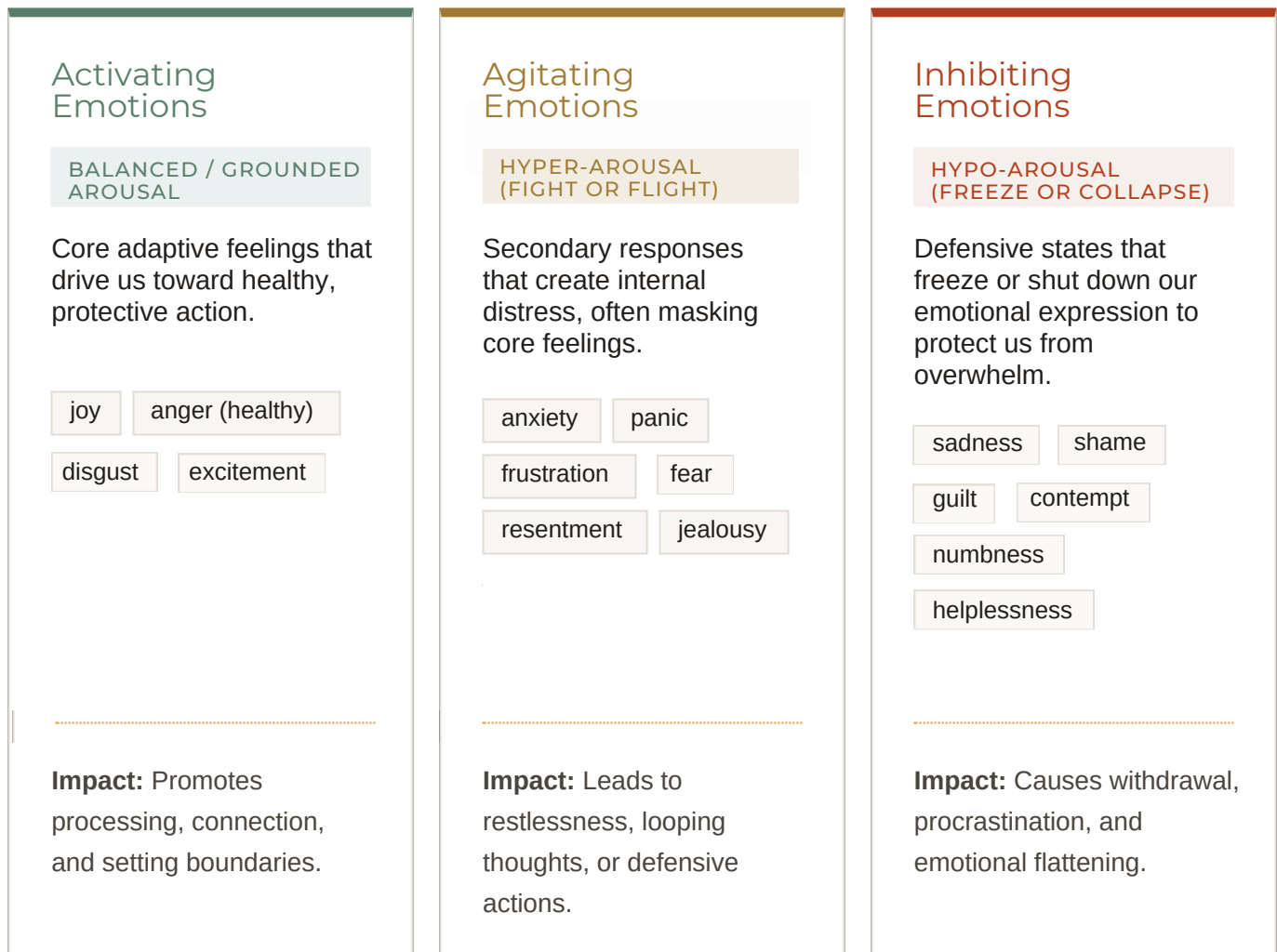
One important factor is arousal: **high-arousal content (whether positive or negative) is what creates the urge to act, and also happens to be more likely to go viral**²².

