



NEW TECH, NEW RULES:

Narrative and Civil Society
in the age of AI and Algorithms

Project Introduction

AI, chatbots and related technologies are having unprecedented impacts on almost every aspect of life, from academia, to employment to the environment, but humans' imaginings about intelligent machines are about as old as storytelling itself. Over the millennia, humans have told one another stories about them, and those stories have in turn shaped our imaginings, our hopes and our fears. The narratives underlying these stories are informing the shape of today's AI tools.

When stories that have echoed through millennia seem to be coming true before our eyes, it is hardly surprising that the predominant narrative underlying almost all discussions about AI today is one of inevitability. As Karen Hao points out powerfully in her book [Empire of AI](#), narrative in general and the inevitability narrative in particular is at the core of AI – what we understand it to be, what we think it's for, and what we believe it holds for our future.

Even as an increasing number of [prominent voices](#) point out the threats AI poses, the discussion seems mainly to be about how to mitigate, manage or adapt to the 'inevitable' mass loss of jobs as a result of AI or about ethical use of large language models like ChatGPT or Gemini. The voices questioning the prioritization of efficiency and profit over people's livelihoods, or imagining a different kind of AI altogether, one that is more human- and earth- centered, seem hardly to get media coverage at all.

As we are being forced to grapple with this new technology, it is important to remember that narrative and culture shape and have always shaped the kind of technology we desire and work to create. They shape what we seek to do with that technology, and they shape who gets to control and benefit from it.

Right now the narrative of inevitability is shaping funding, policy, research agendas and all sorts of other decisions. However, as those of us working in the field we call 'narrative change' understand, a dominant narrative is just a narrative, just a set of stories we are telling ourselves. And this one is a story we don't have to accept. What this pervasive narrative of inevitability does is make us forget that we—we humans—get to decide. Do we want AI? If so, what kind of AI do we want? Do we want it to take people's jobs? Do we want it to destroy our environment? If not, let's imagine, decide, and act differently.

What happens with AI, and with us, will depend—depends right now—on the outcome of a contest of narratives. It is a contest that is too important to leave to the technologists, politicians and economists. At IRIS, we know that if we want a better future, a future of justice, dignity and wellbeing for all, then we have to invite the storytellers, the artists and the dreamers to help show us the way.

It is with all of this in mind that IRIS has engaged in an exciting body of work, spurred and supported by [Luminate](#), exploring the connections between AI, democracy and narrative power.

There are four parts to this work:

- An **Annotated Bibliography**:
[The Narrative Terrain of AI and New Technology.](#)

- Two **blog posts** about [narratives about AI](#)
and the [role of artists and storytellers in shaping the AI narrative landscape.](#)

- An **Original Essay** on AI and Democracy
by [Daniel Stanley of the Future Narratives Lab.](#)

- 10 Global Majority **Case Studies**:
[How are organizations and activists creatively engaging now?](#)

1



The Narrative Terrain of AI and New Tech

If we want to dive into the narrative contest over the future of AI, a starting point is to understand the narrative terrain: what are the predominant narratives and whose interests are they serving? To this end, IRIS project manager and public interest technologist [Di Luong](#) has developed an [annotated bibliography](#) of existing research into the plethora of cultural narratives about AI as well as how those narratives in turn impact our understanding of ourselves as humans, politics and democracy, the nature of truth and even of the past and future.



■ AI Narratives in history

Human thinking about AI goes back millennia, across many cultures, with [a deep history of imagining automata, robots and intelligent machines as servants and killing machines, or used for surveillance, sex and entertainment](#). Self-navigating ships appear in the 8th Century BC in the epics of Homer, while in the 1001 Nights, a brass horseman directs travelers to the City of Brass. In Greek mythology, [Talos \(or Talus\) was a man of bronze](#), who protected Crete from pirates and invaders. Fictional narratives about AI in China go back more than two thousand years. [Ancient Hindu and Buddhist texts](#) from India talk about machines and robots such as automaton warriors. [In the story, 'Yanshi Creating a Man'](#) by Daoist scholar Liezi (C 450-375BC), an automaton male dancer sends flirtatious glances towards a concubine of King Mu of Zou. In the 12th century poem [Perceval, by Chrétien de Troyes](#), two machine sentries guard a knight's pavilion. They bar the way to anyone lacking noble blood and raise an alarm if a woman who is not a virgin tries to enter.

■ Key Narratives impacting current AI development

Key elements of the mythology of AI in US/Western Culture have impacted the shape of today's AI technology. Some examples are:



▶ Rights and Belonging:

Ideas about intelligence—deeply rooted in sexism, racism and eugenics—have long been used to determine who gets to be a citizen: who has rights. If, as we are being told, AI is (or soon will be) more intelligent than humans, that opens up a deeply troubling and problematic debate about the rights of machines with respect to humans. (We are already seeing this start to happen as in the cases of a recent [article in the Guardian](#) asking whether artificial intelligence can suffer and the [granting of citizenship to a robot named Sophia](#) in Saudi Arabia, in 2017).

▶ Technosolutionism:

Mark Andreessen's [Techno-Optimist Manifesto](#) is an extreme version of this, but the idea that technology can fix everything is deeply embedded throughout Western culture. As [Ruha Benjamin](#), [Joy Buolamwini](#) and many others have pointed out, however, technology is not neutral and tends to replicate and deepen existing biases and inequalities while masking the fact that it is doing so.

▶ Male creators, male protagonists:

The predominant forms of AI have been created and programmed [overwhelmingly by male creators](#) and used in the service of mostly male protagonists. The vision of an ideal future that we are being sold is one dreamed up by a tiny group of extremely rich, mostly white, men in Silicon Valley, and it's one they alone are likely to benefit from.

