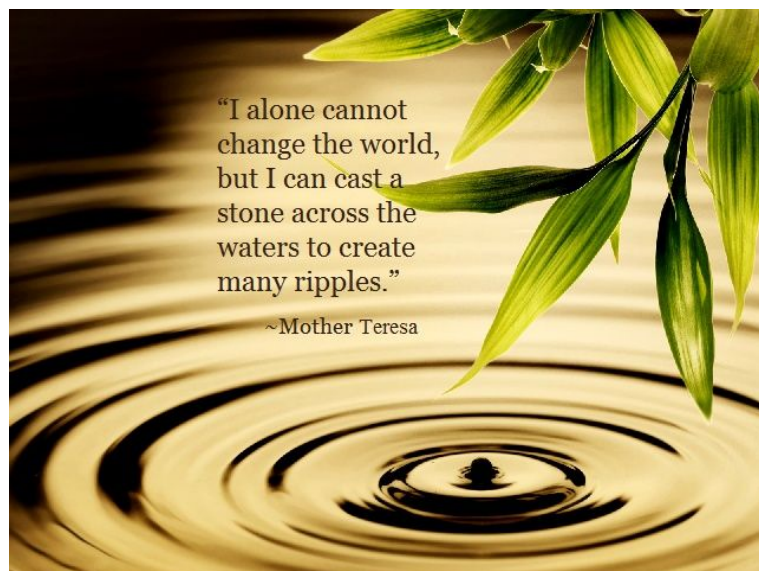


During the first class of the course on Planetary Health in which I am currently enrolled, the wise [Solly Benatar](#), when asked where one could possibly begin to make the radical changes necessary for sustainability and justice, reminded us of the deep importance of speaking our truth and spreading the narrative of other possibilities.



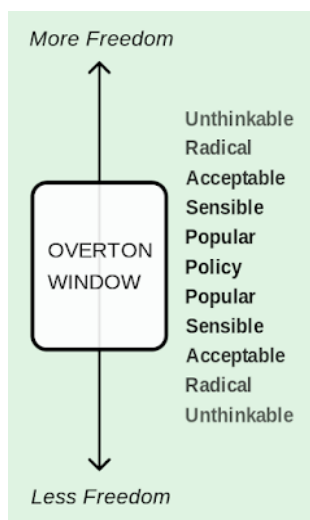
He reminded us that in addition to the

importance of small actions, and the necessity of research, and the critical role of international collaboration, the stories that we tell every day are just as valuable. It was a necessary reminder of a principle that I myself have expressed to others with far less eloquence. The importance of ripples and the power of a butterfly wing.

While I couldn't possibly dive into the complexities of chaos theory (Bishop, 2017), my superficial interpretation of the concept brings me some comfort, and ignites ideas about how I might stick a proverbial wrench in the system. Chaos theory suggests that no one can truly pre-determine the effect of an action on the system. However, given that the current system of white supremacy and extractive capitalism was very deliberately designed (Zarnett, 2020), it seems at least theoretically possible to design a better one.

All societies create myths about how and why they exist, and the nature of their relationship to other humans, species or ecosystems. The systems and stories that dominate current culture were manufactured by the elite to concentrate wealth, oppress the masses and the marginalized (Zarnett, 2020), and are deliberately perpetuated (Clark, 2017; Hancock, 2020; Lent, 2019). These stories

influence our values and behaviours (McDavis-Conway et al, 2019; Kendal & Raymond, 2019). People (Schill et al, 2019) behave as the system dictates, guided by myths of consumption, technoscientific epistemology, infinite growth, anthropocentricity, meritocracy, and white supremacy (Kendal & Raymond, 2019). These values have been ingrained so deeply into our collective subconscious that they can be nearly impossible to see, much less critique; a friend has referred to this as “ignorance by design,” as a friend so frankly put it (Snetsinger, personal communication, February 12, 2020).



Policies within a democratic society also reflect its values and stories. Overton (Mackinac 2020) opined that decision-makers will support only those ideas that they believe will get them re-elected (figure 1). This policy window is wide or narrow, and slides along a spectrum of acceptability to a particular community at a specific place and time. In times of stability, the window shifts very little (Schmitt et al, 2020).

Figure 1: The Overton Window (from [Politics, a socialist movement and the Overton window in 2019](#))

Early in a movement for social change, a small number of radical, innovative thinkers enact values or behaviours different to the status quo, which generates alternate narratives (Dearing, 2009) (figure 2). Over time, this innovative action can help to shift the window, policy, and ultimately the system (Cross & Snow, 2012; McBay 2019; Boyd, 2016a) (figure 3).