Organizers figured this out before neuroscience did. Marshall Ganz's public narrative framework says that action is *inhibited* by inertia, apathy, fear, isolation, and self-doubt and that organizers must counter this with the *activating* emotions of urgency, anger, hope, and solidarity²³.

The other important factor in turning emotion into action is efficacy — the belief that you are capable of doing something and that *what you do actually matters*²⁴. Someone can be maximally emotionally aroused with anger, fear, outrage, or joy and still fail to act if they believe their actions won't have any impact.

To complicate matters a bit, **some emotions can have wildly different behavioral effects on different people**. Ganz specifically named these as *agitating* emotions (fear and anxiety) which can be activating or deactivating depending on the individual and ideological differences. On the individual level, people either respond to fear with fight-or-

flight (activating) or freeze (deactivating) – and these two responses have distinct physiological signatures: accelerated versus slower heart rates. Whether someone is personally activated or deactivated by fear depends on trait anxiety²⁵ and attachment style.



On the ideological level, conservatism is linked to a “prevention” or “protect” focus, with conservatives being more sensitive to and mobilized by fear, threats, and loss aversion than liberals who are more oriented around achieving positive gains^{26,27}.

But regardless of ideology, **a fear-based appeal only works when it’s paired with efficacy and a credible way to resolve the threat**²⁸. Political psychology research has found that reminding people of an existential threat actually increased their support for a

strong leader²⁹ because people are seeking something to soothe their fears. Oftentimes, this threat creates a fear of losing social status or standing in society — known as **status threat**. For example, reminding white Americans that non-white groups will outnumber them activates status threat and, in turn, increases support for Trump and his anti-immigrant policies³⁰.

Status threat

The fear of losing social status or standing in society — often activated by framing change as a zero-sum loss.

Taken together, this explains why “great replacement” rhetoric coupled with the promise of Trump’s anti-immigrant policies has been so effective for a conservative audience that is already primed to be activated by fear-based loss aversion messaging. Trump has manufactured a threat to induce fear by framing demographic change as a zero-sum loss (white people being replaced by immigrants and people of color)³¹ and positioned himself as the only source of safety.

Hope, on the other hand, is also complicated. Hope is unique in its position as both an emotion and a belief. Hope has been associated with brain systems involved in emotion, reward, valuation, and motivation³². But Snyder’s influential Hope Theory frames hope as a cognitive process, built from a clear goal, a believable path to get there, and a genuine sense of agency to walk that path³³. Optimistic and hope-based messages have been shown to either motivate action *or* produce complacency by reducing perceived risk and urgency³⁴. **Hope appears to motivate action when it is paired with a pathway to success that feels attainable but not too certain**³⁵. If success feels unattainable, people may disengage. However, if success seems guaranteed, people may become complacent. **The takeaway on both fear and hope is the same: evoking the emotion is not enough. We must pair emotion with self-efficacy and a credible path to resolution — either reducing a threat or achieving a desired outcome.**

So what emotions should we lean on in our narrative work? Generally speaking, **persuasion and mobilization messaging should prioritize activating (high-arousal) emotions. Fear and hope need to be paired with a clear path to resolution.** But, the more nuanced answer is that it really depends on who you are talking to. Loss, threats,

and fear tend to have a greater impact with more conservative audiences. Gains, opportunity, and possibility tend to have a greater impact with more liberal ones. There is no single emotion that works universally. But one thing is clear: **regardless of what emotion our narrative evokes, we need to provide a place for that emotion to go** by channeling it into an achievable action or outcome.

THE TAKEAWAY

We should prioritize high-arousal activating emotions in our narratives and provide a clear pathway to transform those emotions into action.