▶ Utopian/Dystopian binary:

Each utopian future AI offers has its negative counterpart: immortality/loss of humanity; ease and leisure/obsolescence; connection/alienation; safety/surveillance and control. The film [The Matrix](#) is a good example.



▶ Master/Slave metaphor:

This goes along with the fear the slave will turn against the master. Examples are [Mary Shelley's Frankenstein](#), [2001 A Space Odyssey](#), and [Terminator](#).

▶ Quest for immortality and mind/body separation:

Examples are the TV series [Upload](#) and [Altered Carbon](#), the writing of [Hans Moravec](#), and dozens of [science fiction books](#).

Alternative and Resistant AI Narratives

Ranged against this narrative tide is a wide diversity of alternative and resistant narratives – some with an ancient lineage, others that are newer. Here is a non-exhaustive list:

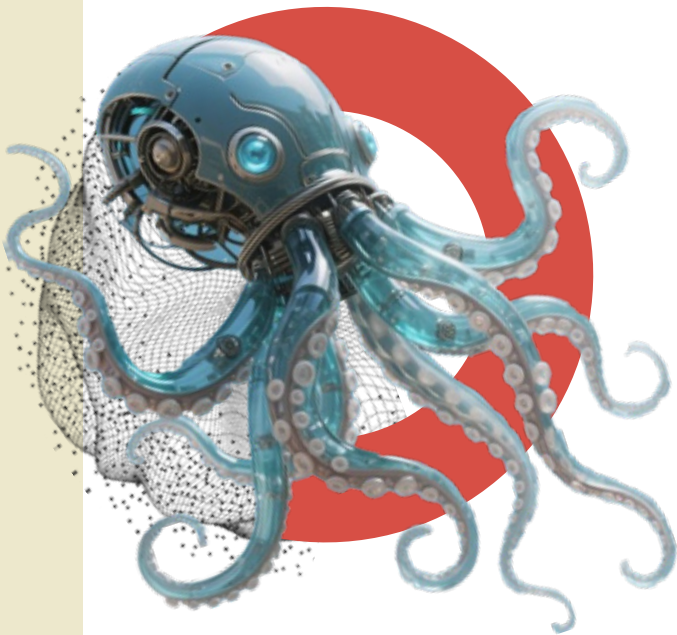
▶ Japanese imaginary:

In Japan, AI is often imagined as [having a body, and a heart as well as a mind](#) such as [Qoobo](#), a therapeutic robot in the form of a cushion with a tail, or [LOVOT](#) by Groove X - the name comes from Love + Robot.



▶ Indigenous perspectives:

Several alternative visions for the future of AI are inspired by [indigenous conceptions](#) of land, responsibility and family; based on indigenous languages; or modeled on the relationships of indigenous people with animals, or the nervous systems of animals (such as the octopus with its semi-autonomous tentacles).



▶ Feminist AI:

Feminist theories understand technology as political and see AI as both being shaped by existing power dynamics impacting gender and race, and reinforcing and shaping these in turn. One common example is the gendering of current AI assistants such as Siri and Alexa. [Lauren AI](#) is a series of performances by artist Lauren McCarthy, where she attempts to become a human version of Amazon Alexa.



▶ **Afrofuturism/[Afrofuturismo](#):**

A cultural aesthetic and philosophy that reimagines the future and alternate realities through a Black cultural lens. It is based on the idea that [‘Black people will exist in the future’](#). Some examples are the Artist Rashaad Newsome’s [BEING project](#), the work of [Intelligent Mischief](#) in the US, the writings of Octavia Butler, and popular films such as [Black Panther](#).

▶ **Decolonial perspective:**

For example, authors such as [Rachel Adams](#) and [Vanessa Machado de Oliveira](#), invite us to move away from binary ways of thinking about AI (human/nonhuman, good/bad, alive/dead), which they see as rooted in colonialism and modernity and instead, [as de Oliveira puts it](#), to “step into a space of curiosity and reflection, to grapple with complexity, and to explore the messy entanglements between humans, technology, and the broader web of life.” The artist [Raúl Cruz](#), focuses on depictions of intelligent machines rooted in the ‘ancestral aesthetics of Mesoamerican cultures’.



Photo credit: Raúl Cruz / RACRUF, Illustrator / Fine Artist

2



AI as Anti-Politics: An original essay from Daniel Stanley, Future Narratives Lab

In addition to surveying the existing research into narratives about AI more generally, we wanted to zoom in on narratives about AI and democracy. Our work in this area begins with a provocation by [Daniel Stanley of the Future Narratives Lab](#), in which he looks at deep trends in our democracy that have helped produce—and may be reinforced by—the particular form of AI we are now seeing. Stanley explores how extractive AI is the product and reflection of exploitative narratives and logics that have come to dominate our democratic life in recent decades, how those ways of thinking undermine the possibility of collective political identity and action, and where the opportunities might lie for building new forms of power to oppose them.



