

THE 50/  
PERCENT



YOUNG PERSON'S  
GUIDE TO  
STORYTELLING



# Introduction

Storytelling is one of the most powerful tools to explore conflict with curiosity and compassion. It humanises statistics, rewires our instinct to “other” and invites dialogue in an era defined by polarisation. Serving as both a mirror and a bridge, storytelling nurtures exponential vulnerability through reflection while offering pathways toward connection. When communities tell their own stories – or listen actively to the stories of others – they begin to see that difference does not equate to distance and that every human life holds intrinsic value.

That is why, in our current era of increasing polarisation, we at the 50 Percent turn to storytelling as an essential antidote to division. By reminding us of our humanness, connecting us to our vulnerability and breaking down barriers, storytelling is an essential tool to nurture the movements that create the change we wish to see. At the 50 Percent, we have centred storytelling as a tool of connection and systems change for over 5 years now through our Storytelling fellowship programme.

The Storytelling fellowship empowers young people to examine the narratives within and around them with profound intentionality. We explore how language can advance both individual and collective peace. When leveraged effectively, written and spoken expression fosters self-regulation, de-escalation and a deeper understanding of identity. Storytelling is also a strategic driver of systems change and building sustainable solutions to complex challenges across sociological contexts.

Designing and facilitating the Storytelling Fellowship has been a labour of love. I am deeply grateful to learn from participants who bring such light

and colour to the program. While the curriculum is designed to plant seeds, the true reward lies in watching fellows consistently water them—weeks, months and even years later. Their stories continue to transform communities, illuminating our interdependence and inspiring the kind of radical imagination our world needs to flourish.

With this guide, we wanted to bring you some of the pillars of the fellowship – we examine why storytelling is such a fundamental tool for change, how stories can build connection and how to create better stories that help us imagine the world we wish to live in. It has been a pleasure putting our learnings over the last few years together to bring you this guide. We also took the opportunity to speak to our growing community, interviewing young people on their perceptions of misinformation and polarisation, helping us to identify what needs to be done to combat this growing challenge. Want to find out more? Well, keep reading.

*With lots of love,  
Vanessa & Kristen, Storytelling Fellowship Leads*





# CONTENT

---

What is storytelling,  
and what is its power? p. 04

---

The rise of misinformation  
and the threat to democracy p. 12

---

Where do young people  
fit into this? p. 16

---

Spotting misinformation  
& false narratives online p. 19

---

Where do we go from here? p. 25

---

The power of storytelling  
to build counternarratives p. 30

---



# 1

## *What is storytelling, and what is its power?*

### **What is storytelling?**

The stories we tell, hear and hold on to are a fundamental part of what makes us human [1]. When we think of stories, we often think of edited narratives, fairy tales or the books we keep by our bedside table. But the reality is that stories are woven into almost all aspects of our lives. Our faith and beliefs, our value systems, the places and people we feel connected to, are all examples of how storytelling influences us.

Stories are how we learn and remember. Storytelling is how we share our experiences but also gain an understanding of the experiences of others, allowing us to see different points of view and build empathy. By doing this, storytelling plays an important role in our sense of identity and belonging, the development of our social skills and as well as directly influencing how we see the world around us [2].



*We have been telling stories since the dawn of time. We are the only species with the ability to use verbal language,* and we have been telling stories since we have developed this ability, turning everything we experience into stories, sometimes adjusting or omitting facts to fit our narratives [3].

As humans, our evolutionary advantage has always been in our ability to problem-solve and to build community. Every major advance we have made as a species, from the invention of agriculture, the abolition of slavery, the Industrial Revolution and even flying to the moon, all required collective imagination and the envisioning of futures that we had not yet experienced. As Yuval Noah Harari, one of the most well-known contemporary voices on

the history of humankind, puts it: storytelling's power lies in allowing people to come together and collaborate [4].

Today, storytelling continues to be integral to our lives – for better or worse – as we will explore in this guide. At The 50 Percent, we view storytelling as a fundamental vehicle for change. We look forward to exploring together how it can help you build a sense of community, share knowledge, facilitate unlearning and ultimately move people towards a common goal through this guide.

**We hope you join us**  
*(it's fun over here).*

# The dangers of storytelling

**If storytelling is such a powerful force,  
what happens when it's used irresponsibly?**

**Let's start with the obvious: stories are not neutral.**

Every story has a perspective, and every storyteller makes choices: what to highlight, what to omit and how to frame events. Those choices aren't random. They are shaped by power, position, memory, emotion and sometimes by intentional manipulation. In short, stories can uplift. But they can also mislead, exclude and cause harm. Amongst other dangers, storytelling can:





## 1. Erase realities by telling only one side (usually the one with more power)

History, as they say, is written by the victors. And while that might sound poetic, it's also a warning. When storytelling becomes dominated by one voice (especially the voice of power), it can erase the existence and experiences of others. This erasure isn't always loud or aggressive. Sometimes, it's subtle: a textbook that omits colonial violence; a film that portrays only one nation's heroism in a global

war; a news story that centres the police's version of events while ignoring survivors.

When only one story is told, it begins to look like the only truth. But the truth is always messier, always plural. **Systems thinkers must remain vigilant about which stories are missing, who is being silenced and why. Stories that claim to be universal are often hiding a very particular point of view.**

## 2. Harm people by perpetuating stereotypes, biases or trauma

Stories help us make sense of things fast. In a world packed with information, that can feel like a relief – but it can also be risky. When we fall back on stereotypes and clichés, we stop seeing people as real, complicated humans. Instead, we turn them into flat characters like “the angry woman,” “the terrorist,” “the illegal immigrant” or “the helpless victim”. These aren't just words. They are stories repeated over and over in media, politics, entertainment and even casual conversation. These narratives don't just reflect bias: they

create it. They fuel discrimination, violence and internalised shame. And when stories constantly replay scenes of trauma without care, without agency, without healing, they can retraumatise those who've lived them.