PART I · ACTION



Creating belonging through social identity and social proof

Human beings do not process messages as isolated individuals; they process them as members of groups. Social Identity Theory holds that a meaningful portion of a person's self-concept is derived from the groups they belong to, and that people are motivated to maintain a positive distinction between their *in-group* and relevant *out-groups*³⁶. This is reflected in

the circuitry of our brains, which are wired for belonging: oxytocin helps regulate social bonding, trust, and attachment³⁷. On the other hand, social exclusion lights up the same neural circuitry (the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex) that processes the emotional aspect of pain — feeling left out quite literally hurts³⁸. Belonging operates not just as an emotional need, but also as a cognitive lens through which we interpret the world. The practical consequence is that group membership functions as a filter applied before the

Ingroups and outgroups

A meaningful portion of a person's self-concept comes from the groups they belong to — and the same message lands differently coming from "us" versus "them."

content of a message is ever weighed. The same claim, the same offer, and the same call to action land differently depending on whether the audience perceives it as coming from *us* or from *them*.

This effect extends well beyond attitudes into consequential behavior. In a field experiment where an injured stranger wore either an in-group soccer team shirt, a rival team's shirt, or an unbranded sports shirt, bystanders were substantially more likely to intervene when the victim wore the in-group shirt³⁹. In another study, **group membership even predicted whether someone stops to help a person in visible distress**. But when the experimenters made a broader, more inclusive identity salient by priming participants to think of themselves as lovers of the sport rather than as fans of one club, helping extended to strangers who had previously been categorized as out-group members³⁹. This is the mechanism behind what researchers call *recategorization*, or the common *in-group identity model*, whereby **intergroup bias can be meaningfully reduced** by leading members of two separate groups to conceive of themselves as a single, larger group⁴⁰.

The strategic implication of this research is important and frequently misunderstood: **the goal is to make a superordinate identity** — one that already includes both the communicator and the audience — the most salient frame in the moment of the ask.

Superordinate identity

A broader identity that already includes both the communicator and the audience — making one larger "us" the salient frame.

The way belonging impacts behavior also operates through a second, quieter channel: **what people believe others *like them* are already doing**. Descriptive social norms — or **social proof** — function as a shortcut for judging what is appropriate and effective. In the brain, social approval activates reward circuitry⁴¹ while deviating from group norms triggers a neural conflict signal that pushes us toward conformity⁴². For example, in two behavioral experiments, signage telling hotel guests that most other guests reused their towels outperformed a conventional environmental appeal⁴³. Further studies have shown

this phenomenon affects behaviors that are not yet majority practice, showing that *dynamic norms* (information that a behavior is increasing) have a similar effect. In one study, dynamic norms were used to double the number of meatless orders in a campus café⁴⁴. This research suggests a solution to the common problem of advocating for something most people don't do yet: **a trend can be persuasive even when the majority have not yet adopted it.** The practical takeaway for communicators: **build a social identity that your audience can see themselves in, and invite action by showcasing the breadth of action increasing.**

Social proof

What people believe others like them are already doing acts as a shortcut for judging what is appropriate and effective.

Dynamic norms

Information that a behavior is increasing can persuade even before the majority has adopted it.

THE TAKEAWAY

Our narrative should build a social identity and social proof.

CASE STUDY

Social Proof Made the Flock Fight Go Viral

In the summer of 2026, progressive communicators poured fuel on an issue that had bubbling organic energy on the ground: *Flock camera mass surveillance*. As a result, Flock surged in the online discourse. By the end of August, 66% of the population had heard about Flock⁴⁵. Clips of people at city council meetings, news of cities canceling their contracts, investigations exposing the police abuse, and a wave of viral videos of camera vandalism swept the internet. News of cities steadily cancelling contracts started to spread. Every win became fuel for the cause, providing evidence that ordinary people could make an impact in their town and inspiring others. During Deflock's planned national week of action Aug 17-21, Flock became one of the top trending topics online for several days. The topic became a cool thing to talk about – everyone from Bernie Sanders and Abdul El-Sayed to Tucker Carlson and Ron DeSantis joined the conversation. This kind of **viral growth of a topic is social proof** in action. When it feels like everyone is talking about something, people feel inclined to jump in.