10 Global Majority Case Studies: How Are People Creatively Engaging Now?

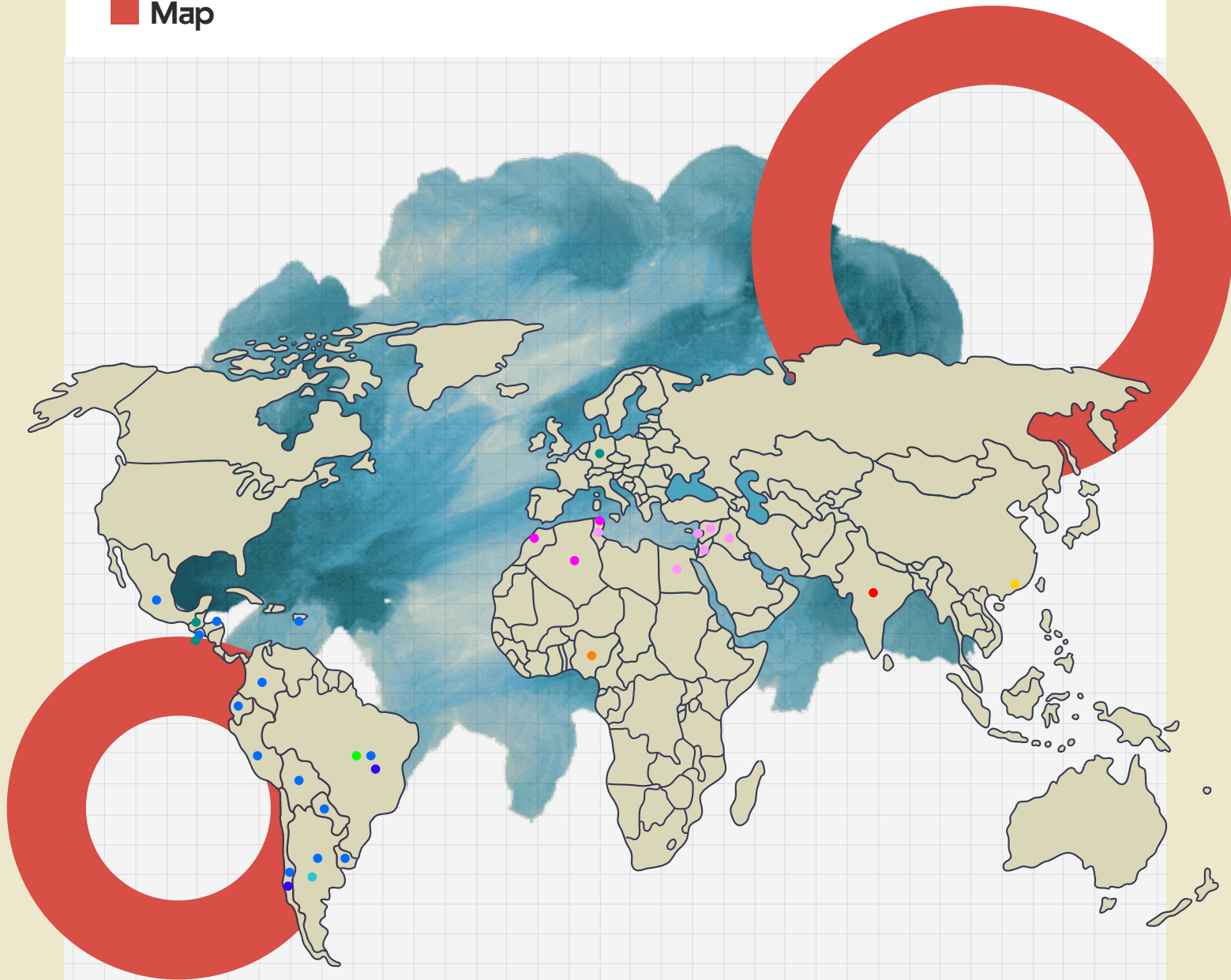
A principal aim of this project was to understand how organizations and activists are engaging in the narrative sphere right now: how are people doing pro-democracy, pro-social justice work in the context of AI, surveillance and data extraction and the information environment as it currently exists, and what lessons can we learn from that? To that end, IRIS sought proposals from organizations within our [Confluence](#) community of narrative changemakers who had learnings and recommendations to share from their experiences organizing and advocating in the information and AI age.

We commissioned 10 case studies ,

selected not only for their work on democracy and social justice in the age of AI and surveillance capitalism, but also to span a representative breadth of geographies, issues, contexts and approaches. A summary of each case study is in the [Appendix](#).



Map



Name of Organization	Region	Countries
● International Institute for Social Responsibility and Human Rights (IIRESODH)	Latin America/Central America	Argentina
● LATFEM	Latin America and the Caribbean	Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Honduras, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, Brazil
● Mada Masr	Arab Region	Lebanon , Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Tunisia
● The Equality Hub	Africa	Nigeria
● The Polis Project	Asia	India
● Derechos Digitales	Latin America	Chile, Brazil
● Fogo Cruzado Institute	Latin America	Brazil
● Tunisia Digital Democracy Partnership	Africa	Tunisia, Morocco , Algeria
● The Storywork Collective	Asia	Hong Kong
● Alharaca	Latin America	El Salvador, Guatemala, Germany

Across the cases, we see three general approaches emerging:

1

Coopting

Harnessing popular culture and new technologies for resistance

- **IRESODH**
The Eternaut Effect
- **Fogo Cruzado**
Challenging Narratives on Police Violence in Favelas

2

Countering

Education and Campaigning against Surveillance and Digital Attacks

- **Derechos Digitales**
Narrating Resistance: Social media campaigns on surveillance and Human Rights in Latin America
- **LatFem**
Feminist Narrative Strategies as Tool of Resistance and Driver for Transnational Learning

3.a

Innovating in Journalism and fact-based storytelling

- **Polis Project**
Voices from the Margins: Vernacular Media and Narrative Resistance in Authoritarian India
- **Mada Masr**
How to Stay Independent: Arab Media and the Politics of Staying with the Trouble
- **Alharaca**
From place-based audio walks to a portable collective-listening interactive experience: Prototyping Ciudad Perdida Across Latin America and Germany

3.b

Innovating in narrative and civic engagement

- **Tunisia Digital Democracy Partnership**
Decoding Authoritarian Narratives in the Algorithmic Age
- **The Storywork Collective**
Narrative Approaches to Undoing Digital Constraints
- **Equality Hub**
The Salt of the Story: Queer Feminist Filmmaking as Narrative Resistance

Narrative Approaches, Case Studies and Key Learnings

1

Coopting: Harnessing popular culture and new technologies for resistance

▶ IIRESODH: The Eternaut Effect

Demonstrates that a work of fiction can be an effective catalyst of constructive public conversations, reframe collective values, and reopen the relationship between popular culture, entertainment, memory, and social justice.