As storytellers, we must ask: Are we humanising or dehumanising? Are we creating space for dignity, or repeating the same old scripts that never belonged to the people we're writing about? And yes: everyone is a storyteller, so responsibility is up to you, too.



### 3. Boost polarisation by reducing complex realities to “us vs. them”

In a world that feels increasingly divided, storytelling often adds fuel to the fire. The human brain loves simplicity: it's easier to process a world of heroes and villains than one full of nuance, contradiction and shared responsibility. But this binary thinking feeds polarisation. It invites us to pick sides, choose a team and dismiss the "other" as wrong, dangerous or irredeemable.

Whether it's politics, climate action, migration or identity, stories that frame issues as battles between good and evil may feel powerful, but

they rarely build bridges. They reinforce echo chambers, devalue dialogue and reduce the potential for collective imagination. Polarisation thrives on oversimplified stories that serve outrage instead of understanding.

Authentic systems change requires sitting in the discomfort of complexity. It asks us to listen across differences, to hold tension and to tell stories that resist the urge to flatten reality into an argument. Reality is more complex than winning an argument on social media.

### 4. Distort facts in favour of simplicity or comfort

Let's be honest: the truth is often inconvenient. It challenges what we thought we knew. It messes with tidy endings and raises more questions than answers. But when we twist or ignore facts to make stories more digestible (whether to protect feelings, avoid conflict or attract clicks), we risk losing something essential.

**In systems change work, this kind of storytelling becomes dangerous. It turns crisis into**

**spectacle. It markets hope without substance. It gives us stories that feel good but do nothing to shift the status quo. The truth, even when it's messy or uncomfortable, is a necessary ingredient for transformation.**

And just as important as the facts we tell are the ones we leave out. Omission is its own form of distortion. So let's commit to stories that are honest, even when they're hard to hear.



## 5. Reinforce systems of oppression by making them seem inevitable or “natural”

Some stories are so deeply embedded in our culture that we stop seeing them as stories at all and start to see them as fundamental truths. “This is just how the world works”. “There’s no alternative”. These phrases often signal that we’re in the presence of a dominant narrative (one that has been repeated so often, it feels like reality).

Capitalism, patriarchy, racism: these systems didn’t fall from the sky. They were built,

maintained and justified through powerful storytelling. When we present inequality as normal, or depict certain people as “deserving” of their suffering, we uphold the very structures we need to dismantle.

Challenging these stories doesn’t mean replacing them with new dogmas. It means opening space for imagination and for the possibility that the world could be organised differently.

## 6. Inhibit change by framing alternatives as unrealistic, naive or dangerous

If storytelling can spark imagination, it can also shut it down. Think of how often we hear stories that dismiss bold ideas as “idealistic”, “too radical” or “impossible”. These aren’t just critiques: they are gatekeepers. They prevent us from exploring new models, new systems and new ways of being.

When the stories we hear suggest that change is too hard, too risky or simply not worth

trying, they breed apathy and cynicism. They narrow our field of vision and discourage collective action.

But change has always started with those who dared to imagine the impossible. Our job as storytellers isn’t to pretend there are easy answers, but to keep the door open. To make room for courage, complexity and the unknown.



# The story that ate a country

## Once upon a time in Argentina...

Once upon a time in Argentina, a man with a wild haircut and a wilder temper started yelling on TV.

His name? Javier Milei.

His thing? Screaming about freedom, economics, and "the Casta", a shadowy cabal of corrupt politicians who, according to him, were behind everything wrong with Argentina.

Inflation? Casta.

Poverty? Casta.

Your ex ghosted you? Probably also the Casta.

At first, Milei was a character, a meme. He shouted on talk shows, argued with economists and popped up on YouTube streams like your angry libertarian uncle at a family dinner. But behind the spectacle, a narrative was being woven. A simple one. Too simple.

**There was a villain: the Casta.**

**There was a hero: Milei.**

**There was a promise: burn it all down and start over.**

People bought it. A lot of people. Because the story felt good. It made complex problems sound solvable. It gave a face to blame. And it offered something even more addictive: moral superiority. If you hated the Casta, you were on the right side of history.

The problem? Argentina is not a fairytale. And this story? It came with consequences. Once Milei won the





presidency, the story didn't just continue, it got louder. Only now, it had a bigger microphone: the presidential pulpit. And instead of governing for all Argentians, the government doubled down on the narrative of enemies and allies, winners and losers, Casta or Milei.

The tone turned hostile. Political opposition wasn't disagreement; it was treason. Journalists weren't critics, they were "operadores". Universities? Hotbeds of "brainwashed socialists". Dialogue? A waste of time when you're too busy "annihilating" the old order.

The storytelling became a weapon. Not just to rally a base, but to polarise a nation. People started turning on each other. Civil society cracked. Institutions were attacked. The press was intimidated. And the real problems (poverty, inequality, inflation) somehow became background noise.

**Because that's the danger of a good story badly used, it simplifies. It blinds. And in the hands of power, it divides.**

The irony? The anti-Casta narrative has become its own Casta. A new elite of influencers, trolls, and shock-doctrine loyalists who've mastered the art of yelling louder than everyone else. But yelling doesn't solve much. And burning down a house doesn't mean you know how to build a better one.

So what now?