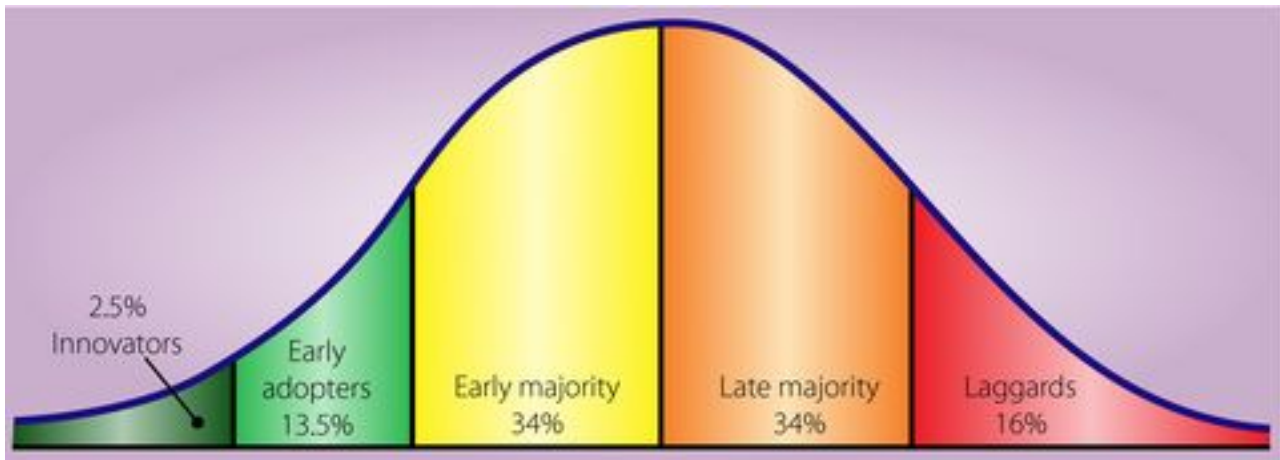


Figure 2: The Diffusion of Innovation curve (from Lien & Jiang, 2017)



Figure 3: The impact of innovators on the Overton Window (from [Politics, a socialist movement and the Overton window in 2019](#))

Shocks may broaden or shift the position of the window more rapidly (Buckley & Ward, 2016), catapulting what may have previously been seen as unthinkable to something that is in the window of acceptable or even sensible (Lent, 2019; McDavis-Conway, 2020; Murphy, 2014). The COVID-19 (C19) pandemic has illustrated this (Williams & Robinson, 2020). There have been a number of policy changes that had previously been deemed radical or unthinkable, such as increasing access to healthcare, providing a basic income supplement, and halting unnecessary travel (Clark, 2017;

Craddock, 2020). Media has a tremendous impact on public perceptions and the acceptability of policy (Garcia 2016). Social influence also has the capacity to shape collective values and behaviour, particularly during times of disruption (Heiskanen et al, 2020). Social media narratives may have a particularly unique capacity to do this (Chew & Eysenbach, 2010).

Some narratives frame C19 as an isolated, temporary hiccup. Resilience will be reflected in our ability to return to the way things were before January. The pandemic can be reduced to a crisis of microbiology that can be resolved biomedically, after which time we will go back to business as usual. Economic stimuli are temporary measures to get us through, and isolation guidelines assume all people have access to the same resources. Technology allows people to simultaneously work from home and homeschool¹. This story is rooted in the colonial, capitalistic narrative that dominates global society (Clark, 2017; Schmitt et al, 2020; Schot & Kranger, 2018). This 'bounce-back' thinking reinforces the status quo and does little to address the root causes of the disruption (Houston, 2015).

Other narratives remind us of the adage that systems are perfectly designed for the results they create (Carr, 2008). This narrative is encapsulated by the idea that C19 is the latest in a litany of increasingly frequent and severe anthropogenic disruptions. It is one of many symptoms of dysfunctional interrelated systems which are rapidly moving the planet towards chaos and destruction (Nelson, 2014). The snarl of intersecting global crises cannot be remedied from a technoscientific or neoliberal perspective since these are precisely the paradigms which created and continue to reinforce these deeply flawed systems. A 'bounce-forward' framework could support a transition towards a more sustainable and just future (Island Press & Kresge Foundation, 2015).

Intersecting with this polarity is a spectrum of emotion. Anger and fear simmers (and occasionally explodes) over the inequities of C19 and the state response to it. The shock of this pandemic has

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flagrantly exposed the consequences of wealth concentration, white supremacy, social polarization, oppression and unearned privilege (Craddock, 2020; Lent, 2019). Vulnerable individuals are more likely to die during this pandemic; people struggle to feed their families; rates of domestic violence have increased; neighbours spar over interpretation of distancing guidelines; and a mental health crisis looms. Despite this, there is cynicism that those with power will make meaningful change, and will in fact use this shock to further promote injustice and limit dissent, in essence nudging Overton's window *away* from freedom (Klein, 2007; Clark, 2017; Boyd, 2016a).