▶ Fogo Cruzado – Challenging Narratives on Police Violence in Favelas

The ability to test narratives quickly and systematically is a strategic advantage in a polarized environment saturated with disinformation. It can mean the difference between crafting messages that resonate and transform public opinion—or failing to break through ideological barriers.



2

Countering: Education and Campaigning against Surveillance and Digital Attacks

▶ Derechos Digitales – Narrating Resistance: Social media campaigns on surveillance and Human Rights in Latin America

Impactful digital rights communication depends not only on creativity but also on trust, context, and timing. Content resonates when it connects with people's emotions, speaks their language, and aligns with ongoing public discussions.

▶ LatFem – Feminist Narrative Strategies as Tool of Resistance and Driver for Transnational Learning

Key recommendations for digital security include strengthening secure internal practices, improving verification routines, and enhancing coordinated response mechanisms across teams and partner organizations. Resistance involves not only social protest but also narrating the everyday lives of those who build alternatives and sustain care in times of crisis.



3a

Innovating: Innovating in Journalism and fact-based storytelling

► **Polis Project – Voices from the Margins: Vernacular Media and Narrative Resistance in Authoritarian India**

Strategies for insurgent media resilience include:

- Financial autonomy through audience-first funding
- Satire as a narrative strategy
- Transform audiences into allies and defenders through hyperlocal reporting
- Anonymity as a security protocol
- Multi-platform pipelines for political engagement and to build in redundancy
- Decentralised collaboration bound by shared democratic values
- Funders should invest in infrastructure as well as content



► **Mada Masr – How to Stay Independent: Arab Media and the Politics of Staying with the Trouble**

News outlets face the 'platform trap' of having to reach audiences via platforms where they cannot control algorithms, search or archiving. These platforms are also owned and controlled by interests hostile to democracy and human rights. They counter this by using websites and newsletters to nurture loyal readership and cultivate closer communities. News media bypass the dangers of national politics by focusing on both on the hyper-local and the supra-national.

► **Alharaca – From place-based audio walks to a portable collective-listening interactive experience: Prototyping Ciudad Perdida Across Latin America and Germany**

Board game participants valued in-person exchange and the importance of connecting global histories to local realities. Collective listening can serve as an entry point. Structured dialogue transforms emotional engagement into deliberation and comparative reflection. Format innovation is not only an aesthetic choice: it is a set of editorial and logistical decisions about how to create stories that connect with audiences beyond online spaces.

3b

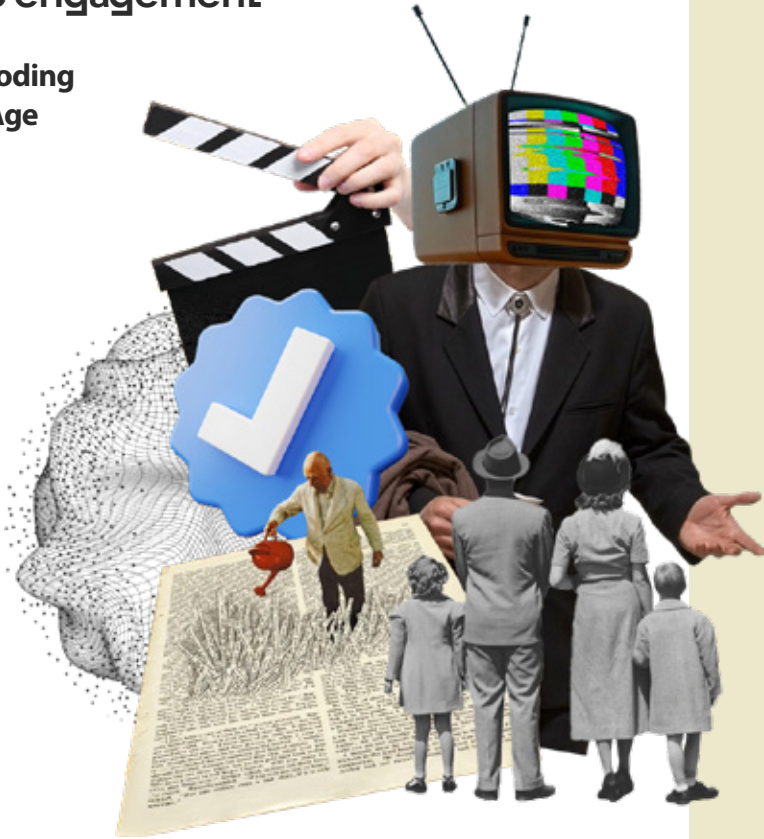
Innovating in narrative and civic engagement

▶ Tunisia Digital Democracy Partnership – Decoding Authoritarian Narratives in the Algorithmic Age

To counter authoritarian narratives, civil society combines factual rebuttals with early monitoring, rapid response, creative storytelling, and cross-border collaboration.

Effective campaigns combine humor, fact-checking, and civic engagement.