Well, if storytelling got us into this mess, maybe a better kind of storytelling can get us out. Stories that hold complexity. Stories that listen. Stories that don't need a villain to have a purpose.

***Because Argentina deserves more than a soundbite revolution, it deserves a future. One that's not trapped in someone else's storyline.***



# 2

## *The rise of misinformation and the threat to democracy*

As we observed with the Argentine example, political polarisation is a common feature of the democratic backsliding that we are currently witnessing in various countries around the world. Political polarisation goes hand in hand with the spread of mis- and disinformation, which the World Economic Forum has named as the biggest risk of our time – over war, natural disasters or pandemics.

### What is the difference between **mis-** and **disinformation**?

**Misinformation** is false or misleading information shared by people who might not know it's false. It is often unknowingly shared by common people who may be uneducated on a specific issue or have not fact-checked their sources.

**Disinformation** means false info spread on purpose, often strategically distributed by political groups, think-tanks and organisations who are trying to further a specific agenda.

## Why is this a problem?

While disagreement is vital in a healthy democracy, the polarisation we are seeing today goes way beyond that. More and more, we are seeing entire communities split into polarly opposite social identities, with different beliefs, values and knowledge systems. Increasingly, we are starting to dislike, fear, judge and avoid those who do not think like us.

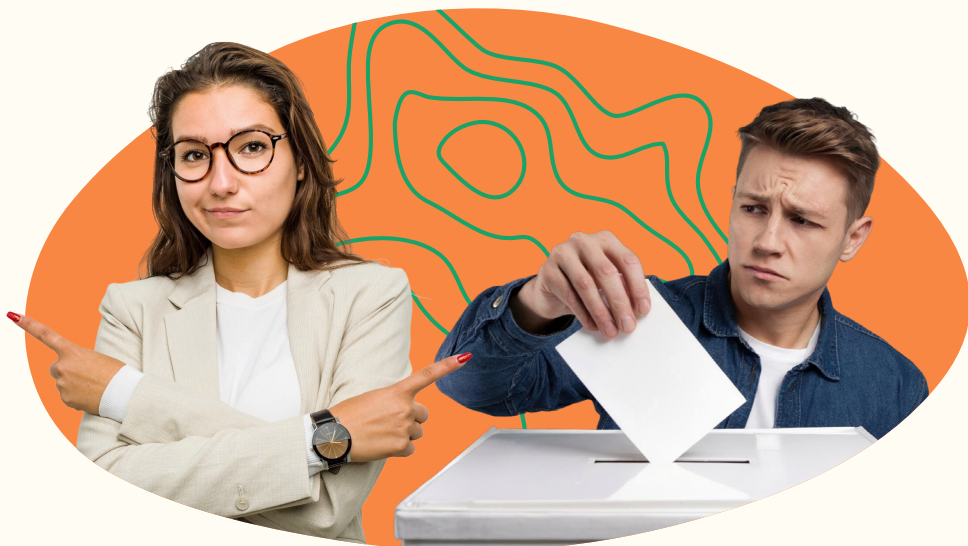
Scholars refer to this phenomenon, where our political affiliation shapes our identity and influences our social circles, our culture and our sense of belonging, as “affective polarisation [5]”. This “othering” of those who disagree with us fosters mistrust, reinforces fear and biases, creating ideal conditions for misinformation to spread. In turn, misinformation confirms these fears and prejudices - a vicious cycle.

## The US example

The United States provides a worrying example of how disinformation and falsehoods can threaten democracy. In early 2024, months ahead of the Presidential election, numerous U.S. voters received calls impersonating President Biden, telling them not to vote in the primary, in an attempt of a new kind of voter suppression [6].



But the impacts of false information can go much further than that. We saw this vividly in the US after the 2020 Presidential election. Fueled by the “Big Lie” – the baseless claim that the vote had been stolen from Trump in favour of Biden – and weeks of online disinformation, a group of angry Trump supporters invaded the Capitol on 6 January 2021. The Capitol



Insurrection was one of the darkest moments of American democracy, with lawmakers describing that they feared for their lives, over 140 police officers being injured and five people losing their lives.

## The cost of distrust

When truth becomes hard to distinguish from fiction, many people simply stop trusting. Studies show that even just knowing misinformation exists makes people less confident in public institutions, from public health to elections [7].

This erosion of trust is the biggest threat disinformation brings along. If people believe elections are rigged, why vote? If they believe the media lies, why listen? If they believe public institutions are corrupt, why participate in civic life at all?

In the U.S., about 65% of people – especially young adults – say that thinking about politics makes them feel exhausted or frustrated [8]. We see similar trends around the world: in Europe, one in five youths say they prefer authoritarianism, as their trust in democracy has eroded [9]. Similarly, in Latin America, only 21% of youths say they trust their government [10], while 60% of African youth say they are “not very” or “not at all” satisfied with the way democracy works in their country [11].

Many have tuned out altogether, not because they don’t care, but because they feel **they no longer can trust political processes**. Here’s the paradox: in an age of ‘social’ media and hyperconnectivity, people feel **more divided than ever**. This did not occur by accident - this division has been systematically created.

Because division keeps us from each other, and it keeps us from forming movements of change.

If we want to counter misinformation, we have to go beyond fact-checking. We have to **rebuild trust and reconnect with our communities.** That starts with making political discourse less identity-based, and more relational. Acknowledging that for the most part, we have more in common than what divides us and focusing on our common goals and needs: safety for our children, food on the table, a liveable future.

We need media and digital literacy, yes - but we need to move beyond that, to re-building empathy: digging deeper than just what people believe, but putting ourselves in their shoes and becoming curious about why they believe it. We need platforms to take responsibility for the architecture of amplification

they've created - and for the harms they've allowed to spread in the name of engagement.

