



**FRI** Frontline Resource  
Institute

# Frontline Momentum

Narrative Building and Storytelling  
for Frontline Organizations

Issue 7: Winter 2025



# A LETTER FROM FRI'S ACTING DIRECTOR

The art of storytelling has endured over millennia because stories have the power to touch our hearts. Throughout my career I have seen how difficult it can be to convey the magnitude or severity of climate change. Stories of personal experience highlight how climate change impacts an individual, families, and communities. This is particularly true for the stories of people living on the frontlines of environmental and climate injustice. Their stories are visceral, impassioned, and deeply personal because their lives and those of their neighbors are at stake.



Despite the vital importance of frontline storytelling, the current state of this storytelling space is one of extraction. Many of FRI's frontline partners have their stories told frequently by major news outlets, yet they don't own their stories. When shared in this way, their stories belong to powerful and profitable entities and are being told on their behalf by individuals with little to no knowledge of their community or situation.

Now, more frontline communities and organizations are working to reclaim their stories and tell them on their own terms. People are going beyond the written word and using video, art, and music to communicate their lived experiences of environmental injustice.

FRI is working to shift the paradigm of storytelling, so that frontline communities own their stories and control their narrative. With support from the Pinterest Foundation, we are creating a collaborative, research-driven storytelling sovereignty toolkit specifically designed for frontline organizations. Focused on continuing to support a small cohort of FRI's 2023 grantees, we are piloting this toolkit while bolstering the storytelling and narrative building capacity of frontline organizations in our network. Through these efforts, we hope to collaboratively refine and eventually build this toolkit into a sustainable model for frontline storytelling and story ownership.

James Baldwin said the following in his essay *The Devil Finds Work*: "A story is impelled by necessity to reveal; the aim of the story is revelation." We need to bring more awareness to the ongoing threats and impacts of environmental and climate injustices on communities. The most effective way to do this is by amplifying the stories and experiences of those who are often unheard. If you can't find a seat at the table, you make your own. FRI will continue to work with frontline communities to create platforms and avenues for storytelling that inspire revelation and action.

## On the Cover

At 2024 Street Works Earth, "*Rising Curtains.*" by Anjali Deshmukh and Ernest Verrett of Make Justice Normal invited participants to dive into community beading, weaving a beaded story map of global surface temperatures. Photo by Greg Kessler.

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*Margot Brown*  
Dr. Margot Brown

## NEWSLETTER FEATURE

# WORDS, FILM, AND ART: FRONTLINE STORYTELLING THROUGH THREE MEDIUMS

Article informed by interviews with **Shilpi Chhotray**, Co-Founder and President, Counterstream Media; **Anjali Deshmukh**, Co-Founder, Make Justice Normal; and **Alexandra Norris**, Filmmaker and Documentarian



**Caption:** At 2024 Street Works Earth, [Kaleidospace](#) hosted an art activation, *Próxima Tierra*, which combined collaborative coloring, workshops, and dance to reflect on the climate crisis. Photo by Greg Kessler.

There is no right or wrong way to go about storytelling. In fact, employing a variety of methods can enable an organization to reach a broader audience, meeting people where they are and how they consume content. This article presents a series of examples that illustrate three types of storytelling and offers tips and recommendations for building your organization's storytelling capacity.

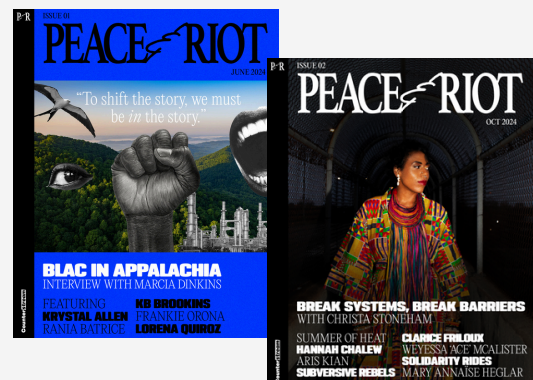
## WRITTEN STORYTELLING

Written storytelling is the easiest of the three methods covered here to implement. A blog on your organization's website and a monthly e-newsletter are great starting points for sharing stories of your organization and its mission, the issues you care about, and the communities you serve. To expand your reach further, you may consider connecting with media outlets to place articles in newspapers, magazines, and digital publications.