Countering authoritarian narratives requires integration of monitoring, creative engagement, transnational collaboration, and iterative learning.



▶ The Storywork Collective – Narrative Approaches to Undoing Digital Constraints

Identifies nine action areas for supporting adaptive narrative infrastructures:

- Shift from oppositional framing to constructive imagination
- Support artistic and coded forms—homonyms, humor, metaphor, aesthetic cues—that circulate values without triggering scrutiny
- Embed civic meaning within cultural, commercial, or wellbeing activities that remain permissible
- Support small-scale, relational, ephemeral communication systems that limit surveillance
- Use “tech for good,” AI ethics, and digital fairness as protective vocabularies
- Connect local experience to global struggles
- Counter Isolation with Reciprocal Storytelling
- Redirect resources toward care, emotional support, and community repair
- Embed security practices into every dimension of civic activity

▶ **Equality Hub – The Salt of the Story: Queer Feminist Filmmaking as Narrative Resistance**

- Invest in the entire queer storytelling ecosystem
- Build community-owned publishing, streaming, archiving and distribution platforms
- Grassroots efforts such as private screenings help build solidarity and foster discussion
- Embed safety and security into every creative budget
- Prioritize love and joy as a radical act of resistance
- Cross-border, cross-discipline, and cross-regional collaborations and distribution strategies are essential

4



Lessons from (and for) the Field

An overview cannot do justice to the wealth of insights and learnings across these projects' activities, but we do want to highlight some connecting themes we see, for sharing with those seeking to hone narrative practices as they are used in the interests of democracy and social justice. All of the communities represented in these studies are doing the hard, long-term work of (as Daniel Stanley says) putting the 'politics' back into politics: they are building community, building collective power, all while recognizing the centrality of narrative and meaning-making in doing so. In a world driven by the logic of datafication and increasingly grappling with technopopulist authorities, these 10 case studies are examples of communities, people, citizens, activists who know democracy cannot be 'fixed' by AI.

a

A Toolkit of Tactics: Co-opting, Countering and Innovating

We see three clear ways in which civil society is responding to the tech-infused authoritarian context: through **Co-opting, Countering and Innovating**. Organizations are **co-opting culture and technology for their own purposes**; they are **countering and resisting tech-driven surveillance and digital violence**; they are **innovating, finding new forms and approaches to journalism and to narrative civic engagement**. These approaches are of course interconnected: co-opting often happens in innovative ways; innovation in turn is a form of countering and resistance. Nevertheless, they are also distinct, and we believe this trio of tactics serves as a potentially useful menu for organizations to consider as they navigate our current moment.



b

From the Hyperlocal to the Transnational

Multiple case studies foreground a turn to the hyper-local, as a way to prioritize grassroots issues and voices sidelined by national media and politics as well as to side-step the scrutiny of authorities mostly focused on the national stage. Shifting the frame from one that places national politics in the center, what was previously thought of as marginal becomes central: **hyperlocal stories, news and politics are where it's at**. This is where politics intersects with people's lives, where connection and power-building can happen outside of surveilled tech platforms, where issues intersect, where audiences and media creators overlap, and where change seems possible.

At the same time there is a turn to the supra-national, looking at trends and connecting the dots of political developments beyond the nation-state, and as a way of sharing lessons and building cross-border solidarity. Just as authoritarians connect and learn from one another across borders, **just as technology knows no borders, so civil society actors need to connect across boundaries and borders, to make meaning and build power.**

c

Flexibility is Everything

In a fast-changing environment, where techno-authoritarianism is both continually innovating and intentionally disrupting and overwhelming, being flexible and adaptable is an essential strategy. While this is apparent across all of the case studies, perhaps the clearest example comes from Hong Kong, where the case study authors highlight the importance of ephemeral infrastructures that can appear, dissolve and reappear or reconfigure themselves as needed. These arrangements—micro-groups, informal collectives, rotating convenors, volunteer networks—sustain momentum while avoiding singular points of vulnerability. This is a really important lesson for funders to note – **both resilience and impact depend on the ability to anticipate and pivot at short notice and funding arrangements need to build this in.**



d

It Takes a Constellation

No single organization can do everything; no-one can achieve systemic impact acting alone. As the case studies illustrate, robust, decentralized and collaborative networks are necessary, both within countries and across borders. Narrative workers and civil society actors are actively forming alliances and seeking assistance and expertise from organisations and peers from beyond their fields to bolster their narrative efforts, strengthen their advocacy campaigns, and guard themselves against digital attacks and surveillance. **Funding strategies in turn should proactively support what the Polis Project calls “the infrastructure of resistance.”**

e

The Interconnectedness of Narrative, Technology and Power



Across these case studies we see three elements in constant interaction, each inseparable from the others: narrative, technology and politics. **Civil society actors are narrative workers:** narrative is upstream of technology, and culture and meaning-making are THE key terrain of struggle. **They are technologists:** operating with, on and through current and emergent technology to build power and engage in the struggle over culture, narrative and meaning, constantly adapting and innovating, always balancing technology's possibilities and affordances with its risks, limitations and harms. **They are political actors, organizers and power-builders:** making meaning both about and with technology, in the interests of social justice and democracy.

5



Conclusion

IRIS embarked on this project mindful of growing surveillance, extraction and suppression around the world, powered by the nexus of technocracy and authoritarianism, and underpinned by long-present, harmful narratives working in the interests of the few. We wanted to understand these narratives and explore the implications of technopopulism and datafication. We especially wanted to understand how civil society actors are operating in this world, and how they are advancing narratives underpinning social justice and working in the interests of the many.