Emotion drives the algorithm

In today's information environment, the narratives that break through are the ones that generate the most engagement online — most algorithms rank engagement as their primary signal for distribution. Therefore, content that leads to action — in this case, liking, sharing, commenting — is required to reach people. The research on what drives online engagement and virality validates that **the same emotion-driven processes that drive our brains also drive the algorithm.**

Emotional Arousal

Messages that evoke high-arousal emotions, positive or negative, spread further and faster online than low-arousal content, and this holds even after controlling for initial exposure²².

Surprise

Surprise also provides a boost — content rated as novel or unexpected is more likely to be shared²². So not only does novelty promote memory, but it also encourages action online.

Social Identity

Content signaling shared identity drives engagement: an analysis of social media posts found that posts expressing ingroup solidarity became linked to engagement after Russia's 2022 invasion⁴⁶.

Social Proof

People are swayed by how popular content already appears to be. Researchers have found that popularity can be manufactured — simply labeling an unpopular song as popular turned it into a hit⁴⁷.

Repetition

The same processing-fluency effect that turns repetition into truth also makes it more likely to get shared online. Messages are more likely to be forwarded after repeated exposure⁴⁸.

THE TAKEAWAY

The algorithm rewards the same things your own brain already rewards — emotional arousal and novelty to grab your attention, repetition to make you believe, and belonging to make you join.

PART I · SUMMARY



To Recap

01

Memorable content needs to be **evocative, emotional, and novel**.

02

Values-framing lowers the defense of motivated reasoning and makes our messaging emotionally safe to believe.

03

Repetition builds familiarity which is interpreted by our brains as truth.

04

We need to evoke **high-arousal** activating emotions and provide a pathway to **transform those emotions into action**.

05

We need to build an **identity** that people can see themselves in and invite action by building **social proof**.

06

The **algorithm rewards the same things your own brain does** — emotional arousal, novelty, repetition, and belonging.

Our brains and the algorithms are designed to prioritize emotion. It's time to ditch the fact sheets and sterile poll-tested messaging and implement an approach that appeals to the emotional brain.



Stories: How Emotion Becomes Persuasion

Now that we have described the science and established the importance of communicating to the emotional brain, let's explore *how* we do it, and how we do it *well*. Put simply, **the core of all effective communication is story** (or, as practitioners like to say: “narrative”). Storytelling is an ancient human practice. Stories are how our brains make sense of the world. And storytelling is the best vehicle we have to evoke the emotions that fire decision-making, memory, belief, and action simultaneously.

Stories unlock the emotional brain

Why are stories so powerful? Our brains have specialized cells called mirror neurons, which fire both when a person performs a specific action *and* when they observe someone else performing that action⁴⁹. Functional MRI (fMRI) scans show that when you read or hear about physical actions or emotions, **the exact same regions of your brain light up as if you were doing or feeling them yourself**⁵⁰. This attentional phenomenon is called neural coupling, and this brain synchronization⁵¹ is the basis for narrative immersion, when someone becomes so immersed in a story that they enter the narrative world. Ever watched a movie where the protagonist is ostensibly a “bad guy” but you can't help but root for them? You have narrative immersion to thank.

Stories are the most effective method of evoking emotions in our audience. Studies show that stories activate the emotional circuitry of the brain⁵² and even trigger the brain to release chemicals like oxytocin⁵³ — the “love” chemical linked with empathy and

Mirror neurons

Specialized cells that fire both when we perform an action and when we watch someone else perform it.

Neural coupling

The synchronization of brain activity between two or more people that serves as the biological basis for empathy.

connection. A meta-analysis of over 75 studies found that **stories were more easily understood and better recalled than explanatory essays**⁵⁴. The phenomenon of narrative immersion has also been shown to impact belief: the more absorbed a person is in a story, the less likely they are to try to counter an argument⁵⁵.

