

ODD DUCK

presents



**A GUIDE TO
STORYTELLING
WITH DATA IN A
POST-TRUTH
WORLD**

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Over the last couple years, I have joined a number of health communicators, journalists, public interest advocates, communication researchers, and digital media activists considering *information as a public health*.

It is a complicated topic mired in issues of power, control, access. The impoverished and disenfranchised, often left out of equitable access to food, healthcare, safety, justice, and opportunity, also, often, get the short end of the stick when it comes to information.

As is true with these other examples, those who are information poor, are often blamed in the public narrative for this lack of access. Made fun of for their backward ignorance, lack of understanding, or funny beliefs.

Who owns information? Who has access to it? How can we tell if it is reliable? How is it manipulated for different economic or political aims? How has it been weaponized?

“Infodemics” have accompanied pandemics as far back as the 2nd Century Plague of Galen. The mis/disinformation, confusion, & conspiracy theories that distort how we perceive information, including data have been around at least as long as recorded history. Sylvie Briand, the architect of WHO’s strategy to counter the infodemic risk, told [The Lancet](#), “We know that every outbreak will be accompanied by a kind of tsunami of information, but also within this information you always have misinformation, rumours, etc.”

It is different now, Briand notes, “...with social media is that this phenomenon is amplified, it goes faster and further, like the viruses that travel with people and go faster and further. So it is a new challenge, and the challenge is the [timing] because you need to be faster if you want to fill the void...What is at stake during an outbreak is making sure people will do the right thing to control the disease or to mitigate its impact. So, it is not only information to make sure people are informed; it is also making sure people are informed to act appropriately.”

The pandemic has exposed inequities along the lines of race and class, divisions between rural and urban communities, and more. Yet, inequities in the information we access—and the beliefs formed by that information—are more complicated to manage.

We will be sorting out these issues for years to come, but for those institutions and organizations charged with population health there are things that we can do now to ensure healthier information options. This guide is a step in the right direction. It is a quick overview on five keys to storytelling in a post-truth world for population health organizations based on my workshop: *“Information as Public Health: How Mis/Disinformation, Confusion, & Conspiracy Distort Data Perception & What We Can Do About It.”* As with the workshop, this guide is meant to start conversations, not to be an end all be all definitive authority on the topic.

We hope that it reads as some nutritious food for thought and feeds the conversations to come.

Thank you for your time, energy, effort and interest in reading this guide.

Josh Gryniewicz
Odd Duck, Chief Narrative Strategist & the Odd Duck Team



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Key 1: Validating Feelings, Addressing Concerns

There is an emotional human reality underlining mis/disinformation and conspiracy theory. Real feelings and real concerns beneath the most erroneous or outlandish beliefs. Conspiracy theories often reflect skewed power dynamics or class structures. Mis/disinformation can be based in a mixed sense of fear and futility.

It is important to try to find this common ground if you want to actually communicate rather than debating, denying, or rejecting beliefs fact-for-fact.

This is difficult for otherwise well-meaning folks to accept. As one colleague replied with understandable incredulity, “...wait, even lizard people? We are supposed to take lizard people seriously now?”

But it is not so much about accepting these beliefs as it is accepting the people who believe them.

It is about providing a space for audiences to express their worldviews, so that the emotional reality beneath them can be revealed. Conspiracy theories are often adopted to cope with our random, complicated world. Rather than challenging these worldviews, it is more productive to seek the emotional reality motivating them.



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Key 2: Strategic Storytelling

Strategic storytelling means thinking of the components that go into a story before sharing it.

Ask:


Who do you want to hear this story?

What are you trying to accomplish by its telling?

What do you want your audience to takeaway from the encounter?

Can you move your audience to action by expressing it in a certain way?

In a complex, emotionally charged, polarizing environment a strategic story is more effective than statistics alone. It should be memorable. It should be composed of a clear message, action, and/or behavior. It should have an emotional core.



Odd Duck literally maps the stories we help share. We identify the who and the what before we apply any narrative. We look at possible barriers to taking action. In April 2020, we partnered with Interrupt the Violence (ITV) to encourage adoption of CDC Safety Guidelines in disenfranchised African American communities in Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. As COVID rates increased, we were cutting against a social narrative that was blaming these communities, while also trying to understand resistance to safety protocols.

The answers were nuanced, complicated, underscored systemic racism, and for a longtime were left out of public discourse. We heard of longstanding and justifiably well-earned historical distrust of the health system. We heard young Black men expressed that they felt masking up posed a greater risk to their safety than COVID. We tailored the stories we collected, crafted, shaped, and shared to accept and address these concerns and navigate around them.



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Key 3: Recruiting Trusted Sources

Even before the pandemic, the trustworthiness of the four institutions at the center of our social ecosystem—business, government, NGOs, and media—were not looking so good. For over two decades, the global PR agency Edelman, conducts research into who and what consumers trust.