All four of Counterstream Media's initiatives—the [Peace & Riot Zine](#), [People over Plastic Podcast](#), [The Margin](#), and [Solidarity Rides](#)—elevate the personal narratives of frontline communities. The first of their written media initiatives, the [Peace and Riot](#) zine, explores the intersections of environmental and social justice by centering voices that are sidelined in mainstream media. The zine focuses on communities in the Gulf South, but it also covers activism and advocacy efforts in other parts of the U.S. and the world. The second project, [The Margin](#) (an independent project at Counterstream Media), is a digital storytelling platform that is dedicated to amplifying frontline communities through investigative journalism and data. Stories in [The Margin](#) combine personal narratives with data analysis and visualizations to help readers understand a community's present situation, how they got there, and where they are going next. Pieces published in [The Margin](#) are getting republished in publications like [The Nation](#), ensuring the stories of frontline communities reach a wider audience.

## VISUAL STORYTELLING

Video is king in visual storytelling. Short clips and documentaries that tell the stories of people or communities responding to injustices can be powerful tools for education and advocacy that resonate with a broad audience. While visual storytelling has a higher barrier to entry, (e.g., access to camera equipment or a smartphone), its ability to document the impacts of environmental injustices on communities and how people are fighting for their health and well-being is undeniable.



**Caption:** Counterstream Media's [Peace & Riot Zine](#) centers the voices of environmental and social justice leaders. [Click here](#) to read Issues 1 and 2.



**Caption:** Premiere of the documentary short [Solidarity Rides: Convergence, Healing, and Justice](#). Photography by Briana Blueitt for Counterstream.

For example, Counterstream Media produced a short documentary about their power-building [Solidarity Rides](#), which bring together frontline communities from Appalachia and the Gulf South. One solidarity ride featured in the documentary took place in Louisville, Kentucky, which is home to a massive industrial complex called Rubbertown. Riders visited Rubbertown and then toured community-led projects such as BearFruit and Grow, a Black-owned food justice organization that creates pathways for food access, land acquisition, and resource distribution. Riders also shared stories and strategies to achieve healing and food justice and overcome environmental injustices, in this case the petrochemical and coal mining industry's presence in Appalachia. You can watch the trailer and learn more about the documentary [here!](#)

Another ambitious project is being carried out by filmmaker Alexandra Norris. She is creating a feature-length documentary called "Let No One Lose Heart," which chronicles the ups and downs in the life and work of environmental justice leader Sharon Lavigne and her daughter Shamyra in St. James, Louisiana. Four years in the making, the documentary is in post-production and will be released later in 2025.

### CONNECT AND LEARN MORE!



To learn more about Let No One Lose Heart and view a preview of the film, [click here.](#)

## ARTISTIC STORYTELLING

Artistic storytelling is a kind of visual storytelling that employs the senses to evoke an emotional response and foster empathy and understanding. It's true multimedia storytelling and can take many forms - from public murals to gallery installations to interactive exhibits.

Make Justice Normal partners with [Street Works](#), a practice that is dedicated to reimagining public spaces as the galleries of the future, using community-engaged, participatory art to inspire social action. Street Works was conceived as a response to the inaccessibility and privatization of art in galleries, museums, and other art-centered spaces, driven by systemic injustice. The program centers deep participation and co-creation, inviting community members to be "curators" of art and artistic expression that is interactive and reflects their diverse backgrounds and the social issues they care about.

The first Street Works event, Street Works Earth, took place in September 2024 in the Jackson Heights neighborhood of Queens, New York. The focus of the event was environmental and climate justice, and it featured installations from local artists that invited participants to learn more about climate change and what they can do to take action.



**Caption:** [Kaleidospace's](#) dance performance at Street Works Earth 2024 explored "corporate imperialism and the role of collective community-based action" in fighting the climate crisis. Photo by Greg Kessler.

## DEEPENING YOUR STORYTELLING PRACTICE

Storytelling takes time and resources - two things that many frontline organizations don't have in abundance. However, there are things you can do to build your organization's storytelling capacity.

### PARTNER WITH VALUES-ALIGNED ORGANIZATIONS THAT CAN HELP YOU REACH A BROADER AUDIENCE.

For example, if your organization doesn't have a large social media following, you can approach like-minded organizations and see if they would be interested in amplifying your social messaging or blog posts. Connect with organizations like Counterstream Media that host digital publications and partner with them on a piece that can be shared through their platforms.