We hope you will agree that what we have found is greatly encouraging. Operating on a hugely uneven playing field that is becoming exponentially more uneven thanks to new technologies, advocates and activists, journalists and storytellers around the world are successfully co-opting and employing technology and culture to build people power in the interests of democracy and social justice. They are countering and resisting, and, especially, innovating. Operating in hostile territory, using tools owned by so-called 'broligarchs' and authoritarians, they are nimbly and flexibly organizing, making meaning, moving stories from the margins into the mainstream.

The cases we feature here are only a small snapshot of the contest being carried out on this uneven playing field, but they provide vital lessons about what is working and (equally important) what is not. Most importantly, each highlights the importance of working locally, while forging collaborations and solidarity networks globally.

We hope you will learn from these lessons, as well as join the conversation to share your own.

Funders: Take Note

We hope these resources provide funders in particular with a deeper understanding of the centrality of narrative and meaning-making in the fight for justice and equality, and of the interconnectedness of narrative with technology and with power. We especially hope funders will take away three key insights:

- First, engaging in the world of narrative and meaning-making is not optional – narrative is not just a tactic, culture is not a luxury: they are inextricably interwoven into the very fabric of political and social struggle
- Second, it is vital to fund in a way that supports networks, pipelines, ecosystems and infrastructures.
- Third, it is crucial to fund in a way that allows grantees maximum flexibility: adaptability and innovation are key to resilience and success in the long term.

IRIS' vision and wish is for us as a global community to add a fourth approach to the three approaches of co-opting, countering, and innovating that we have highlighted here. It is: dreaming. **Just as the many artists and storytellers of millennia gone by have fed the deep narratives that fuel the extractive and exploitative visions of the intelligent machines being foisted upon us, so it is up to the storytellers, artists and narrative workers of today not only to co-opt, counter and innovate in response to what we have been given, but to dream up fresh new visions of what might be.** Many of the organizations featured here are already doing this (consider LatFem's collaboration with Puentes on Postcards of the Future): this needs to become much more central. We all need more dreaming and visioning. And then, we must weave the networks (and the networks-of-networks) that will build the power to make it happen.

About IRIS

The [International Resource for Impact & Storytelling](#) (IRIS) is a new international philanthropy-facing donor collaborative connecting creative visual storytellers, civic innovators and narrative analysis, with a focus on global-south-based and -focused work across a range of interconnected social justice issue areas. Launched in 2021 by a small-and-growing team of specialists, IRIS works with its partners to design innovative projects that interweave research, fluency in narrative strategies and content cultivation for impact. IRIS supports network strengthening, peer learning, and solidarity building activities that are locally relevant and globally connected.

Appendix 1

Detail on Case Studies: How are Organizations Engaging Now?

We have grouped the case studies by approach: Co-opting; Countering, and Innovating – with Innovating divided into two subsections. All three of the approaches occur across all of the cases to a greater or lesser extent (after all, co-opting is creative and entails innovation; innovation is a form of countering and resistance). That a case study appears under a particular heading below does not mean it represents that approach to the exclusion of the other two – merely that it seemed to serve as an illustrative example of the respective approach.

▶ 1. Co-opting: Harnessing popular culture and new technologies for resistance

The studies grouped in this section are completely different from one another in almost every way except for two: they both come from Latin America and they both powerfully illustrate co-optation—that is, using cultural products or technological tools for alternative purposes—in action.

“A work of fiction can be an effective catalyst of constructive public conversations, reframe collective values, and reopen the relationship between popular culture, entertainment, memory, and social justice”

In [The Eternaut Effect](#), the International Institute for Social Responsibility and Human Rights (IRESODH) describes how the hit Argentinian Netflix series *El Eternauta* revived conversations about the common good. In a context dominated by individualistic and anti-state discourses promoted by the government and partisans of Javier Milei, this investigation vividly demonstrates how stories and science fiction can be an effective medium for transmitting democratic values, even in a context saturated with political messaging. The Eternaut is powerful in that it does not show heroes or victims but rather people who are transforming together: real change is occurring not only individually but also collectively. When a story dares to narrate collaboration, empathy, doubt, or shared vulnerability, it becomes more credible, more relatable and human, and, above all, more capable of inspiring action.

The Eternaut demonstrates that a work of fiction can effectively catalyze constructive public conversations, reframe collective values, and reopen the relationship between popular culture, entertainment, memory, and social justice. With help from accessible technology (such as image generation engines) and creative, low-cost ‘guerilla’ marketing tactics, social organizations can make the most of organic behaviours to promote their agendas and spread their messages to a wider audience.

“ A potentially powerful new capacity for civil society organisations to understand their audiences and develop more effective messaging”

Elsewhere in Latin America, in a regional context of high rates of lethal violence, particularly in Brazil, **Instituto Fogo Cruzado** undertook an experiment, [Challenging Narratives on Police Violence in Favelas](#). Conducted in partnership with Future Narratives Lab (FNL), Fogo Cruzado co-opted the affordances provided by extractive AI platform methods. They deployed an AI interviewing tool to develop and test narratives that could shift public opinion on police violence in favelas toward rights-based safety policies. Not only does the tool provide useful messaging insights for the campaign: it also demonstrates the broader potential of AI tools to provide organizations working on climate, human rights and social justice with the technical capability to test narratives quickly, systematically and affordably. This capability can mean the difference between crafting messages that resonate and transform public opinion and failing to break through ideological barriers.

- ▶ **2. Countering: Education and Campaigning against Surveillance and Digital Attacks**
The case studies in this section describe campaigns and initiatives aimed at educating audiences about the dangers of tech-driven surveillance and online attacks, equipping people to protect themselves, and mobilising collective action to push back and resist. They also invite audiences to imagine a different, better future as a necessary precursor to helping bring about that future.

“ Narratives that invite emotional participation through humor, curiosity, and indignation offer the audience a pathway for change.”

Surveillance technologies such as facial recognition are often introduced in Latin America under the guise of security and efficiency, leaving little room for public debate. In their study, [Narrating Resistance: Social media campaigns on surveillance and Human Rights in Latin America](#), digital rights organization **Derechos Digitales** describe how they aimed to challenge this by translating technical policy debates into relatable narratives that resonate emotionally and culturally with ordinary people. Between May and July 2025, the organization launched three social media campaigns using storytelling and design to raise awareness about surveillance and human rights. Using social media platforms, they experimented with visuals, metaphors and tone to connect digital rights issues with everyday experiences. The campaigns also demonstrated that digital rights storytelling can be accessible without oversimplifying issues and tensions, and emotional without losing technical rigor. Framing complex issues through everyday experiences made surveillance tangible, while combining emotional appeal with practical guidance fostered deeper engagement and credibility.

“ *Resistance refers not only to reporting on social protest but also to narrating the everyday lives of those who build alternatives and sustain care in times of crisis”*

LatFem is a digital-native feminist media outlet based in Argentina, focused on Latin America and the Caribbean. Their case study, [Feminist Narrative Strategies as Tool of Resistance and Driver for Transnational Learning](#), analyzes the feminist narrative strategies developed by LatFem’s Narrative Work Team to counter violence and disinformation, especially technoviolence, and to diversify narratives to broaden political dialogue. LatFem operates according to a ‘three-temporal logic’:

- The Political Present (responding to the fast-paced, chaotic agenda of the political right, but avoiding reactive responses);
- Qualitative Analysis (Prioritizing reflection and qualitative analysis over breaking news urgency, aiming to set the agenda rather than chase it), and
- Timeless Work (producing cultural and political content that transcends current events, amplifying marginalized voices and fostering collective hope).

Feedback from partners confirmed that this approach contributed to a shared regional understanding of technology-facilitated gender-based violence among feminist journalists, communicators, and civil society organizations.

▶ **3. Innovating**

a. Innovating in Journalism and fact-based storytelling

The studies in this section explore how journalists and news outlets are innovating and shifting focus to enable them to operate in a hostile political, and fast-changing technological context. In such a climate, news outlets must also weigh the need to reach audiences using popular online platforms against the fact that these platforms are often owned and controlled by interests hostile to democracy and human rights.

“ *The work of liberation, then and now, depends on the networks we build to carry the struggle forward”*

The **Polis Project’s case study**, [Voices from the Margins: Vernacular Media and Narrative Resistance in Authoritarian India](#), maps what they term the “insurgent media ecosystem,” one that is stepping up to challenge an emerging system of information control taking shape in India. The study analyzes insurgent media actors, looking at their relationship to the state and capital, the threats they face, their strategies of resilience and the potential for their replication. The Polis Project develops a typology of insurgent media and the study identifies a range of actors (English-first Digital News, Digital Creator Networks, Comedians

and Satirists, Hyperlocal Media, Civil Society Organizations, and Archival Organizations) who have formed a network that operates like a modern 'Underground Railroad': smuggling facts, testimonies, and alternative stories through a hostile environment, carrying them from marginalized corners of society into the broader public conversation.

“ *To ‘stay’ is not merely to endure; it is to hold ground and shift the conditions of information and narrative battle”*

Mada Masr's study on the practices of news outlets in the Arab region, [“How to Stay Independent: Arab Media and the Politics of Staying with the Trouble”](#) explores how meaning is made in a constantly shifting socio-political landscape. It focuses on platforms across the region that share a commitment to progressive media practice in environments hostile to independent journalism. The report seeks to understand how these platforms adapt, make editorial choices and sustain public engagement amid authoritarianism and political fragmentation. The researchers have observed a turning away from covering national politics and toward both the hyper-local and the supra-national. For outlets finding themselves having to use platforms that permit no control over algorithms or other capabilities, there is a constant need to innovate content and formats, experiment with delivery mechanisms, and manage the tension between producing quality content and reaching audiences at scale.

“ *How can a small, independent outlet keep doing journalism when online attention markets reward outrage? What would it look like to create offline formats spaces where audiences slow down, listen together, and deliberate?”*

Faced with the increasing use of social media and digital platforms to drive disinformation, polarization, intimidation, and harassment in El Salvador, the feminist media outlet **Alharaca** began rethinking how journalism can achieve public impact under high-risk conditions. Rather than accepting the online sphere as the only viable route to reach and move audiences, they chose to go against the current by investing in offline formats. They built an alternative to social media: spaces where audiences can meet face to face, listen to stories together, and reconnect through shared experiences. Working in exile, their case study, [From place-based audio walks to a portable collective-listening interactive experience: Prototyping Ciudad Perdida Across Latin America and Germany](#), evaluates the use of a board game as part of an ongoing prototyping process. They see it as a potentially replicable methodology: a portable, offline format that fosters embodied listening and strong emotional engagement. It could also, they hope, offer independent journalism alternative pathways to create dialogue and civic connection beyond algorithm-driven online spaces.

▶ 3. Innovating

b. Innovating in Narrative and Civic Engagement

The cases in this section show how storytellers and grassroots civil society actors are adapting and innovating in response to automated state-powered surveillance, suppression and algorithmic manipulation.

“Resilience against digital authoritarianism is not only about correcting facts but also about shaping narratives that reinforce pluralism, dignity, and collective agency.”

In an increasingly centralized Tunisia, [Decoding Authoritarian Narratives in the Algorithmic Age](#) dissects how digital narratives of sovereignty, security, and moral order sustain authoritarianism. The study by the **Tunisia Digital Democracy Partnership**, then examines how Tunisian civil society has innovated in response, including through early monitoring, rapid response, creative storytelling, continual research and iteration, and cross-border collaboration. Contextually-adapted campaigns combining humor, fact-checking, and civic engagement tactics effectively reach diverse audiences, especially youth, and foster trust in digital spaces. The study offers valuable insights for regional digital resilience, since similar social media dynamics and narrative playbooks are observed in neighboring countries in the region.

“[Narrative] practices are not substitutes for political organising. They are the infrastructure through which civic life continues when formal repertoires become constrained. Narrative keeps imagination alive, sustains relationships, and supports continuity in a landscape of shifting attention and reduced visibility.”

In [Narrative Approaches to Undoing Digital Constraints](#), **The Storywork Collective** offers rich insights into how communities in Hong Kong sustain democratic imagination and civic continuity. The report explores how, amid tightened informational, administrative, and cultural conditions as well as contracting formal civic spaces, innovative and adaptive narrative practices have become essential infrastructures for carrying values, maintaining relationships, and preserving continuity. Where explicit language has taken on elements of risk, members of civil society are embedding meaning and political action in uncontested language and mundane activities, inventing new symbols, and building ephemeral networks.

The study identifies seven ways of organizing civic life under societal constraints: coded expression, distributed meaning, nesting, comparative interpretation, care-based infrastructures, decentralisation, and reframing. It also outlines actionable pathways for strengthening civic resilience, tailored for groups including community builders, educators, philanthropists, journalists, artists, academics, diaspora networks, and legacy organizations. Appendices provide context, interpretive tools, and methodological guidance for understanding and safely documenting civic practice.

“ *Queer storytelling in Nigeria is not merely about representation, but about reclaiming agency, reimagining freedom, and rewriting the social imagination of what justice looks like.* **”**

In a hostile legal and social context for LGBTQ+ people, storytelling, especially through film, has become a strategic lever for advocacy, challenging dominant narratives and creating spaces for belonging. This report from **Equality Hub**, [The Salt of the Story: Queer Feminist Filmmaking as Narrative Resistance](#), documents the strategies, challenges, and successes of filmmakers, writers, and activists who use storytelling to subvert erasure, decolonize knowledge, and foster community.

The study draws on the work and features the perspectives of several film makers, researchers and storytellers, but centers on the example of *Ífé*: the first Nigerian lesbian film to portray queer love positively. Its production and release required careful planning for safety, security, and censorship evasion – including the use of independent distribution channels. The producers eventually developed an entirely new community-owned, pay-per-view streaming platform – Equality Hub TV (EhTV) – designed to host and distribute queer-centered films and other underrepresented stories. While the platform ultimately proved unsustainable, its impact was significant. EhTV proved that decentralised, community-owned storytelling infrastructure can exist, and that even in restrictive environments, queer creatives continue to find ways to build their own platforms, tell their stories, and reach audiences on their own terms.

Appendix 2

List of Organizations

▶ **Alharaca**

Alharaca is a feminist digital media outlet founded in February 2018 in El Salvador by four Salvadoran women. It has built a diverse audience—primarily in El Salvador, Mexico, the United States, and other Latin American countries—and today operates two active bases in Costa Rica (Latin America) and Germany (Europe).

▶ **Derechos Digitales**

Derechos Digitales (DD) is one of the leading digital rights organizations in Latin America. Initially focused in Chile, where the organization was founded in 2005 as a pioneer in the field, it now operates regionally with staff based in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Paraguay and Peru. Through research, strategic litigation, public policy advocacy, and communications, DD works to defend and strengthen human rights in digital environments across the region.

▶ **Equality Hub**

A filmmaker, queer feminist storyteller, and social impact strategist based in Lagos, Nigeria. Projects exist at the intersection of storytelling, activism, and philanthropy, and focus on advancing the rights, visibility, and safety of LGBTQIA+ communities through narrative change strategies.

▶ **Fogo Cruzado**

Instituto Fogo Cruzado is a leading civil society organization that has developed Latin America's most comprehensive database on armed violence.

▶ **International Institute for Social Responsibility and Human Rights (IRESODH)**

IRESODH is a Costa Rican organization dedicated to the promotion and defense of human rights, with a robust international footprint including offices in Canada, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, and Switzerland.

▶ **LATFEM**

LATFEM is a feminist media and advocacy organization based in Latin America, dedicated to producing and amplifying narratives that advance gender justice, human rights, and social transformation across the region. Since their founding in 2017, they have built a cross-border community of journalists, communicators, artists, and activists committed to challenging dominant narratives and reimagining power from an intersectional and decolonial lens.

▶ **Mada Masr**

Mada Masr is an independent Egyptian online newspaper, founded in June 2013.

▶ **The Polis Project**

The Polis Project is a research and media organisation committed to documenting and amplifying resistance to authoritarianism through storytelling, public scholarship, and community-led media.

▶ **The Storywork Collective**

A collective authorship adopted to safeguard contributors in sensitive contexts.

▶ **Tunisia Digital Democracy Partnership**

A collaborative research team composed of Zyna Mejri, a leading Tunisian digital rights activist and narrative strategist, and French-Algerian Professor Kamel Smaïli, an internationally recognized expert in natural language processing and AI with over 30 years of experience researching misinformation and narrative detection in Arabic-speaking contexts.

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NEW RULES:**

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