

# REFRAMING NARRATIVES, RESETTING REALITY:

*A Conversation with Mackenzie Price  
of the FrameWorks Institute*

**Nonprofit Quarterly:** *People have been talking a lot about narratives lately, and particularly narratives having to do with racial justice, racial issues generally, and how narratives are used to define what it is that's going on in the world. Can you give us an example of narratives in conflict, or perhaps a narrative that needs to change?*

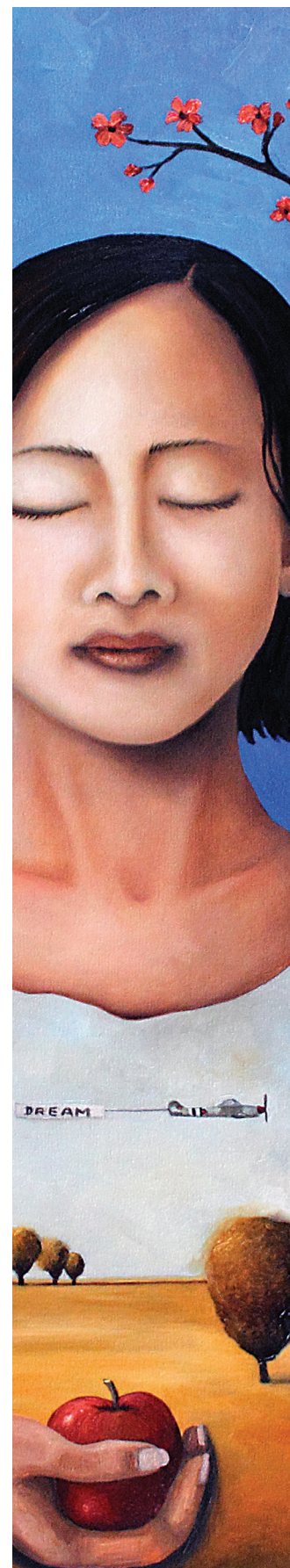
**Mackenzie Price:** I think about narrative a lot, both as someone who studies language in interaction and also in my work at FrameWorks. When I think like a linguist, “narrative” describes language that reports events, and those events involve actors or characters that are positioned in various ways. As a linguist, I think about the implications of the language choices that get made when events are being reported.

When I think about narrative and its value for communicators, I am thinking about narrative as an applied concept that describes how reality is constructed and how information is conveyed. Narrative needs to continue to have strength as an applied concept, because it allows all of us to see how the ways we use language to talk about our work, our lives, or our beliefs position people while we are constructing reality and conveying

information. Every piece of communication is a part of some narrative.

There are a myriad of ways that narrative, as a way to conceptualize establishing reality, can be brought to bear strategically to help guide discourse and, subsequently, action and policy. I can give you an example of why a field might elect to advance a different narrative, or strategy, for conveying information to further policy goals. One of our projects at the FrameWorks Institute involves a group of nine or so foundations that work on age-related issues. Crucially, the field wants to talk about what changes to our society will support healthy aging for everyone. One strategy the field relies on is giving examples of incredibly successful, exemplary older people that we all might look up to. This strategy can backfire, though, because holding up examples of exemplary individuals will inadvertently overshadow a lot of other aspects of what it means to get older. Put another way, focusing on “superhuman” older adults as the dominant image of aging might erase other aspects of the reality of aging.

For example, to lift up Ruth Bader Ginsburg with the message that you or I or anyone could be just like her might leave out the wider factors



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that allowed for this fantastic outcome. What is the implication of those missing pieces in the conversation about aging? What about the type of work that she has? She has a job for life. How many people can land a job like that?

If you're a communicator in a field that wants to have a conversation about workplace discrimination, and the accessibility of healthcare, and how we can ensure a multigenerational workforce, then a narrative (or public reporting of information) that is missing pieces and only focuses on Ruth Bader Ginsburg is limiting. The narrative about aging needs to be expanded so that it does not accidentally close the door on or submerge other stories that need to be part of—or even lead—the analysis.

Another example of invoking narratives is from current events I've been unraveling. A news radio piece the other morning played a clip of Trump at a rally saying something like, “You guys know who I am, and there is a word for what I am, but it's a little old-fashioned, and people don't say it anymore. But I'm just going to say it: ‘I'm a nationalist.’” Thus, he frames the negative connotations of nationalism as just that it is old-fashioned and he is just the guy who is not held back by conventions—the guy who can say what he thinks and, by implication, what you are thinking.

It was a very clever crafting of reality, and not accidental. I don't think it's going too far to say it was a great way to nod to history without connecting himself directly to white nationalism per se—and, going even further, to erase the real and dangerous negative connotations and replace them with something seemingly benign: “old-fashioned.” That's an example of crafting a narrative to dangerous effect. The fact that someone with influence and power gets to say that and have it transmitted on the radio without commentary—that is going to have enormous consequences down the line.

**NPQ:** *Can you talk a little bit about how people listening to something like that can recognize that a narrative is being run on them? And in that scenario, is there a danger of accepting enough of it to normalize it and therefore support it? Do you have to know your social*

*history in order to be able to recognize when this is happening?*

**MP:** I think in the example of Donald Trump working to position nationalism as quaintly old-fashioned, you do have to know your history to see the progression of the narrative or reality being built. Knowing your history means not just knowing events but also recognizing cues. As a linguist, I'm interested in interpretation, by which I mean that I am interested in what cues are present, and who recognizes what cue, and what they do with each cue. And every cue can potentially go in many different directions, so it's interesting to track them. In this example, I was struck by the pairing of the cue “nationalism” with the cue “old-fashioned.” I was struck by how they interact with each other. Different people are going to see different cues in the juxtaposition—but what's crucial here is that, in this example, if you know your history, you will recognize that “old-fashioned” and “nationalism” are being combined. And you can then question why this is happening.

So, getting at the question of how we know when a narrative is present, I would say that everyone should know that narrative is always happening. That should be the baseline assumption.

**NPQ:** *When do you have to take action on a narrative, and how do you take action on it? I think everyone can agree that they often find themselves in the middle of a conversation in which someone has a different story going on than they feel or have experienced, and challenging that can feel impolite or disruptive—and it is disruptive!*

**MP:** An important thing to note is that even if you disrupt a narrative like that in real time, or challenge someone in real time, because what is being said has serious implications, you may not get the result you want in that interaction. You might not be able to challenge someone and instantly change his or her thinking. And that's okay, because I would argue, and I think many would agree, that this is a long-term thing, and those challenges have to happen multiple times in order to make it possible for someone to

interpret cues differently or to have more experiences that he or she can draw on in future interactions. So, you might not make that change in the moment, but every time you interrupt a false narrative or a false reality—well, not to get overly metaphysical, but you are putting something into a consciousness.

**NPQ:** *Into a collective consciousness.*

**MP:** Yes. And my feeling is that activism belongs in that context. Even if an action doesn't have an immediate tangible effect, it puts new ideas and challenges into a wider consciousness—so that later on down the line, and/or in a different context, these internalized cues will resurface for people. They are now set up with the ability to see different cues or interpret cues differently. An example of what this can mean for activism that comes right to mind is the early reaction to Black Lives Matter—as phrase, as idea, as movement. Do you remember how the instant, reactionary retort was, “No, all lives matter”? “All lives matter” is an attempt to silence “Black lives matter.” But it didn't work. And the repetition of “Black lives matter” as a way to assert that Black lives have been disregarded, discounted, and disrespected has been successful at showing how privilege and racism in our society function.

“Black lives matter” is a narrative, a way for expressing a reality, and it challenges a more dominant reality—the reality that some people and communities are more privileged than others.

**NPQ:** *That then gives you the opportunity to explain why we do need to say at this moment that Black lives matter, right?*

**MP:** Right. And I think that this is also an example of the long-term aspect of this kind of consciousness. I don't know if that kind of hair-trigger reaction is still happening as much as it was. It's my sense that it's happening less—which if true gives space for articulating why, at this moment, it is important to say that Black lives matter, and what it means for Black lives to matter, and even what the evidence is that Black lives have not mattered. It gives space for those conversations to repeat

and move forward. This is not to say that there isn't a long way to go, but if there is even just a decline of this “all lives matter” retort, I see that as an important movement toward victory—or at least a positive change in consciousness. And to be clear: Black lives matter. Elevating this narrative and this truth is essential. The lives of Black people in America continue to be disrespected and discounted, and to assert that they matter must continue.

**NPQ:** *This idea of repetition is interesting—and repetition from multiple places, so that it does become part of the consciousness. One thing leaders can do is help move a narrative along. It reminds me of the work that was done by the Battered Women's Movement and the rape movement—the anti-violence against women movement. Back in the day, the definition of what that violence was and why it occurred, and the language around it—“crime of passion,” “things got out of hand”—was completely different, just completely disconnected from women's experience. And it took decades of redefining terms and working with the media to educate people around what women were really experiencing, and what it meant, and how it needed to be described and reported. And now, in this time of social media, where we have these multiple voices 24/7, you can almost see those redefinitions move along fairly quickly. So, for those who are really interested in helping to shift frames, what is it that they should be looking to practice?*

**MP:** One step to take is to be conscious of how and when our actions or the things we say privilege some people, identities, or communities over others. Take, for example, a communal sink in a workplace kitchen. If a posted sign says “Communal Sink,” yet in practice some people—because of their role or title—are “exempt” from washing dishes, and pile up items, then we have a case where people can exert privilege or act from privilege. How do we take steps to change a context in which some people are exempt and others are not? We can all think about breaking down the unspoken and spoken rules that maintain

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privilege, as well as those spoken and unspoken rules that maintain oppression and erasure.

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**NPQ:** *So, getting back to the collective work that we have to do in reframing, do you have ideas about how to make that happen? I know that FrameWorks gets involved in a lot of public campaign messaging and that kind of thing, but on a more organic level, what is important to do to help a reframed narrative move along in public consciousness?*

**MP:** A reframed narrative moves through public consciousness in large part by being present and by repetition. But repeating a narrative doesn’t mean telling the same story over and over and over. Repetition is not using the exact same example or featuring the exact same person in your newsletter. Repetition is about continuously appealing to categories of values, examples, messengers, and stories. Repetition can even be as subtle as saying, “We are going to make sure that all of the solutions that we’re prescribing—that we’re advocating for—meet these certain criteria, that they are collective.” It’s not about saying the exact same thing over and over again but rather identifying these larger categories and staying loyal, in a sense, to those categories—continuing with that kind of fidelity.

**NPQ:** *So, you’re basically rewriting a story, but it’s more a genre of story? A story that brings you to a particular place that’s different from the place that you would have been brought to were another story to have dominated. It reminds me of something the artist M. C. Escher talked about in (I think it was) an autobiography, which is that repetition is important. He said, “How does a child know what a dog is?” I mean, you’ve got Chihuahuas and you’ve got rottweilers and you’ve got all these different forms and types of dogs, and they’re different from cats, but at what point—and how—does a child know that something is a dog rather than a cat? And Escher said that it’s by repetition, but in a particular way. The child will sense the categories, and the categories get reinforced in his or her mind over time.*

**MP:** And it takes time to identify what the features of this category are, and that’s kind of the way that FrameWorks thinks about its work. Framing research identifies different broad categories that can create a new narrative or new strategy for talking about an issue. Once we know what the features of the category are, FrameWorks works with a field to share what the features of the strategy should be. And as you generate new examples and new messengers and new types of solutions—or even new infographics or sources of data—you need to hit the following features in order to get in that category or that narrative.

Bringing it back to the aging-related-issues field, they are now including information in their narrative about aging about what it takes to age healthily. A narrative that is broader than a focus on exemplary individuals is a shift in communications strategy. Repeating this strategy will, over time, change the way public policy impacting aging is understood.

**NPQ:** *So, this is an exercise in being very purposeful about the way you communicate the issues that you’re talking about. But they can’t be understood without that repetition.*

**MP:** Right.

**NPQ:** *And, then, in fact, we have very often been privy to the repetition of very different stories that do privilege the dominant narrative.*

**MP:** Right. I can give you an example of that. The morning after Senator Elizabeth Warren released her video about taking a DNA test to “prove” her Delaware and Cherokee ancestry, I heard Chuck Hoskin, Jr., the Cherokee Nation secretary of state, on the radio. He made the point that by making that video, Warren was “dishonoring legitimate tribal governments and their citizens, whose ancestors are well documented and whose heritage is proven,” by telling and repeating a narrative about belonging through genealogy rather than tribal affiliation. In other words, she was appealing to a vision of reality where identity is

about biological relationships rather than actual connection.

Chuck Hoskin, Jr., pointed out that the Cherokee Nation is a sovereign nation within the lands that are known as the United States. They have a particular set of legal agreements with the federal government of the United States that allow them to decide who a citizen is. Members of the nation are legal citizens, and there are criteria for determining this that have nothing to do with genetics.

Warren was repeating a common and dominant narrative about belonging through ancestry and biology. That narrative privileges certain identities. The secretary of state was confronting Warren's narrative and that privilege, while asserting a narrative that highlights Cherokee rights and interests.

Now, Hoskin, Jr., could have gotten on the air and invoked another narrative. For example, he could have talked about the Cherokee Nation as a community that has experienced a long-standing occupation by the United States federal government. Either way, both an occupation narrative and a legal citizenship narrative are very

different from the dominant narrative of belonging through ancestry.

**NPQ:** *When you begin thinking about what the stories are that underlie the actions that we take together and apart, it can feel overwhelming but at the same time incredibly powerful. There's enormous power in being able to select a narrative that meets the situation but doesn't necessarily meet the dominant narrative—and even disrupts it. And to make sure that there are enough diverse voices talking to it that you can collectively affect public consciousness is hugely powerful.*

**MP:** Yes, in the end, we are talking about the ability to reset reality—to ring alarm bells in a way that is a clarion call to a future we choose rather than one being foisted on us.

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