### TAP INTO YOUR NETWORKS.

See who your peers are going to for their storytelling needs. In this case, you are more likely to connect with people who align with your organization's mission and values.

### LEVERAGE LISTSERVS.

A great resource is a listserv called Rad Comms, which is a group of communications professionals from a wide range of specialties. If they don't have the background or experience your organization is looking for, chances are they can connect you with someone who does.

### SEEK OUT ORGANIZATIONS THAT DO PRO BONO WORK FOR NONPROFITS.

One such group is [Catchafire](#). While you have to be invited to receive a membership, once you are in, you can access pro bono support for all kinds of projects.

### ATTEND EVENTS AND EXHIBITIONS.

This is especially helpful for organizations that are looking to connect with artists. Look to local arts organizations and guilds for lists of upcoming events, go out, and meet people at spaces where they are.

Above all, start small. Focus on one storytelling method at first and build your capacity in that medium before expanding into others. Use this as an opportunity to develop and hone your storytelling lens so when you branch out into new mediums you can be confident in the types of stories you share - and the actions you want to inspire.



**Caption:** Convening at [Food Literacy Project](#) where youth farmers are bringing solutions to food insecure communities in Louisville, KY. Photography by Jon Cherry for Counterstream.



### CONNECT AND LEARN MORE!

To learn more about each of our featured organizations, experts, and their projects, visit their websites here:

- [Counterstream Media](#)
- [Let No One Lose Heart](#)
- [Make Justice Normal](#)

# CHANGE THE NARRATIVE, CHANGE THE WORLD: CREATING ENGAGING NARRATIVES FOR FRONTLINE STORYTELLING

*Shilpi Chhotray, Co-Founder and President, Counterstream Media*



Frontline community-based organizations are driving systemic change while leading movements for justice with minimal resources. However, the stories of their work are frequently underrepresented or misinterpreted by mainstream media. At [Counterstream Media](#) (formerly People over Plastic), we believe that the power to tell one's story is transformative—and that when communities most impacted by injustice take the lead in shaping the narrative, it challenges entrenched systems of power. Frontline community-based organizations, many of which we partner with, are best positioned to tell these stories, and push forward systemic change.

## THE ELEMENTS OF A POWERFUL STORY

When it comes to frontline storytelling, a good story isn't only about relaying facts. It's about connecting on a human level, making the listener or reader feel deeply and inspiring them to act. At Counterstream Media, we focus on these core elements to build narratives that elevate the voices of historically excluded communities.



### CENTERING LIVED EXPERIENCE

A story rooted in lived experience is undeniably powerful. This means telling the truth about what's happening on the ground, without diluting the message for the comfort of mainstream audiences and white-washed legacy media. Often, we hear about the raw realities of oppression while celebrating the resilience and solutions that arise from within.



### EMOTION

At its core, storytelling is about making people feel. Whether you're sparking empathy, anger, hope, or a call to action, evoking emotion is essential for mobilizing the masses. The stories we share at Counterstream Media aren't just abstract statistics or policy arguments—they're stories about real people fighting for justice, like the countless community leaders we've worked with who are on the frontlines of climate change, racial injustice, and economic inequity.



### CLEAR CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

Every powerful story needs a conflict—a challenge that speaks to larger systemic issues. But just as important as identifying the problem is highlighting how the community is responding. When we amplify voices from Gulf South communities battling the petrochemical industry, we don't stop at the problem. We spotlight the solutions led by the communities themselves. This not only gives people hope but also reframes the community as the expert, not the victim.



### CALLS TO ACTION

Stories can move people to action, but the next step must be clear. Whether it's rallying for a protest, supporting legislation, donating, or amplifying the message, make sure your audience knows how they can contribute to the movement.

## LEVERAGING STORY ELEMENTS FOR DIFFERENT AUDIENCES

Building narratives that resonate across diverse audiences requires nuance. Not every group will respond to the same elements of a story in the same way. The key is understanding who you're speaking to and what moves them.

### POLICYMAKERS AND FUNDERS

For this audience, facts, solutions, and impact are central, but we don't abandon the emotional core of storytelling. For example, when covering the toxic impacts of petrochemical facilities on frontline communities, we combine data on how these facilities predominantly affect Black and brown communities with personal stories to humanize the issue. An independent project at Counterstream Media, [The Margin](#), does this brilliantly by blending investigative journalism with firsthand accounts, ensuring a depth of understanding in the evidence and the lived experiences behind the statistics.