And perhaps most urgently, we need stories: counter-narratives that reconnect us to our shared realities and futures. Because if polarisation thrives on fear, maybe truth can begin with curiosity. And if misinformation isolates, maybe democracy begins again when we choose to **reconnect.**

If those in power are abusing false narratives to grasp onto power and drive division, the antidote is communities coming together to empower themselves with knowledge, literacy and connection. This can involve launching independent publications to share counternarratives, hosting skills-share workshops on media literacy, educating ourselves on AI and taking a more active role in our communities to fight division.



# 3

## *Where do young people fit into this?*

Young people today are growing up in a media landscape unlike any before it. We are more connected, more informed and yet paradoxically, more vulnerable to mis- and disinformation than older generations.



## Misinformation and digital news habits

When we asked our 50 Percent community, the vast majority said they are concerned about misinformation, with 75% describing it as a very serious problem. While most 50 Percenters believe they can identify misleading content, research paints a more complicated picture:

*Studies from the University of Cambridge and UBC found that Gen Z are among the most susceptible to misinformation, despite assumptions of strong digital literacy [12].*

**The study also found that:**

- **The Misinformation Susceptibility Test (MIST)** revealed that older adults often outperform younger ones in spotting fake news headlines. Only 11% of 18–29 year-olds achieved high accuracy compared to 36% of those aged 65+.
- **Reliance on social platforms** like Snapchat, TikTok or Instagram is linked to lower accuracy in identifying misinformation. By contrast, young people who turn to reputable outlets such as Reuters or NPR scored significantly better.

### *This highlights a disconnect:*

Young people are engaged with news (over 80% follow news regularly according to the JIM and Shell Youth Studies) [13] and believe they can manage misinformation, yet they are often less skilled than older generations at distinguishing fact from falsehood.





## Polarisation and division

In a survey ran amongst the 50 Percent community, over 90% of respondents felt their communities were divided, mirroring broader concerns about polarisation. International research supports this perception:

- **The Glocalities survey found that social media algorithms are actively magnifying polarisation**, especially among young men, nudging them from moderate views towards more extreme positions by feeding

them polarising content.

- **In the U.S., 65% of people say politics makes them feel exhausted or frustrated**, with young Americans particularly likely to disengage due to polarisation and toxic political discourse.

*This sense of division not only impacts political participation but also contributes to wider feelings of cynicism and mistrust in institutions.*

## Artificial intelligence: opportunity and concern

AI is already a major part of young people's lives. In a survey ran by the 50 Percent, 87% reported using AI, often for studying, writing or creative tasks. However:

- **Trust in AI is split**, with 62% saying they do not trust it.
- Very few have been taught **how to use AI safely and effectively** (only 31%), yet nearly all (94%) say they want training.

This shows both a gap and an opportunity: while AI tools are widely adopted, young people are navigating them largely without formal guidance, leaving them vulnerable to

misuse or misinformation generated by AI systems themselves.

Overall, recent studies on how young people are engaging with polarisation and fake news shows that there is a significant educational gap. While young people may feel very empowered to spot false information, research shows that they are much more susceptible than they think [5] - making them an easy target to fall for harmful narratives. At the same time, young people want to learn how to use tools like social media more effectively, and feel more equipped to address the polarisation in their communities.





# 4

## *Spotting misinformation & false narratives online*

### **The age of (dis)information?**

*Misinformation and disinformation have existed, but, as we previously explored, have definitely been made worse by social media.*

Social media platforms were designed to capture our attention. The algorithms that power them optimise for engagement, not truth. They feed us content that keeps us emotionally hooked, which often means content that confirms our beliefs, intensifies our anger or reinforces “us vs them” dynamics.

And with new technologies like generative AI, that speed is only increasing [14]. “Deepfake” videos and AI-generated audio can now imitate real people, making it hard for the general public to know what is real and what is not.

AI also supercharges content creation, with bots being able to churn out hundreds of misleading posts an hour, tailoring messages to specific user profiles and flooding platforms with what looks like grassroots sentiment. This creates a manufactured consent, where extremist views are strategically seeded and algorithmically boosted, making them seem more widely accepted than they are.

***Fake stories spread fast online. In fact, roughly one in five TikTok videos contains misinformation. However, there are things that you can do to feel more empowered in spotting false information and stopping the spread of false narratives.***

## Recognise misinformation on your feed

Not everything on your feed is true, and just because something has been shared widely does not mean it's true. On platforms like TikTok or Instagram, a creator's follower count or likes might make them seem like experts, but popularity is not expertise [15]. Short videos (sometimes just seconds long) leave little room for nuance or context, so creators might oversimplify or leave out facts. Be sceptical if a post has any of these red flags:

- **Sensational or clickbait claims:** outrageous headlines, hyperbolic language and emotional triggers to get your attention.
- **No credible source or evidence:** if someone is dropping “facts” online without citing where they got them, that’s something you should be wary about. Misinformation posts often can’t be substantiated with credible sources – they might rely on personal anecdotes or baseless assertions instead. Check if reputable news sites or experts are reporting the same thing. If a wild story isn’t being talked about by any known reliable outlets, chances are it’s fake.
- **Urgency and pressure to share:** phrases like “Share this NOW before it gets deleted!” or “Everyone needs to see this!!!” are common in viral false posts. Creators of fake content induce a sense of urgency on purpose, because they want you to react emotionally and hit repost without thinking. Don’t let them rush you – pause and verify first.