Narrative immersion

The more absorbed a person is in a story, the less likely they are to try to counter an argument.

Stories transport us. They shape how we see ourselves, how we view the world, how we relate to others, and the actions we are willing to take as a result. An emotional story arc that releases oxytocin can induce feelings of empathy and actually increase prosocial behavior⁵³. Time and again, science shows us that stories are key to unlocking our emotional brain.

THE TAKEAWAY

If storytelling is how we evoke emotions, and emotions drive our decision-making, memory, beliefs, and actions, then communicators need to focus less on *what makes a good argument* and more on *what makes a compelling story*.

PART II • STRATEGY



Centering Emotion in Our Narrative Objectives and Research Approach

Traditional communications strategies often begin with poll-testing: a battery of messages is presented to respondents, and the message that garners the most agreement is deemed most effective. This methodology fails to indicate the extent to which a message moves people to *feel* an emotion, *believe something*, or take an *action* – and it certainly doesn't indicate potential for digital virality.

Instead, knowing that our emotional brains are what drive memory, belief, decision-making, and action, we should start from a different place and ask different questions. Instead of focusing on what message people agree with most, we should ask:

- *Which emotions are respondents feeling?*
- *What do they think and believe?*
- *How do they rationalize holding those views, positions and beliefs?*
- *What do we actually want people to feel, think, and believe?*

The first three questions can be uncovered in a survey, but are usually reserved for focus groups and rarely examined by survey researchers. However, new technology is increasingly enabling researchers to use open-ended questions, allowing us to code and quantify qualitative responses.

Instead of simply asking survey respondents how convincing a message is or how much they agree with it, we can ask them how a message — or a piece of creative content like a video — makes them *feel*. We can ask about what resonated with their own lived experience, and what didn't. We can ask them what they remember most after reading or watching to see what's sticky. We can examine how emotional responses vary when we change a single variable in a piece of content such as the music, voice over, imagery, or even a single word. Importantly, we can also ask them to tell us why they believe they had the reaction they did. Centering the role of emotion in our approach to research dramatically changes the questions we ask, and the insights that inform our approach as a result.

We can also turn the process upside down and work to **understand what messages are already resonating with the public**. We can use social listening tools to map the trending political conversation and study the types of content, topics, and formats that generate the most engagement. Content that is more emotionally arousing generates more engagement, meaning that we can use engagement as a proxy for emotional

arousal. Engagement tells us what content is evoking emotion and what is also more likely to spread.

The fourth question is a *strategy* question that is often skipped. When we start with **the feelings and beliefs we want to inspire in our audience**, we can then work to channel the appropriately activating emotions in the narrative we develop and in the stories that bring that narrative to life.

THE TAKEAWAY

Communicators should anchor their narratives in the feelings and beliefs they wish to inspire in their audience, instead of simply selecting a message based on what garners the highest levels of agreement in a poll.

PART II · CRAFT

Compelling Narrative Development

Storytelling is art *and* science. There is no formula for resonant narratives, but there are some key principles grounded in social science that make effective storytelling. Research on the role of the emotional brain, the power of ingroups and outgroups, the prevalence of motivated reasoning, the importance of processing fluency, and the effects of moral reframing explains why resonant narratives tend to consistently do three things well:

- *They spark emotion*
- *They tap into deeply held values*
- *They create a sense of belonging and shared lived experience*

In the context of political persuasion, we also find effectiveness in narratives that frame a **clear moral choice and point to concrete outcomes**.

Stories with clear, coherent emotional trajectories are more widely shared and engaged than stories with jumbled or unclear emotional shapes⁵³. One of the clearest emotional arcs is a structure that practitioners refer to as **The Hero's Journey**: a protagonist of a story goes on a journey of some kind, faces a crisis or conflict, and takes actions that lead to a positive outcome (or what we colloquially refer to as a “happy ending”). Over time, an array of writers, storytellers, and psychologists have deconstructed and described the hero's journey in different versions, structures, and steps, but the idea of focusing on a protagonist who faces a challenge that leads to an outcome is the common denominator.

