The Story Platform Report

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The Midwest Culture Lab is a Project of Alliance for Youth Organizing in association with Chicago Votes, Ohio Student Association and We The People (Michigan)
Acknowledgements

The Midwest Culture Lab is a 2018 experiment to increase and deepen civic engagement by integrating cultural organizing and story-driven content strategy with grassroots, youth-led organizing. It is a nonpartisan, nonprofit project of the Alliance for Youth Organizing, in partnership with Chicago Votes, Ohio Student Association and We The People (Michigan).

The Lab’s design team is: Sarah Audelo (Alliance for Youth Organizing), Kirk Cheyfitz (A More Perfect Story), Renee Fazzari (Independent Consultant), Prentiss Haney (Ohio Student Association), Liz Manne (A More Perfect Story), Rebecca Petzel (The Emergence Collective), Amber J. Phillips (Writer, Organizer, Creative and co-host of the The Black Joy Mixtape), Erin Potts (A More Perfect Story), Art Reyes (We The People–Michigan), Matt Singer (Impactual) and Stevie Valles (Chicago Votes).

This report was written by Kirk Cheyfitz, Liz Manne, Amber J. Phillips and Erin Potts with the support and input of all members of the Lab’s design team.

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The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions of Investing in US or the Alliance for Youth Organizing.

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Contact: midwestculturelab@gmail.com.

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# The Story Platform Report

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Our Manifesto

This is crystal clear to us.
Why not to you?
The way you’ve always done this
Ain’t working. Not for quite a while.

Must we re-learn that insanity
Is trying the same shit and expecting different results?
It’s past time for something new; something different.
Something real. No bullshit.

Campaigns have been coming to our doors
Carrying messages and urgent instructions.
But they never listen to any young people.
That they claim to need so bad.
So it’s time for us to put our lessons together.
Time for us to teach.

This is our way to say
That we are the best folks to determine
How to get to our people;
How to reach us.
And move forward with us.

You don’t understand our culture
because you’ve never understood us.
You can only understand us
If you listen.

So here’s what’s new and different:
This time, it’s us deciding and doing for us.
We have come together and
Crafted our own story —
A narrative made of who we are and
How life works and doesn’t work in the
Real neighborhoods where we live.

This time, the young people who live
In the places where we live
Will be the ones to decide
What stories to tell
And who’ll do the telling.

Because when we tell our own
Co-created stories,
Everybody’s going to listen.
And when we make our demands,
Everyone is going to act.
What it means to “participate” will shift
And things are going to change
At last.

We Choose Us.

—Sarah Audelo
—Prentiss J. Haney
—Amber J. Phillips
—Art Reyes
—Stevie Valles
1. Executive Summary

This report documents foundational work from January to April, 2018, by the Midwest Culture Lab, a project of the Alliance for Youth Organizing — a premier federation of youth organizing groups — in partnership with three grassroots organizing groups: Chicago Votes, Ohio Student Association and We The People (Michigan). The report is intended to serve multiple audiences — from grassroots youth organizers in the Midwest to national foundations, campaigns, researchers and strategists — seeking to understand, replicate and expand the Lab’s work to increase the civic and political participation of young people. This section is a brief summary of significant findings and conclusions.

The Lab’s first phase — the Design Phase — combined multiracial youth organizing, cultural organizing and storytelling to find and test a unique core narrative that would motivate young people to join in civic and political activities, including voting. The Lab’s work was premised on serious shortcomings in how campaigns have addressed young people, particularly young people of color. Our aim was to replace ineffective messaging and talking points with effective storytelling.

➔ It became clear that one critical task for the Midwest Culture Lab would be to design, test and evaluate a whole new way for the political and cause-related establishment to organize, operate and communicate; a way that incorporates creative processes and culture-shaping; a way that unites long-term and short-term goals; a way that is anchored in listening intently to — and uplifting — the voices of the affected.

To locate and organize effective stories, we chose the Story Platform Workshop Process, an approach pioneered by one of the Lab’s partners, Kirk Cheyfitz, proven in commercial advertising and customized for our purposes. The process begins with broad audience-centric and cultural research. One focus is collecting stories the audience tells about why, in this case, they do and don’t engage in political action. These stories are synthesized into a single core narrative through a one-day workshop involving youth organizers who come from and work with the audience being addressed. The workshop produces the core narrative — the “story platform” — that most powerfully connects the audience with the project’s goals. The story platform is then used as a basis for creative concepts, which are tested to determine their emotional connection to the audience. In the Implementation Phase, basic creative concepts will be made into audience-facing content, which we define as media (both digital and physical), experiences (like events) and products (tees, patches and so on).

The Lab’s research and workshop exercises found that young people, particularly of color:

• Are cynical and skeptical about voting because they have not seen voting produce positive change;
• Broadly reject the typical political calls to rally around “America” or the nation;
• Are motivated most powerfully by the desire to come together to create neighborhoods and communities that work for themselves, their family, and friends;
• Are surrounded by and gravitate towards pop culture stories, such as Black Panther, about the search for and use of localized power to create, maintain and empower one’s own community.

These findings have deep implications for both the development of the Midwest Culture Labs’ story platform, and the way that progressive movements and candidates should communicate with this audience.

The 14 youth organizers in the workshop made important decisions based on the research and discussion about what the Lab offers, who it is and what its audience is:
• Our promise or “brand” is to help youth secure power to co-create communities where needs are met and everyone is accepted for who they are.
• The tone and personality we will use is defined by our archetype, the Creator — building a vision, inviting community collaboration, offering real choices.

This story platform emerged: Co-created by us, real, with joy: the world we need. The story pillars — rich storytelling areas that rise from this platform — identify stories that will move the needle for youth participation:

• Co-creation of thriving communities by young people, especially youth of color;
• Authentic stories rooted in people’s everyday lives with no bullshit — 100% real;
• Expressing joy and love in life, work and activism; and
• Joining together to achieve the common goal of making an inclusive world where all are accepted.

Based on our story platform, we commissioned 30 creative concepts from seven individuals and teams, including an internal Lab team. We chose three concepts for testing by the research firm System1. The test, with a sample of 1200, yielded an array of learning, including:

• Our internal team’s concept — We Choose Us — tested highest for emotional connection (46% for surprise and happiness, the top two categories) with a national youth audience, beating System1’s Not For Profit Average (34%). It excelled, in particular, in being “important” and “hopeful.”
• Respondents’ phrasing of the “key message” in We Choose Us shows the “focus on … people coming together to make a difference” drives the emotional score.
• Far behind was OUTVOTE (35%), which, while taking a very different approach from past “vote” campaigns, urges voting directly.
• Among the learnings from System1 is that there was no significant difference in how the concepts were received from region to region.

Conclusions

The learning produced by the combination of the System1 test results and the Lab’s own research findings was extensive and supports a number of important conclusions, including:

• System1’s methodology validates the Midwest Culture Lab’s story platform. The highest-scoring concept was internally produced and most precisely conveyed the story platform’s narrative.
• The evidence also strongly points to the conclusion that telling youth to “vote” engenders emotional neutrality, which produces no action. Evidence includes large blocks of respondents reacting to all three concepts with neutrality and deep skepticism about voting expressed in interviews and through pop culture.

The next step for the Midwest Culture Lab is the creation and dissemination of content based on the story platform, spelled out in the Implementation Plan, a separate document.
2. Hello.

The goal of this report is to help funders, partners and other fellow travellers understand how and why the Midwest Culture Lab was born, who comprises the young audience being addressed, what we saw in the cultural context of the moment and how this project’s approach diverges sharply from seemingly similar past efforts to engage young people in civic and political participation.

Specifically, this report contains the processes, goals, findings, deliverables and outcomes that have contributed to and flowed from the project’s work on story and culture in the Lab’s Design Phase (Phase 1).

As you read this report, you will understand why the project began with a search for a unique “story platform,” what exactly a story platform is and how it relates to every activity undertaken in the Design Phase. This report will also include general, forward-looking guidance on how these key deliverables from the Design Phase will be used to accomplish the goals of the Implementation Phase (Phase 2) of the Midwest Culture Lab.

Please note this report is not the Implementation Plan. A separate, standalone document, the Implementation Plan is a tactical guide and detailed plan of action for Phase 2. It describes the short-term activities that need to be executed to turn the Design Phase of the Midwest Culture Lab into increased youth participation and voting in the 2018 election and the long-term activities needed to change the culture around political and civic engagement such that youth increase their presence and power.

Who’s the Audience for This Report?

This detailed documentation of how we arrived at our story platform will make it possible for anyone to deeply understand the work that was done and to carry that work forward immediately by implementing effective and consistent campaigns, events and experiences based on the story platform.

Apart from this immediate application by the Midwest Culture Lab and its anchor partners, this report is meant to be used by youth organizers, civic engagement funders and others interested in understanding narrative work and the strategic use of storytelling and cultural organizing to achieve the goals of short-term campaigns and to change culture over time.

Specifically, we anticipate the audiences for this report to include:

1. Primary — Our existing grassroots anchor partners: Ohio Student Association, Chicago Votes, We The People (Michigan) as well as the Alliance for Youth Organizing and its board.
2. Secondary — All additional Alliance affiliates (7 organizations) and Alliance Youth Organizing Partners (13 organizations).
3. Tertiary — Select progressive organizations, researchers and funders interested in shared learning to fuel story-driven, locally-rooted youth organizing in 2018 and beyond.

Why This Project?

The 2016 election was marked by significant declines in Black voter turnout, especially Black youth, and especially in key swing states in the Midwest. As Brookings described it in a detailed report:1

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“Among minority groups, black Americans showed the sharpest decline in voter turnout — 7.1 percent since 2012. At 59.6 percent, it was the lowest black turnout rate since 2000. This is notable because 2012 was the first year since records were kept that black turnout eclipsed white turnout nationally. The 2016 black turnout rate lies nearly six points behind that of the white turnout rate.”

Young voter turnout in Midwest Culture Lab’s key states runs higher than average in presidential years, but was very low in the 2014 midterm election. In 2012 and 2016, turnout of eligible young people in the region was roughly 50-60%, among the highest in the nation for young voters. But in 2014, turnout of young voters in several of our states was in the low teens, below average for the country as a whole. This is important data as we head into the 2018 midterm elections.

The Backstory

The Midwest Culture Lab sprang from two parallel conversations following the 2016 election.

In the wreckage of 2016, Prentiss Haney of Ohio Student Association and Stevie Valles of Chicago Votes were concerned about the disengagement of youth of color in the Midwest as well as a rightward shift among white youth in the region that they believed reflected increased racial resentment. In discussions with Sarah Audelo of the Alliance for Youth Organizing, they identified further concern that the progressive establishment, including funders, would sideline young people in the region, particularly young people of color, in favor of investments aimed at engaging older, white Midwesterners. Prentiss, Stevie and Sarah — all young leaders-of-color — were committed to building multi-racial grassroots coalitions: they understood that working class and low income Midwestern families were suffering from the shared effects of forty years of deindustrialization. They felt that by collaborating as a regional block, they could better build power and resources for their organizations and the communities they served.

Simultaneously, longtime cultural strategists Liz Manne and Erin Potts were talking about the need to empower smart and skilled cultural organizing — a practice that fuses arts, culture and political organizing — at the state level. They believed the top-down, Beltway-centric, transactional model of “messaging” and “surrogates” was contributing to America’s narrative crisis and political dysfunction. They had a hypothesis that a strategic approach to narrative and a commitment to long-term culture change — led at the local level — could help shift the tide. They began exploratory conversations with a number of potential partners, including network design experts Renee Fazzari and Rebecca Petzel, who had significant state-based experience.

Matt Singer, founder of National Voter Registration Day and the Bus Federation (which in 2017 was renamed as the Alliance for Youth Organizing), was privy to both conversations and introduced the groups. Matt’s theory was that a regional approach to state-level cultural organizing was the right scope for an experiment: choosing a single state was too small, the entire country too big. What could be learned in a region in 2018 could be scaled in 2020 and beyond.

And so, starting in the summer of 2017, Sarah, Prentiss, Stevie, Matt, Liz, Erin, Renee and Rebecca began to diagnose what had happened in 2016 and to frame a project that would leverage culture and narrative change strategies to increase the civic and political participation and the real political power of young people in the Midwest region.

This was the genesis of the Midwest Culture Lab.

By January of 2018, when the Design Phase of the Midwest Culture Lab officially began (thanks to funding from Investing in US), the core Lab partners — or members of the Lab’s “design team” — would include eleven experts. It was a diverse team: multiracial, intergenerational, gender-balanced, intersectional and geographically
dispersed, with different, complementary areas of lived experience and professional expertise as grassroots organizing experts, culture change and story strategy experts and network collaboration experts. (See Appendix F for bios.)

Sarah Audelo, Executive Director, Alliance for Youth Organizing
Kirk Cheyfitz, Partner, A More Perfect Story
Renee Fazzari, Independent Consultant
Prentiss Haney, Executive Director, Ohio Student Association
Liz Manne, Partner, A More Perfect Story
Rebecca Petzel, The Emergence Collective
Amber J. Phillips, Writer, Organizer, Creative and co-host of the The Black Joy Mixtape
Erin Potts, Partner, A More Perfect Story
Art Reyes, Executive Director, We The People (Michigan)
Matt Singer, