

## Changing Minds

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This discussion paper is part of the institute's programme of work under the title of **The Narrative Project**, which explores how stories could be derived from our systems thinking into the complex, wicked messes that make up our world. We are concerned about the difficulty of shifting the massive systems in which we live, and the key often lies in human behaviour. We are looking for patterns and inspiration from all types of literature and communications. We are delighted to involve local students from an English Literature with Writing programme

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### What is changing minds?

The human mind is a powerful and complex thing. It's our inner world, where we hold memories, beliefs, biases and trauma. Also, where we craft our ideas and dreams. So much happens in our minds that we aren't even aware of – most of what informs our decision-making is in the subconscious. Social psychologist Timothy Wilson says that approximately 95% of our thoughts, feelings and memories live in our subconscious. This is because the human brain can absorb much more than what our conscious mind can process – about 275,000 times more! (Pierson, 5). So, it isn't only our conscious mind that informs our decision making. What does that mean for *changing minds*?

For someone's mind to change, not only do they have to be made aware of new information, but they must also make sure that information aligns with everything else they already believe or they would have to change that too. It's no surprise then, that psychologists warn we must use more than facts and logic to change someone's mind (Stillman). If what you're saying doesn't align with their subconscious – informed by experiences, feelings, upbringing, media, religion – then they're unlikely to take it on board. One conversation is usually not enough to challenge a whole lifetime of beliefs. So, how do you change someone's mind?

If we think of the 'mind' as a *belief system*, we can use systems thinking to help us understand what techniques can be used in changing them:

*“Belief systems are the stories we tell ourselves to define our personal sense of reality. Every human being has a belief system that they utilize, and it is through this mechanism that we individually, “make sense” of the world around us... What is systemic in the whole belief system is the interrelation between several sub-beliefs.”* (Usó-Doménech, Nescolarde-Selva).

If belief systems are like stories, then thinking critically about narrative and storytelling can help us understand them. Stories are everywhere: fairytales, books, television, mythology, religion, politics. Storytelling has long been a means of teaching and influencing people. But the subconscious mind may struggle to differentiate fact from fiction, meaning belief systems are not *only* influenced by facts. What we *know* and what we *feel* are two different things.

### Changing minds with narrative

Powerful people understand the importance of storytelling in changing minds, which is why they employ publicists, strategists and consultants to help them in crafting the perfect narrative. King Leopold for example, a Belgian coloniser responsible for the death of an estimated 10 million Africans, recognised "that what matters, often, is less the substance of a political event than how the public perceives it" (Ogniben, 20). He managed to profit from the exploitation and colonisation of Africans under the guise of a “humanitarian and philanthropic mission” (Rannard and Webster). Using religion and politics, he crafted a narrative that justified the unjustifiable.

Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *The Poisonwood Bible* explores the interrelational aspect of narratives and belief systems – particularly the role of religion, politics, family and nature. Nathan Price, a Southern Baptist evangelical minister, moves with his family from the U.S. to the village of Kilanga in the Belgian Congo. He is “a symbolic figure... suggesting many things about the way the U.S. and Europe have approached Africa with a history of cultural arrogance and misunderstanding at every turn" (Ogniben, 20). As a devout Christian and proud American, Nathan is convinced it is his calling to convert and “civilise” the Congolese people. He ultimately fails as he is totally ignorant of their language and culture and refuses to learn. The title is taken from Nathan’s mispronunciation during a sermon of "Jesus is most precious" to "Jesus is poisonwood" – “Kingsolver reverses expectations and roles: it is not the Congolese

who are ignorant or ‘savage’ or say the wrong words but the colonizers” (Ogniben, 34). Throughout the narrative, Nathan’s wife and children begin to question his ideas as he proves his ignorance again and again:

*“Leah sees how Nathan has no sense at all of the culture he wants to civilize; his message is as irrelevant as his Kentucky seeds to the Congo environment.”* (Kingsolver, 26)

The conflict between man and nature also reflects the flaws in the western ecological narrative: *“In the Western tradition there is a recognized hierarchy of beings, with, of course, the human being on top—the pinnacle of evolution, the darling of Creation—and the plants at the bottom.”* (Wall-Kimmerer). This hierarchy is embedded in Nathan’s belief system and justified by his religion.