Beautiful acts of kindness and compassion have also emerged, illustrating love, compassion, and the resilience of nature. Stories are shared about clear air in Asia and clean canals in Venice. Some countries are committed to maintaining a basic income program. Some cities are redefining their economy. Grassroots community support programs have blossomed. Advocacy movements pivot to different tactics and strategies. Arts organizations are innovating access to culture. Those with active hope elevate the narrative that this disruption is an opportunity to bounce forward to a world that is more resilient, just and sustainable (Schill et al, 2019; Schot & Kanger, 2016).

These themes can be organized into a framework built on the intersecting spectrums of context and emotion (figure 4). Table 1 provides examples of circulated stories that fit within these themes.

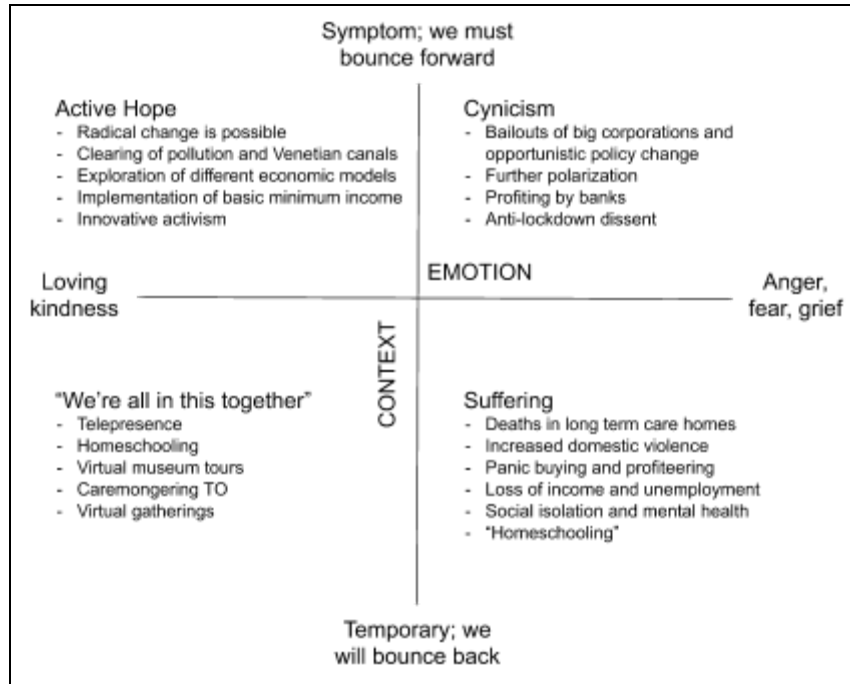


Figure 4: Thematic analysis of narratives

Table 1: Examples of Media Stories that Illustrate Observed Narratives

Active Hope	Radical change is possible and critical (Lynch, 2020)
	Environmental benefits to radical change (Henriques, 2020)
	Adoption of alternative economic models (Boffey, 2020; Ng, 2020)
	Importance of strong social services (Jones, 2020)
	Innovative activism (Amnesty International, 2020)
Cynicism	Big corporate bailouts and opportunistic policy change (Stuart, 2020; Carrington, 2020)
	Further polarization (Collins, 2020)
	Anti-quarantine dissent (BBC, 2020; Ellis, 2020)
	Profiting by banks (Saltzman, 2020)
We're All in this Together	Economic stimulation a top priority (Georgieva, 2020)
	Telepresence (Glazer, 2020)

	Homeschooling (Jolly, 2020)
	A crisis of microbiology (Nishihata, 2020)
	Grassroots organization and collective action (Gerken, 2020)
Suffering	Existing inequities are exacerbated by this pandemic (The Economist, 2020)
	Increasing rates of domestic violence (Taub, 2020)
	Opportunistic profiteering (McLeod, 2020)
	Deaths in long term care facilities (Walsh, 2020)
	Triggering/exacerbation of mental health crises (Asthana et al, 2020)
	Unemployment soars (Lim, 2020)

Social and civil movements have always been about telling the truth about injustice and exposing the face of power (Craddock, 2020; Young, 1994). In moments of crisis, the stories we tell can influence post-disruption pathways (Schill et al, 2019; Yerega, 2018; Kendal & Raymond, 2019; Lent, 2019). The intersection between physical isolation guidelines and the omnipresence of social media offers a compelling method by which the collective narrative can be influenced (Kendal & Raymond, 2019; McDavis, 2019; Amnesty International, 2020). In many ways, media has become democratized: narratives can be co-created, and any story can be told (Cook, 2017; Yerega, 2018). Amplification of “active hope” narratives may propel a positive shift in values, behaviours, and ultimately policy (McDavis-Conway, 2019).