In the context of political persuasion and mobilization, we posit that a resonant hero's journey narrative tends to include the below components:



A core challenge

A concrete problem (avoiding abstractions!) that concerns our audience, directly affecting their lived experience — a challenge with self-relevance evokes a stronger emotional response⁵⁷ and gets preferential processing in our brains⁵⁸.



A villain, their intent, and their motivation

A person or group of people who are creating or perpetuating the problem, often placing their own interest over the interest of others / the many; having a clear villain gives a place to channel the emotions that the core challenge raises — turning the fear or anxiety from a threat into anger at the perpetrator.



Hero(es) who face an important choice

Typically, we want our audience to identify with or aspire to be the hero in our stories. Identification with a hero is an established pathway through which stories change beliefs. The more someone identifies with the hero's journey, the more beliefs shift toward alignment with a story's message⁵⁹.



Framing the choice in the language of shared values

This not only helps us connect to our audience emotionally but also establishes in-group belonging and reduces the effect of motivated reasoning.



Presentation of a solution and a future with concrete, positive outcomes

A credible and attainable pathway that leads to a better future and improves the lived experience of our audience (and/or those they love) helps turn emotion into action.

These story elements take our audience on an emotional journey that can ultimately change beliefs and behavior. A self-relevant challenge triggers an emotional response, a villain gives a way to channel those emotions into anger, and a hero and solution transform that anger into efficacy and action — all framed inside of shared values that make the brain more receptive to the message of the story.

CASE STUDY

The Right-Wing Hero's Journey

The Right has mastered its own version of an emotional hero's journey, and has historically been very effective at activating the conservative base. Time and time again, the American right wing has **scapegoated and othered immigrants and people of color**, providing villains to blame for all of the problems that plague Americans' lives.

Conservatives are the heroes in their own journey to "Make America Great Again" through anti-immigrant policies that they promise will deliver tangible outcomes. Their meta narrative is designed to **activate and leverage status threat, to create and reinforce an exclusive in-group social identity, and to foster aggression toward the out-group**.

This narrative is emotionally activating: it drums up fear, turns it into anger, and directs it to achieve a desired outcome.

THE TAKEAWAY

The most compelling narratives are evocative: they immerse the audience in a journey with a powerful emotional arc, have clear heroes and villains, center on a high-stakes values-based choice, a clear solution, and a vision of a better future.

PART II • DELIVERY



Finally: Show and Feel, Don't Tell

Too often, communicators develop a compelling narrative but fail to **bring the narrative to life**. The best communicators know that effective storytelling is more about *showing* and making your audience *feel* than *telling*. You can have a great story arc, a relatable protagonist, a high-stakes choice, and the best values framing and still fall flat if the *delivery* of the story doesn't hit emotionally. And so many things go into an effective delivery: the messenger, the medium, the auditory components (e.g., music, voiceovers, etc.), the imagery, the timing...the list goes on.

Creatives understand this intuitively. Give two directors the same screenplay, and you'll get two very different films. Different casts, with different blocking and different body language. Different scores. Different tone. Different scene-setting. Different line interpretation. Different lighting. Different camera angles. Different images in the foreground. Different length. *Different emotional impact.*

As communicators, we have so many different mediums through which to try to convey our stories — from radio to print to social media and more. Regardless of the delivery vehicle, the question to ask is: **how can we make our audience feel the way we want?** Maybe it's through an emotionally moving song or voice tone on radio, a powerful image that speaks volumes in a print article, emotionally charged words on a billboard, or a clip that gives you goosebumps on social media.