**Example:** there has been a rampant rise of misinformation on social media around birth control [16]. Now, while the industry is far from perfect and there are various reasons why people with uterus are choosing to stop taking birth control, as always, this is a nuanced conversation to be had. But there is very little room for nuance on social media. And when influencers start posing as health experts, sharing emotional, experience-based stories asking women to stop taking birth control, this can be a problem.

While many of these experiences may be valid, and the choice to go off birth control may have been the right one for that particular person, individual experience is not medical expertise. And when this experience is used to generalise and spread fears, this creates dangerous conditions. Because nothing exists in a vacuum - while stories may have been shared from a place of good intentions, they are also being shared in a world where not every woman has access to healthcare and reproductive care.

While it is important to share the experiences of women on birth control, and hold the pharmaceutical industry accountable, presenting them as absolute truth denies the advances that women have experienced due to birth control, such as higher education rates [17], health benefits, managing chronic illnesses and having more assertiveness over their destinies.

***So, when you encounter individuals presenting as experts, always consider the context.***

Looking at the conversation on birth control on social media, this type of one-sided, fear-based content is experiencing a rise in a post Roe v. Wade America, where we know that certain groups are implementing political strategies to attack women's rights and may well be playing on the well-founded fears of women around birth control.

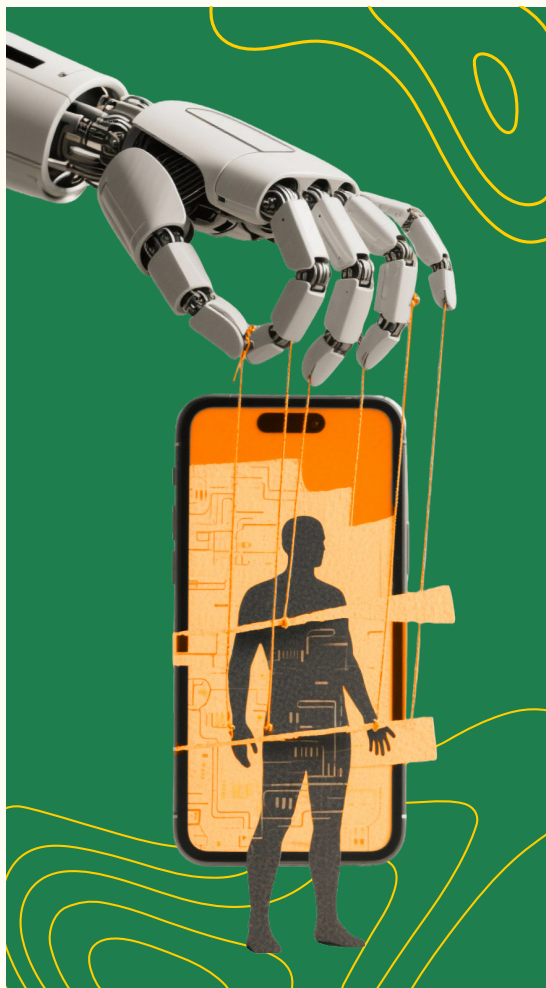
## Good to know

Roe v. Wade was a 1973 USA Supreme Court case that made abortion legal across the U.S., saying the Constitution protects a woman's right to choose. In 2022, this decision was overturned, allowing each state to make its own abortion laws, putting many women's reproductive rights, healthcare access and bodily autonomy at risk.

It's also important to remember that many influencers who are discussing this may be pursuing their own interests. For example, they may be trying to sell you a holistic health course, stating that they can teach you how to address your PCOS symptoms without medication.

***Always ask yourself: who is this person? What is their motive? Are they trying to sell me something?***

Personal experiences are powerful, but they are not unbiased. Make sure you are considering this when consuming content.



## How AI and algorithms can fool you

Be wary of looking at AI as a source of ultimate truth. While AI chatbots like ChatGPT may sound confident when giving answers, they may be replicating false information found online. If you are uncertain, always verify information through other means, such as trusted websites, books and experts. AI may be a great tool to summarise key points or direct you to sources, but be mindful not to let it replace actual research.

Social media algorithms (the recommendation systems on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) are another thing to be mindful of. These algorithms love showing you stuff



similar to what you already liked or watched. Click one flat-earth video or extremist meme, and the platform might keep feeding you more. Before you know it, you're in a filter bubble or echo chamber – basically a loop of one-sided content only shown to people who probably already agree with you. Users who engage with misleading content are more likely to be shown similar videos, creating an echo chamber where misinformation flourishes. The algorithm isn't trying to lie to you; it's just trying to keep you hooked. But this can reinforce false or extreme narratives because you stop seeing other perspectives. Break out by actively seeking diverse views and sources (follow different creators, read various news outlets) to pop that bubble.

AI can also create fake content that looks **scarily** real. Ever see an unreal photo or video and wonder if it's a deepfake? Modern AI can produce lifelike images, videos ("deepfakes") or audio clips that are hard to tell from reality. If a photo or video is shocking or "too perfect", it might be an AI fabrication. Don't be afraid to question it: **"Could this be fake or edited?"** Use tools (like reverse image search) to see if that media has been debunked.

## Stay alert to manipulative narratives

Disinformation isn't just about wrong facts – often it's tied to harmful narratives that try to manipulate how you feel or think. The people pushing these false stories know that if they get an emotional reaction from you, or if you identify some part of yourself or your experiences with the stories they are sharing, you are more likely to believe the facts in said story - and to re-share it. If you're reading or watching something and it's making you really annoyed, angry or terrified, pause and examine that feeling. Is the content delibera-

tely **playing on your emotions?**

Those tactically trying to spread disinformation often use our emotions against us, because we tend to see information through the lens of feelings rather than logic. It's human – we all do it. But being aware of it helps you stay in control.