Then God said, *“Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”* (Genesis 1:26-28)

Despite his beliefs, Nathan is consistently bested by nature. Like when his American seeds don't grow, when he tries to baptise people in a river filled with crocodiles or convince the women to “cover themselves” in extreme heat. He fails to convert the Congolese people as their belief system is congruent with a completely different climate, economy and religion. Their culture’s belief system is rooted in a reciprocal relationship with nature as opposed to an exploitative one:

*“In Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation.” We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn—we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance.”* (Wall-Kimmerer)

These conflicts show us how politics, religion and the environment are all interconnected and influential to one's belief system or worldview. This process is not just about changing minds but prescribing both action and *inaction* (the latter also being very important):

*“Religion and politics are not separate entities, but a powerful combined force used historically not only to “convert the savages” but to convert the masses to believe that what is done in the name of democratic, Christian principles is done for the greater good.”* (Ogniben, 20).

The role of Christianity and white supremacist pseudoscience during this period was to create a *narrative* in which colonisation was justified. Believing negative narratives about Africa (“uncivilised”, “savage”, “poor”) and positive narratives about Europe and Christianity (“civilised”, “moral”, “wealthy”), primes people to not question endless wars, exploitation and underdevelopment. Even when presented with facts that contradict this narrative, many people struggle to be persuaded. It contradicts something deeper within their belief system that they may not even be aware of: *Manufacturing Consent* argues that the mass communication media of the U.S. *“are effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function, by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship, and without overt coercion”* (Herman, Chomsky, 306)

The best way to counter these negative stereotypes is often through education. Contrary to western and capitalist narratives of ecology, nature is ultimately the most powerful and effective teacher. Learning from the Congolese natives and their environment challenges the Price family’s preconceived notions of Africa and the U.S. Stories like *The Poisonwood Bible*, drawing from real events and the authors time spent in Africa, expose people to new ideas and perspectives. This exposure can expand their knowledge and challenge their belief systems. Watching characters slowly begin to change their minds throughout the narrative can encourage readers to do the same without the fear of judgement or hostility.

### Changing minds in the contemporary world

Having previously established different techniques for changing minds from history and fictional examples, how can people be persuaded to change their worldviews in our contemporary society? As the Schumacher Institute is dedicated towards solutions for sustainability, climate change will be the issue examined to analyse techniques that persuade changes in worldviews, behaviours, and systems.

To understand how to change minds about climate change, we must begin by looking at the different systems involved and the relationships between them to understand where change could and should occur. The major systems at play here are the consumers, the producers/industry, and the nations/political powers. These three systems exist in a triangular relationship with each other in which the consumers demand, the industries aim to meet the demand, the political powers regulate the industries, and the consumers vote for their political leaders.

The political powers enact laws and commitments (such as Net Zero in the UK) and direct the industries towards goals such as reducing emissions and having climate-conscious practices. However, as stated previously, an alignment of belief systems and values must occur to change minds, and in industries and countries, persuasion of climate change often clashes with profit and GDP-growing incentives. For example, according to BP Energy Outlook 2030, which was published in 2011, emerging nations such as China and India opted for coal to boost their growth and showed no signs of stopping till 2030. Priorities for profit and growing a country, in this case, outweighed the damage of coal usage. But, in the decade after BP's prediction of coal usage, China and India are forecasted to not reach that predicted peak in 2030 due to recent growth in clean energy production, and instead, coal usage has fallen in both countries for the first time since 1973 (4).

Also mentioned in the IEA's article: *“Between 2019 and 2024, China will account for 40% of global renewable capacity expansion, driven by improved system integration, lower curtailment rates and enhanced competitiveness of both solar PV and onshore wind.”*

So, what caused this change? Certainly, there is the element of technology availability and its viability, which will be covered later as another persuasion technique, but due to coal becoming increasingly more expensive than renewable energy resources, nations have been switching gears over the last decade.