The research shows that **visual content can evoke emotion more directly and powerfully than words**

do. Visuals are processed 10x faster by our brains^{60,61}. In one striking study, briefly flashing emotionally charged images changed the behavior

of participants, while equivalent emotionally charged words did not⁶². Furthermore, actual images and video are remembered better than the same information delivered as text alone, a well-documented finding known as the picture superiority effect⁶³. When we have the opportunity to incorporate visuals into our storytelling, we should seek out those that create emotional arousal – the combination of emotion and visual input gets prioritized processing by our brains.

Visual processing

Visuals are processed 10x faster by our brains than words.

Visuals are not the only way to convey or evoke emotions; **sound can evoke emotional responses too**. Music is the most extensively studied form of audio, with an ability to produce measurable emotional and physiological responses, including changes in brain activity, skin conductance, heart rate, and even chills/goosebumps⁶⁴. Listeners can also infer emotional states from how something is said (speech prosody)⁶⁵, as well as nonverbal vocalizations (e.g., screaming, crying, cheering, etc.)⁶⁶, and environmental sounds (e.g., an alarm, thunder, birds chirping)⁶⁷. So whether we're speaking to an audience or composing an ad, we should consider the most effective way to use sound to stimulate emotion.

And, of course, **the words we use do indeed matter**, but not in the way communicators usually think about them. Words can themselves carry emotion — through valence (positive or negative) and arousal (how emotionally activating/intense the word feels)⁶⁸.

Emotion, regardless of valence, gives words a processing advantage over neutral words⁶⁹ and greater emotional arousal can make them even more memorable⁷⁰. Concrete words (how well someone can picture a word) are also better recalled than abstract words⁷¹. Personal relevance can also amplify emotional impact and memory — when people see themselves, their family, their experiences, or their interests in a message, they are more likely to devote attention to it and remember it⁷². That means that the **most emotionally**

powerful language combines high valence with high arousal and concrete vivid imagery that feels personal. For example, you could say “the cost of living is rising” (low valence, low arousal, not concrete, not personal) OR you could make your audience personally feel and imagine by saying, “You get your paycheck, buy your groceries, and pay your rent, but still don’t have enough to make it to the end of the month.”

Political practitioners have a tendency to dismiss the importance of these aspects of storytelling, and they do so at their peril. We tend to focus a lot on getting the topics and focus right, and not enough on the emotional *signals* we are sending in countless other ways. When we **focus on the whole picture of what tells a story — visuals, audio, evocative words, news stories, hooks, and clips that *illustrate* our narrative** — the content we create is more emotionally resonant and, therefore, better remembered, believed, shared, and acted upon.

Q CASE STUDY

Bringing the Resistance to Life

Political scientists tell us that a sustained mass resistance movement is crucial to defeating authoritarianism. This requires driving a core narrative that builds social proof: *Americans across the country are fighting back*. Instead of just saying that people are resisting, show-not-tell looks like sourcing and amplifying emotionally evocative content that highlights the resistance tactics across the country: clips of massive crowds at protests, people shutting down the offices of corporate capitulators, stories of neighbors supporting each other through local mutual aid networks, clips of neighbors blowing ICE whistles, and examples of MAGA or military defections expressing regret. Repeating a single narrative is not enough — to be effective, communicators must consistently amplify the stories, examples, and images that **bring a narrative to life**.

THE TAKEAWAY

Communicators should focus more on how our content looks and feels, and the stories that best illustrate a narrative.



The Science TL;DR

01

Emotional and/or novel content is better remembered by our brains.

02

We need to make information emotionally safe to believe because our brains have built a mechanism to protect us from the emotional pain of being wrong (motivated reasoning).

03

Repetition is key to belief because our brains process information we have encountered repeatedly as true (illusory truth effect).

04

Fact-based arguments often fail to impact decision making because our emotions guide our decisions more than logical reasoning.

05

Values-based framing can help shift beliefs by reducing the psychological cost of being wrong.

06

High arousal content (positive or negative) gets privileged processing, drives attention, and is most effective at driving action.