All scholars and practitioners of radical action espouse the necessity of diverse tactics, selecting the approach that is most appropriate given the target, goal, context and resources (Boyd, 2016a; McBay 2019; Sharp, 1973a). Creativity is a core principle of effective activism; however, it can be easy to do the same old thing until circumstances force innovation (McBay, 2019). Not only does this limit

effectiveness, it is also less fun! Given the restrictions on public gatherings, it has been essential to pivot to tactics that can be accomplished and amplified at a physical distance. Many organizers have demonstrated remarkable agility in order to continue to agitate within reasonable safety parameters. I have both attended and organized in-person events this spring that used creative strategies to maintain physical distance while still empowering people to put their boots on the ground. The innovation that this required enhanced the value and impact of the events in many ways. A Juneteenth mass sit-in had participants position themselves two meters away from others. This had the effect of taking up significantly more physical space than if distancing guidelines had not been in place; the occupation stretched from College and Yonge to Bay and Queen². Another was the design of a family-friendly anti-Racism march that allowed household bubbles to move through the route in their own time and direction. Stops used non-contact methods to engage children in developing skills of critical allyship³.

Because of its ease and a rapt audience (many of whom are reticent to attend public events, even if caution is used), all of the advocacy movements in which I am engaged have been attempting to actively use social media to generate and amplify the “Active Hope” narrative. Despite it being before he wrote his seminal work, Sharp acknowledged the value of persuasion (1973b); when done well, memes can be very effectively spread via social media. Members of Extinction Rebellion created a video to support the campaign to expand the bike lane network in the city as part of ActiveTO⁴ which received relatively little engagement (although there were 843 views!) and likely had relatively little impact. Naturopathic Doctors for Environmental and Social Trust (NEST) disseminated shareable images through social media channels to build support for an open letter to the Ministry of Education

² [Anti-Black racism protest in Toronto calls to defund the police on Juneteenth | Watch News Videos Online](#)

³<https://www.facebook.com/events/715635785867314/>

⁴www.facebook.com/leslie.solomonian/videos/vb.729390296/10163533394940297/?type=2&theater¬if_t=video_processed¬if_id=1590585145548999

regarding restrictions on children⁵; this tactic produced a surprising amount of engagement for a small advocacy upstart with over 300 signatories. NEST also stated and disseminated its position on systemic racism within the naturopathic community⁶. Stand up for Racial Justice (SURJ) hosted an amazingly well organized and well-attended online teach-in, and raised over \$60,000 for BIPOC-led⁷ organizations in fewer than 10 minutes⁸. They were able to engage so many participants due to the power of social media and the captive attention of their target audience in the wake of George Floyd's murder and ubiquitous discussions of white supremacy. The coalition that spearheaded the Green New Deal for Canada movement in 2019 shifted their attention to building momentum via social media to advocate for a Just Recovery for All, including a list of demands for all levels of government, and a massive online rally⁹ - Extinction Rebellion Toronto, NEST and First Unitarian Toronto all signed on with a plan to enact the principles in future work.

Media of course - social and otherwise - is fraught with corporate and government influence. Algorithms of social media platforms can result in bias (Wihbey, 2014). And with the massive amount of competition for people's attention - both online and in real life - any deliberate attempt to influence the narratives in circulation will require savvy and innovation. It is clear that movements that have a strong existing following and credibility (eg. LeadNow) may have more capacity to persuade their audience. Reading the climate and appetite of the intended audience may have a large influence on success as well (eg. the timing of SURJ's teach-in). Creativity with the method is also more likely to rise above the cacophony and grab attention. I am currently working through an online course that explores the application of art to activism and social movements,¹⁰ and Boyd's toolbox (2016b) provides abundant inspiration. Although I do not fancy myself to be an artist, there is a huge

⁵ [Lift Restrictions on Kids](#)

⁶ <https://www.nestnds.com/antiracism>

⁷ Black, Indigenous and People of Colour

⁸ [How white folks can take anti-racist action in COVID 19 — SURJ Toronto](#)

⁹ <https://justrecoveryforall.ca/erally/>

¹⁰ [ART of the MOOC: Activism and Social Movements](#)

opportunity for artistic collaboration in this and many other forms of activism. I have already had the pleasure of working with artists who are part of ARCA during previous actions; this network could be further mined.¹¹ Best practices of social media marketing effectiveness will apply here as well (eg. [5 Social Media Best Practices Every Marketer Must Follow](#)).

Communication is a key means of transmitting narratives that can shape collective values, behaviours and policies. During a time of physical distancing, the use of social media is and can be effective at persuading an attentive audience of narratives that promote active hope. Creativity, innovation, and good timing will leverage opportunities to influence perspectives and values in order to shift the window of acceptable policy options.

¹¹ [Artists for Real Climate Action](#)

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