Watch out for a few common tactics used by those trying to use false information to spread polarising narratives:

- **Us vs. Them stories:** politically polarising content is everywhere, especially during elections or big social debates. If a post or video paints one group as heroes and the other

as pure evil (with no in-between), be sceptical. Real life is usually more complex. Extreme memes or rants that blame a particular group for all problems or use divisive language might be trying to manipulate you. Question posts that seem designed to stir up partisan hate or that oversimplify issues into good vs. bad.

- **Fear-mongering and hate:** does the content make you feel afraid for your life or safety? Does it single out an ethnicity, gender, religion or other identity as dangerous or evil? That's a big red flag. For example, rumours that **immigrants are coming to do X terrible thing or such-and-such a group is behind a secret plot** often turn out false, yet they spread because they exploit fears or prejudices. Similarly, hot-button issues like immigration, gender rights or vaccines are common targets for false narratives. The more a story tries to make you scared or angry at a certain group, the more carefully you should vet it.

- **Conspiracy theories:** these are the wild stories claiming **everything** is secretly controlled by some evil cabal, and that anyone who disagrees is “in on it.” Classic traits of conspiracies include extreme distrust of any official information, a belief that random events are all connected by a hidden plot and an insistence that anyone debunking it is part of the conspiracy. Conspiracy

content often plays on the feeling of being “in the know” or part of a special group that sees “the truth.” It can be enticing, but it is important to think critically. If a claim lacks solid evidence, it's probably false.

The key is to think about why a piece of content was made. Is it informing you, or is it **manipulating** you? If you suspect the latter, trust your gut and dig deeper (or just scroll on by). By staying alert to these tactics, you keep control of your own narrative instead of getting played by someone else's.

### Remember:

You have agency. While the rise of mis- and disinformation may cause you to worry, you are not powerless. **You** get to decide what you believe and spread. By staying curious, checking facts and thinking critically, you can play a critical role in stopping the spread of false narratives in its tracks.

You can absolutely continue to enjoy social media and be critically aware of it as a tool to spread false narratives. Being a responsible digital citizen isn't about never making mistakes – it's about caring enough to seek the truth, having honest (and potentially uncomfortable) conversations, holding space for nuance and being mindful of what you share online.



# 5

## *Where do we go from here?*

We spoke to Roots, an organisation focused on driving change through a community-centred approach, on how we can build movements focused on connection, not division. Here is their advice:

*“The deepening sense of polarisation is disconnecting us from each other and making it much harder to organise, build power and work collectively to create positive change in the world around us.*

*To move forward, we need to change the story by leading with empathy, centring shared values, and listening; even when we disagree. It's not about compromising principles, but about recognising each other's experiences as important, even if they are different from our own.*

*This means meeting people where they are and seeking to understand their daily realities. When we build stories grounded in what brings us together rather than what separates us, we can spark deep connections that bridge large divides”.*

– Roots Team

## Can we move from fear to curiosity?

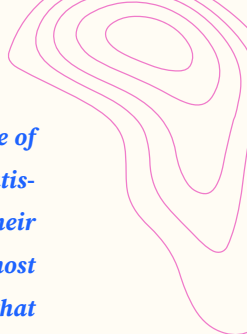
Why is storytelling so fundamental to influencing public policy, reconciliation and activism [18]? Because all three are about connecting with people and making them think of an issue in a way they haven't before. That is why there has never been an activist movement without a central story at its heart.

In today's world, where polarisation is rampant and individualism, separation and competition are systematically pushed on us, storytelling can help us re-connect with one another and build the trust and collaborative spirit needed to create movements and push for systems transformation. As division in our societies grows, telling stories can remind us of our shared humanity, helping us to move from fear to curiosity.

As we previously explored, storytelling is incredibly effective in connecting us to our emotions and spreading ideas. Currently, we are seeing this being used by the political class mostly to drive division. In many cases, a 'common enemy' is identified who is scapegoated for existing social and economic problems. This disempowers us, it leaves us unfocused and fearful.

If we look at trans women for example, from the US to the UK, there are high-level political debates focused on the 'threat' trans women pose to cis-women in female bathrooms. But as a recent study by UCLA demonstrates, there is no link between trans women using female bathrooms and an increase of safety risks for cis-women.





*“As a cis-woman, I have never felt threatened by the presence of a trans woman. What I am afraid of are domestic violence statistics and the fact that women are most likely to be killed by their partners, making sharing a house with a cis-man one of the most dangerous things I can do. I am terrified of the rape culture that propagates our societies and the fact that so many men still fail to speak up when their peers cross the line. And I want to scream when I continue to see governments fail to protect women, and instead focus on the non-existent risk apparently posed by the person washing their hands next to me in a public bathroom.*



*I am in disbelief when I see other women celebrating court rulings that define womanhood by the genitalia we were born with, as if there is not much more that we share. I welcome different narratives that celebrate the common humanity we share with our trans sisters, and connect us in the fight against the patriarchy that keeps us all (including men!) oppressed.”*

*Vanessa Terschluse, The 50 Percent*

Immigration is another example. It is disconcerting to see how, across the world, numerous nations are becoming less and less welcoming to those that emigrate looking for work and a better future, or refuge from war and persecution. Our leaders (or is it the corporations that fund their campaigns?) want us to believe that the reason for poverty, lack of access to resources such as housing, education and healthcare are the immigrants who lift our economies and take on much needed roles, instead of income inequality, unfair tax systems that benefit

billionaires and corporations and a lack of investment in public well-being.

