

Narrative Building as Process

One of our first clients at The First Principles Advisory, was an international grant-making organisation that had commissioned research to support the mapping of narrative approaches and practices that civil society organisations wished to undertake, and to contribute to the design and documentation of a fellowship program that could strengthen participation, effectiveness, and engagement in narrative discourse. Early in the consultancy process, however, it became clear that the challenge was not simply about designing another fellowship or identifying communication activities for grantees. Through consultations with civil society organisations, media practitioners, academic institutions, and ecosystem actors, a deeper question emerged: how does civil society understand and engage with narrative power, and why do existing approaches to media, storytelling, and communications often remain fragmented, under-resourced, and institutionally weak? The final outcome, therefore, evolved into a broader, more foundational piece of work, shaped by the realities uncovered during the consultation process.

From the outset, TFP approached narrative not as a communications output but as a civic and institutional process. The underlying premise was that narratives are not merely stories organisations tell; they are systems through which societies shape legitimacy, belonging, credibility, dignity, and public understanding. In a context marked by increasing polarisation, shrinking civic space, rapid technological change, and declining trust in institutions, narrative work could not be reduced to messaging, visibility strategies, or content production alone. We therefore reframed the conversation from communications support to “purposeful narrative building” — a reflective and ethically grounded practice that helps organisations understand how meaning, power, identity, and public perception are constructed and contested over time. This shift became necessary because many organisations recognised the impact of dominant narratives on the communities they worked with, even if they did not yet have a structured way of thinking about narrative as an organisational capability.

As a result, TFP delivered far more than a fellowship concept note. The work included an ecosystem-level analysis intended to help the funder make informed long-term decisions in this emerging area. The report mapped the broader media and fellowship landscape, analysed the limitations of existing fellowship models, examined institutional funding approaches, explored regulatory and political constraints affecting narrative work, and documented the structural reasons why narrative capacity within civil society often remains weak. These elements were included because it became clear that any fellowship design developed in isolation would risk reproducing the same short-term and output-driven approaches that already exist across much of the sector.

The consultation process itself played a critical role in shaping the final recommendations. Rather than functioning as one-time interviews, the engagements evolved into iterative conversations over several months with more than fifteen

stakeholders from civil society, academia, media, and related fields. These discussions revealed that organisations were approaching narrative work from very different starting points. Some had already developed sophisticated understandings of narrative, ethics, identity, and power, while others were only beginning to see narrative as a strategic concern. Their priorities, capacities, and contexts varied significantly. For this reason, we deliberately avoided proposing a single standardised fellowship structure. Instead, it developed a flexible framework capable of accommodating different levels of readiness, organisational capacities, and thematic interests while remaining anchored in a shared understanding of purposeful narrative building.

This thinking also informed the decision to propose multiple operational models rather than a single prescriptive approach. The intention was not to complicate implementation, but to recognise that the funder might require flexibility depending on its strategic priorities, operational capacity, governance considerations, and long-term ambitions. One model focused on direct support to organisations, combined with ongoing accompaniment and developmental assessment. This approach recognised that narrative work requires continuous reflection, learning, and contextual interpretation rather than technical training alone.

A second model explored a cohort-based fellowship anchored through a technical host institution. This model emerged from the recognition that narrative capacity building often requires dedicated spaces for reflection, interdisciplinary learning, peer exchange, experimentation, and sustained inquiry. By connecting civil society organisations with an academic or technical environment, the model sought to create conditions for deeper learning and longer-term capability development.

More broadly, the inclusion of multiple models reflected a core insight from our engagement: narrative work cannot be effectively operationalised through rigid program design alone. The consultations repeatedly demonstrated that narrative building is relational, context-dependent, politically sensitive, and uneven across organisations. We therefore, prioritised adaptability over standardisation and sought to provide a range of pathways that could support different levels of investment, ownership, and ambition while remaining grounded in the same conceptual framework.

The final outcome represented both a response to the original request and a strategic expansion of it. We concluded that meaningful investment in narrative work would require more than a fellowship structure. It would require a shared conceptual language, an understanding of the broader ecosystem, flexible implementation pathways, and an institutional approach to building long-term narrative capacity. The report therefore delivered not only programmatic recommendations, but also a deeper articulation of why narrative infrastructure matters, why existing approaches often fall short, and what conditions are necessary for civil society organisations to engage in narrative practice in a thoughtful, sustainable, and institutionally grounded way. In that sense, the report served not only as program design support, but as an

opportunity to think more strategically about narrative power itself—its possibilities, its constraints, and its significance within contemporary civic life.

One of the most valuable lessons from this assignment was learning that narrative work begins long before storytelling. Our role was not to arrive with answers, frameworks, or solutions, but to listen carefully and understand how organisations themselves made sense of the world, the communities they worked with, and the changes they hoped to see. The process began with extensive secondary research—mapping media fellowships, studying narrative theory and practice, and reading across disciplines ranging from storytelling and ethics to digital media and social change. That research helped shape a broad set of questions rather than predetermined conclusions. Through conversations with organisations, we became increasingly interested in what was absent as much as what was present: the processes they had built, the assumptions they held, the institutional capacities they lacked, and the ways they understood narrative without always having the language to describe it.

Perhaps the strength I brought to the work was the ability to hold a long-term frame while remaining deeply attentive to context—listening for patterns, contradictions, and possibilities without rushing to fill gaps or prescribe solutions. In many ways, the exercise reinforced my belief that meaningful strategy emerges not from expertise alone, but from careful observation, patient listening, and the ability to connect ideas across different worlds.

Among other things, Sudha consults with The First Principles Advisory. She is an avid learner whose diverse journey spans tech, marketing, textiles, e-learning, education and anthropology. She is self-taught and digitally savvy, she explores open-source platforms globally, creating content that melds technology and education seamlessly. With a master's in Anthropology, she aspires to be a serious ethnographer, delving into humanity's intricacies. Beyond her professional pursuits, she seeks inner calm and self-awareness, embodying a commitment to continuous growth