A report by IRENA published in 2021 reads:

*“In the United States, for example, 149 GW or 61 per cent of the total coal capacity costs more than new renewable capacity. Retiring and replacing these plants with renewables would cut*

*expenses by USD 5.6 billion per year and save 332 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, reducing emissions from coal in the United States by one-third. In India, 141 GW of installed coal is more expensive than new renewable capacity. In Germany, no existing coal plant has lower operating costs than new solar PV or onshore wind capacity.”*

Hence, it can be inferred that a major factor behind this change is that the profit perspectives of industries and nations started aligning with the technology that fights climate change, therefore facilitating the shift worldwide towards using clean energy. One can only imagine how the events would turn out if coal continued to remain as the cheapest fuel option.

Now, as alluded to above, the availability and viability of infrastructure and technology are another important instrument in persuasion. Even in the case of a campaign aligning with a subject's values and belief systems, change will be hard to come by if there is much friction against the action, or if the action is impossible. Take the earlier quote as an example, China accounting for 40% of worldwide renewable energy capacity was driven by the improvements and the technology/infrastructure being available. Or another example, persuading people to start cycling more will not gain as much traction if the roads are unsafe for cyclists. However, as better cycle paths continue to be built in countries like the UK and schemes like “Cycle2Work” making cycling more economically viable, it becomes much easier to persuade commuters to take up cycling (as evident by the 63% increase in cycling from 2013 to 2021 (6)). Therefore, not only must values align, but the option and feasibility to enact the change are essential for persuasion.

Finally, the tone of voice is also an important aspect to consider. Regarding climate change, the two main tones that are usually taken are those on the more positive side, termed “climate optimism”, and those on the negative, “climate doomerism”. It's easy to see the pros and cons of each camp; “climate optimism” provides hope, yet too much optimism may make it seem like the danger is far away and the stakes are low, and “climate doomerism” raises the necessity for action, yet extreme pessimism may lead to inaction and giving up. A study published in 2024 that took place in 63 countries and involved 59,400 participants revealed that negative messaging on the internet was the most effective tone in spreading information about climate change; however, it was also the worst in catalysing action and one of the worst for promoting

support towards climate change policies and changing beliefs about climate change (7) (detailed figures and data of this study are in (8)).

So, what is the right tone to take? It may be helpful here to examine a video of a science and information YouTube channel called Kurzgesagt, which has over 25 million subscribers. This video, titled “We WILL Fix Climate Change”, attracted 11 million viewers over the last three years since its upload (9). The video begins with a stark and bleak tone, accompanied by similar visuals, positing the reality of what climate change and ignoring it has done to our world. This introduction works well as it sets the gravity and the seriousness of the situation and does not dress up the damage that the world is suffering from. As the video continues, snapshots of hope and positivity are included as they discuss different interventions by countries and how trends are slowing down. The video concludes with the perspective that “*the situation is dire, but all hope is not lost*”. This ending tone is very effective, as it combines both pessimistic and optimistic aspects, leveraging the strengths of both sides and mitigating their weaknesses. Awareness and urgency are spread, and action is stimulated because there is still hope. Hence, a good tone for persuasion into changing minds should make use of both positive and negative aspects.

There are many layers when approaching changing minds. Most important is good storytelling - the use of narrative built on the foundation of alignment with values and belief systems. As seen in the examples of Africa and colonialism, strong persuasion correlates with strong narrative control via religion, politics and education. When it comes to the contemporary world, alignment with these belief systems is also of foundational importance. Discussion of availability and viability of technology and infrastructure also forms the structure of an effective persuasion into issues like climate change. This is by no means an exhaustive report of persuasion techniques, but merely an insight into what may be effective and what is not.

When it comes to environmental and social justice issues, we are lucky in that facts (and nature) are usually on our side. However, through looking at the role of narratives in changing minds, we can start to see how other factors can be essential to an effective rhetoric. Looking at the persuasive techniques in both fiction and non-fiction helps us understand how people are persuaded and what methods are best at converting them to a new worldview. This can help us

craft narratives that connect facts with feelings, hopefully persuading people to a belief system that is more informed, empathetic and sustainable.

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