*But if these are the current dominating narratives, how do we create new ones?*

Narratives are not neutral. They can be used to persuade people that a minority group needs to be fought against, they can push fear, violence and authoritarianism. But they can also help usher us into a more just, equitable and abundant world. To create new stories that bring us closer to the future we want, we need to understand what narratives are and how they work.

# Types of narratives

In his Medium, writer Matt Sheehan [19] outlines different kinds of narratives. The European Union's toolkit for human rights speech [20] also offers some insight:

## *Master narratives*

Master narratives are the stories that are most recurrent in our societies. They dominate mainstream media, political discourse and play a large role in how we perceive the world around us.

## *Counter narratives*

Stories and narratives that don't conform to the 'master narrative' are referred to as 'counter narratives'. Counter narratives are an emerging tool in storytelling for change and are used to de-construct, discredit and demystify harmful narratives.

## *Alternative narratives*

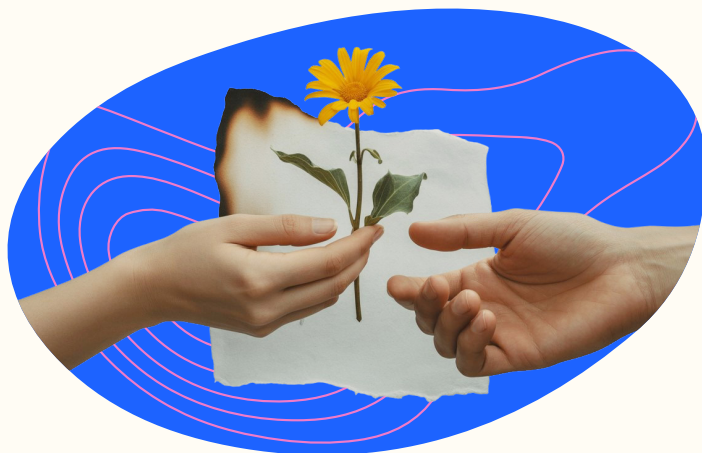
Alternative narratives do just that – they present an alternative for harmful and unhelpful narratives, focusing on what we are 'for' rather than what we are 'against'. They may not directly target destructive or outdated narratives, but they present a more positive, hopeful choice. By providing alternative proposals and highlighting their positives, rather than focusing on the negatives or trade-offs, alternative narratives can be extremely influential in shaping political debates or public opinion.





Currently, the master narratives dominating in most countries are based on fear. And this is directly contributing to the rise of fascism and ultra-conservatism that we are observing. Fear is fundamental to fascism, because societies with the most isolated, disconnected people are the easiest prey for dictators (at least according to German historian Hannah Arendt – and we think she would know).

Fascism wants us to panic. It does not want us to critically assess information, question narrative or imagine a better future. Knowing this, we can use our newfound understanding of narratives to push for a different direction in our communities. By strategically creating and making use of counter narratives and alternative narratives, we can move away from fear of others, the future and a feeling that there is not enough to go around for us all, towards a place of curiosity of what makes us different and what we have in common, of questioning the status-quo and challenging hateful narratives pushed upon us, arriving *in a state where we can join together to imagine a more peaceful, prosperous and equal future.*



# 6

## *The power of storytelling to build counternarratives*

Storytelling cuts through noise. While polarisation thrives on abstraction, on “the other,” the enemy, the threat, stories root us in the particular and the personal. They invite empathy. They remind us that behind every label is a person with a name, a family and a set of hopes not so different from our own. Where polarisation says “**choose a side,**” **storytelling says “try to understand.”** And that understanding is where healing begins.



**To be effective, however, counternarratives must follow a different set of principles than the fear-based stories we're trying to disrupt.**

### *First*

**Start with shared values**, not just shared problems. If climate action, for example, is framed as a battle between economic survival and environmentalism, we reinforce division. But if we tell stories about communities reclaiming dignity through green jobs, restoring land or protecting future generations, we anchor the message in values like care, pride, justice and belonging – values that cut across ideology.

### *Second*

**Centre the storyteller.** A good counter-narrative doesn't lecture or correct – it **connects**. When young people speak about the emotional toll of online hate, when elders share how changing weather patterns have affected ancestral lands, or when migrants talk about what home means, listeners are drawn into a shared human experience. This is how you soften defences and make space for new ways of seeing.







### *Third*

**Make hope tangible.** People need to not just know another future is possible – they need to **feel** it. Hope doesn't mean ignoring hard truths; it means showing that change is both necessary and achievable. Storytelling for action should highlight agency: not just what's broken, but what's being built. What if the most radical thing we could do in the face of disinformation and despair is to tell stories of real people showing up for each other, solving problems together and keeping faith in the future?

### *Fourth*

**Embrace complexity without collapsing into confusion.** The most powerful stories don't simplify the world into good vs. evil. Good stories make room for nuance while still offering direction. They show that people can change, that disagreement doesn't mean hatred and that systems can be unjust even when individuals are trying their best. This complexity builds resilience: audiences become less susceptible to black-and-white narratives and more able to hold the tensions that real democracy requires.

Finally, **tell stories that open doors, not close them.** When our narratives make space for others to see themselves within them, they become invitations—not weapons. If we want to create a culture of tolerance, climate justice, community and care, we need stories that don't just call out what's wrong—but call in those who've been alienated by fear, shame or disillusionment.

Storytelling isn't a luxury in this fight. It's an essential tool of democratic resistance and transformation. To counter polarisation, to push back against the tide of cynicism, to reclaim our collective future—we need to tell better stories. Stories that bridge divides. Stories that spark curiosity. Stories that help us remember that while the world is complex, we **still** belong to **each** other.

## AUTHORS



***Matias Lara***

CO DIRECTOR



***Vanessa Terschluse***

HEAD OF CONTENT  
& ADVOCACY



***Kristen Miller***

PROGRAM LEAD  
STORYTELLING FELLOWSHIP

# SOURCES

[1] C. Hennebury, "Storytelling is not just entertainment. It's a fundamental part of being human," CBC, Mar. 20, 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/storytelling-is-human-1.5511027>

[2] M. C. Green and M. Appel, "Chapter One - Narrative transportation: How stories shape how we see ourselves and the world," *Adv. Exp. Soc. Psychol.*, vol. 7, pp. 1–82, 2018. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0065260124000145>

[3] C. Alviani, "The Science Behind Storytelling," Medium, Oct. 11, 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://medium.com/@carolinalviani/the-science-behind-storytelling-840e586be5d9>

[4] C. Gallo, "The Power Of Storytellers To Shape Our World," *Forbes*, Mar. 17, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminegallo/2024/03/17/the-power-of-storytellers-to-shape-our-world>

[5] L. Jenke, "Affective Polarization and Misinformation Belief," *Polit. Behav.*, vol. 46, pp. 825–884, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11109-022-09851-w>

[6] D. Adam, "Misinformation might sway elections — but not in the way that you think," *Nature*, Jun. 18, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-01696-z>

[7] G. R. Sanchez and K. Middlemass, "Misinformation is eroding the public's confidence in democracy," *Brookings*, Jul. 26, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/misinformation-is-eroding-the-publics-confidence-in-democracy>

[8] Pew Research Center, "Americans' Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics," Sep. 19, 2023. [Online]. Available: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/americans-dismal-views-of-the-nations-politics>

[9] J. Henley, "Young Europeans losing faith in democracy, poll finds," *The Guardian*, Jul. 4, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/jul/04/young-europeans-losing-faith-in-democracy-poll-finds>

[10] UNDP Latin America and the Caribbean and Blavatnik School of Government, "In whom do we trust? Less in institutions and more in communities in LAC," UNDP, Mar. 6, 2023. [Online]. Available: <https://www.undp.org/latin-america/blog/whom-do-we-trust-less-institutions-and-more-communities-lac>

[11] Afrobarometer, "African youth are committed to democracy but express greater dissatisfaction than their elders, Afrobarometer inaugural flagship report reveals," Afrobarometer, May 2023. [Online]. Available: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/african-youth-are-committed-to-democracy-but-express-greater-dissatisfaction-than-their-elders-afrobarometer-inaugural-flagship-report-reveals>

# SOURCES

- [12] R. Maertens, F. M. Götz, H. F. Golino et al., "The Misinformation Susceptibility Test (MIST): A psychometrically validated measure of news veracity discernment," *Behav. Res.*, vol. 56, pp. 1863–1899, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.3758/s13428-023-02124-2>
- [13] Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, *JIM-Studie 2024: Jugend, Information, Medien. Basisuntersuchung zum Medienumgang 12- bis 19-Jähriger in Deutschland*, Stuttgart: MPFS, Nov. 2024. [Online]. Available: [https://mpfs.de/app/uploads/2024/11/JIM\\_2024\\_PDF\\_barrierearm.pdf](https://mpfs.de/app/uploads/2024/11/JIM_2024_PDF_barrierearm.pdf)
- [14] C. Downey, "New Concordia research shows social networks are vulnerable to relatively simple AI manipulation and polarization," *Concordia University News*, Apr. 14, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://www.concordia.ca/news/stories/2025/04/14/new-concordia-research-shows-social-networks-are-vulnerable-to-relatively-simple-ai-manipulation-and-polarization.html>
- [15] M. R. Sievers, "TikTok and war: The misinformation dilemma," *Capitol Technology University Blog*, Apr. 24, 2023. [Online]. Available: <https://www.capttechu.edu/blog/tiktok-and-war-misinformation>
- [16] S. Malhi and L. Weber, "Women are getting off birth control amid misinformation explosion," *The Washington Post*, Mar. 21, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2024/03/21/stopping-birth-control-misinformation>
- [17] A. J. Stevenson, K. R. Genadek, S. Yeatman, S. Mollborn, and J. A. Menken, "The impact of contraceptive access on high school graduation," *Sci. Adv.*, vol. 7, no. 19, 2021.
- [18] T. Foley, "The Power of Storytelling: An Interview with Social Change Leader David Hunt," *The Activist History Review*, May 12, 2017. [Online]. Available: <https://activisthistory.com/2017/05/12/the-power-of-storytelling>
- [19] M. Sheehan, "Science of Story Building: Master Counter-Narratives," *Medium*, Jan. 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://medium.com/science-of-story-building/science-of-story-building-master-counter-narratives-1992bec6b8f6>
- [20] Council of Europe, "Step 3: Deciding and defining what you want to transfer – human rights-based counter or alternative narratives," *Human Rights and Speech*, [Online]. Available: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-speech/step-3-deciding-and-defining-what-you-want-to-transfer-human-rights-based-counter-or-alternative-narratives>



# THE 50 PERCENT /

The 50 Percent is a youth-led platform that empowers young changemakers to address the world's most complex challenges through systems thinking, to drive systemic change.

By building a mutually supportive learning community of young people and youth-focused organisations, we equip youth with practical tools to understand how interconnected elements shape our world. This empowers them to identify powerful leverage points for change and create meaningful impact—locally, nationally and globally—as active citizens.



[www.the50percent.org](http://www.the50percent.org)



[linkedin.com/company/the50percent](https://www.linkedin.com/company/the50percent)



<https://www.instagram.com/the50percentglobal>

The 50 Percent is a key initiative of The Fifth Element.