### THE PUBLIC

Here, emotion is front and center. The public may not always understand the intricacies of racist systems and policies, but they will connect with human experiences. When we share stories through the [People over Plastic](#) podcast - now in our fifth season, we ensure that the voices of community members are driving the conversation. Their stories of resilience and creativity in the face of injustice make complex issues more accessible and inspire collective action.

### ALLY ORGANIZATIONS

Storytelling for peer groups is about solidarity, shared strategies, and collective empowerment. These stories often revolve around tactics, lessons learned and wins that other organizations can adopt in their own struggles. Our [Solidarity Rides](#), for example, invite participants to physically experience the stories of communities fighting environmental injustice, offering not only an educational component but tangible next steps for community-driven action.



**Caption:** Riders on the bus during Counterstream's Solidarity Ride. Photography by Jon Cherry for Counterstream.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FRONTLINE STORYTELLING

### 1. CENTER THE VOICES OF THOSE MOST IMPACTED

Let the story be told by those who live it. Storytelling is an act of resistance and empowerment, especially for historically excluded communities whose voices are often silenced. For example, when Palestinian climate justice advocate Rania Batrice says, "Stop talking about us and start talking to us" in our [Peace and Riot](#) zine, the power of their words becomes even more compelling when heard directly. At Counterstream Media, we don't speak for communities—we work to elevate their stories on their own terms. This is crucial for building narratives that are authentic and impactful.

### 2. DON'T JUST TELL THE STORY, CHANGE THE POWER DYNAMICS

Storytelling is political. It's not just about the stories we tell but who gets to tell them. Just like frontline organizations are intentional about challenging existing power structures, communications allies must ensure that the storytelling process reflects the justice they're advocating for. A key part of our mission at Counterstream Media is to disrupt the status quo and center voices that have been historically excluded from the mainstream narrative.

### 3. MAKE IT POP

Stories come to life through more than just words. Through multimedia storytelling, we're able to engage audiences on a deeper level. The visuals we include across our projects and digital media amplification give audiences a visceral connection to the communities we cover. Similarly, audio storytelling through podcasts captures the emotional nuance of a storyteller's voice, allowing listeners to feel the urgency and passion in a way that's hard to convey with text alone.

### 4. COLLABORATE ON STORYTELLING

Storytelling should not be a solo endeavor. Collaborating with other organizations, media outlets, and storytellers amplifies your reach and impact. For example, our strategic collaboration with organizations like the Black Appalachian Coalition, 350.org, and NDN Collective (and many others) allows Counterstream Media to cross-pollinate stories, share audiences, and build momentum around shared goals.

At Counterstream Media, we're committed to changing the narrative landscape by empowering communities to tell their own stories—because when we change the narrative, we change the world. Check out more at [counterstream.org](https://counterstream.org) | [@counterstream\\_media](https://www.instagram.com/counterstream_media)

*Shilpi Chhotray (she/her) is a strategic communications leader and the Co-Founder and President of Counterstream Media (formerly People over Plastic). With expertise in plastic pollution, climate change, and environmental justice, her work focuses on reshaping global narratives to empower communities and influence systemic change.*

## FEATURED STORIES AND RESOURCES FROM THE FRI NETWORK

Our blog, [Stories from the Frontlines](#), and our [Resource Hub](#) support frontline environmental justice storytelling and knowledge sharing across FRI's network. We'll be featuring different frontline organizations, individuals, and partners as they share their stories, histories, and the work they're doing to further climate and environmental justice in their communities and beyond.



### CALL FOR INTERVIEWEES: NARRATIVE AND STORYTELLING SOVEREIGNTY STUDY

To guide FRI's work in 2025, our team is conducting a research project in partnership with KTLN Consulting to understand how frontline communities conceptualize stories and storytelling, identify emerging needs and priorities around frontline storytelling, and understand the importance of story ownership and sovereignty in a 21st century context. We are recruiting **individuals who are currently affiliated with a frontline community-based organization** to be interviewed for this study. These interviews will be about 60-90 minutes and will be compensated \$50 either via monetary payment or e-gift card. Alternatively, if individuals are not able to accept compensation we are happy to have a treat of their choice delivered to you around the interview time.

If you're interested, please complete this [google form](#) to determine your eligibility and register your interest in being interviewed.

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