Worldwide, they survey 33,000 participants from 27 countries, each year.

It is no surprise that the institutions at the center of our society have not been held in the highest regard. This steady erosion has accelerated in the last two years, as crisis after crisis, amplified by the rampant, often politicized, infodemic has produced an “environment of information bankruptcy” according to their 2021 Trust Barometer.

Reestablishing and rebuilding trust, actually turning this around, requires defining our institutional narratives in cooperation with the communities we serve.

Organizations need to put their values at the center of their story—and, live those values.



For community organizations, that means putting the community before the institution. Radical collaboration across organizations, rather than building an individual brand and jockeying for credit. It means seeking out trusted community partners, even untested activist organizations, rather than trying to go it alone. It makes more sense for a health & hospital system to partner with a local food bank, instead of trying to establish their own.

For national or global organizations, it means partnering with local groups on-the-ground at the street-level, rather than coming in with all the answers.

It means working with the community to develop solutions, hosting listening sessions to hear ideas, and working collaboratively to bring them to fruition.

It means recruiting for positions from the community itself and providing avenues to actually exercise authority with voting powers.

Finally, it means remembering that trust is earned even for institutions—then doing what it takes to earn that trust.

Key 4: Right Messenger, Right Message

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An interesting pattern appears in the Edelman Trust Barometer over the years.

The highest levels of trust are consistently assigned to people they believe are “just like me.”

Not institutions.

Not organizations.

Not celebrities.

Not social workers. Not professional journalists from vaunted publications. Not government establishments, politicians, companies, corporations, or businesses.

People we perceive are “just like me.”

If our organization doesn't reflect the customers we rely on, the clients we serve, or the audiences we talk to regularly than we have an integrity problem.

We also need to recognize and compensate the authority that comes with Lived Experience.

These individuals are Credible Messengers.

They have the expertise, knowledge, experience, and influence to move social change forward.

As the saying goes, don't be a voice for the disenfranchised—pass the mic.

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Key 5: Data Transparency & Data Democratization

There is an understandable anxiety around how our data is used and for what purposes. As the Trust Barometer indicated, we are suspect of nonprofits and of government, so transparency is key—we need to disclose what data is accessed, what linkages are made, how it is used, what has been removed, and what is missing—but it is just the beginning.

Data can be instrumental in decision making at every level of society—it can influence policy, build cities, improve our lives—but too often the citizens that data should serve get counted then left out of the equation.

We cannot let this happen any longer.

This is why mySidewalk, the online engagement platform designed to track, analyze and communicate data, advocates for “democratizing data.” Everyone should have access to data and the tools to analyze.

In the earliest days of the pandemic, in King County, Seattle, the public health department was doing its best just to keep up with accurate documentation of COVID cases at the tail end of a log flu season. It wasn't until they made their dash boards open source that the community asked for breakdowns by race and ethnicity. The department replied immediately and skewed patterns of discrepancies were revealed.

And, we can go even further.

We need to provide opportunities for literacy and training to citizens from all backgrounds, education levels, and walks of life. We need to communicate context, encourage engagement, and explain not only how the data is used, but also how the data can be used.

The Data Squad in Minneapolis—composed of public housing and public health professionals, community coordinators, and residents themselves—received funding from Data Across Sectors of Health (DASH) to use data to problem solve community issues with residents. Residents learned how to use data for advocacy effectively on everything from snow removal to public safety.



ODD DUCK

Odd Duck is a storytelling for social change consultancy. We help paradigm-shifting leaders in mental wellness and population health to shape culture through narrative. From tech startups promoting mindfulness platforms to global health initiatives advancing transformational interventions, we specialize in change through disruptive narratives. We build narrative frameworks, provide training, and develop content to advance your organizational strategy.

<https://oddduck.io/>

INTERRUPT THE VIOLENCE

Interrupt the Violence (ITV) has over a decade of experience developing violence prevention, conflict resolution, and public safety plans throughout the country. We partner with city and state governments, community-based organizations, nonprofits, foundations, NGOs, activists, and stakeholders to develop an impact strategy that achieves results. Our expertise is in identifying key stakeholders, highest-risk youth, community partners, and major players to come together to reduce violence without increasing incarceration. Our initiatives aim to leverage community strengths, challenge the cultural components that perpetuate violence, and provide hope.

<https://www.interrupttheviolence.com/>

mySidewalk

mySidewalk is a technology company on a mission to democratize data. mySidewalk equips community change-makers with tools to help them advance equitable programs and policies. With an extensive data library and a mobile-friendly, ADA-accessible publishing platform, mySidewalk customers create place-based analytics built on data, design, and expertise. mySidewalk works with hundreds of public, private, and non-profit clients to break down barriers to knowledge and inspire change.

<https://mysidewalk.com/>