07

Both fear and hope can be mobilizing when paired with efficacy and a path to resolution.

08

The algorithm rewards the same things our brain does — emotion, surprise, belonging, and repetition.

09

Effective communications strategies will build social identity that everyone can see themselves in and normalize action by showcasing the breadth of action already happening.

10

Stories unlock our emotional brain and are, therefore, better remembered, better able to impact belief, and more likely to change behavior.

11

Effective stories evoke emotions, tap into shared values, and create a sense of belonging.

12

We should prioritize the visuals, sound, evocative language, feelings, stories, and clips that bring our narrative to life.

Our brains are wired to prioritize emotion and emotionally stimulating content delivered through stories is the most effective way to impact our audience's memory, belief, decisions, and behavior.

PRACTICE



Putting the Approach Into Practice

Hopefully, we've successfully made the case for reorienting our narrative strategies to put **emotions first** by walking through the science. Maybe you're now thinking: "Okay, I'm convinced, but **how do I do this?**" Here is a brief overview of the process we recommend:

01 MAP THE EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE

Do research to uncover the feelings, values, and beliefs held by your target audience

02 DETERMINE NARRATIVE OBJECTIVES

Identify the core feelings and beliefs that you desire in your audience, and the delta between them and what you see in the baseline data — setting these objectives will inform the emotional journey your narrative requires

03 DEVELOP THE STORY

Use your emotional landscape and objectives to develop the core components of your narrative: problem, villain, hero, solution, and shared values framing.

04 CONDUCT SOCIAL LISTENING

Use social listening to understand the existing political conversation, and to identify what types of content are performing well with your audience.

05 RIDE THE WAVES

Amplify the stories, visuals, and clips that bring your narrative to life. Rinse and repeat.

06 CENTER CONTENT AND DISTRIBUTION

Focus on getting your stories in front of as many eyeballs as possible as many times as possible, via the channels that reach your audience at scale.

This approach centers emotions, stories, content, and repetition because science tells us this is the way to unlock attention, memory, belief, decision making, and behavior change.

CONCLUSION

As political communicators, we aim to influence what people remember, believe, decide, and do — all of this is driven by the emotional brain. It is time to reorient our narrative strategy with values-framing, high-arousal activating emotions, belonging, and a pathway to action by repeatedly driving evocative visuals, news stories, clips, and content.



About the Authors

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Dr. Jiggy Geronimo is a neuroscientist turned social justice advocate, bringing her research expertise and understanding of the mind to her work on political narratives. She is the Founder and Principal of JG Insights LLC, a progressive consulting firm that innovates emotions-first and content-first communications designed for the modern media environment. Jiggy was previously the founding Executive Director of the Research Collaborative where she helped coordinate the national #CountEveryVote campaign to protect the 2020 election. She also ran policy campaigns for democracy in over 10 states across the country during her time at Indivisible and Voting Rights Lab, including the successful ballot initiative to #FreetheVote to people coming home from prison in California. Prior to a career in politics, Jiggy earned her PhD in neuroscience at UC San Francisco, published 5 peer-reviewed neuroscience papers, and taught undergraduate biology courses at the University of San Francisco.

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Kate Catherall is a strategist, organizer, and storyteller who has worked on the most pressing issues of our time — from clean energy and reproductive freedom to gun violence prevention and affordable housing. Prior to founding Slow Clap, she was Senior Advisor and Chief Engagement Officer at Avalanche Insights, where her team guided messaging for over \$1B in media spending. Kate is the Co-founder of Arena, an organization that trains, supports, and convenes next-generation political leaders and strategists. Earlier in her career, Kate was a Senior VP at 270 Strategies, conducted civic engagement research with ideas42, and taught a global campaigns fellowship course at Cornell University. She is an alum of Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns. Kate's work has taken her around the globe: she has trained and partnered with movement-builders from across more than 40 countries. She has a lifetime of social science training, as both of her parents are clinical psychologists.

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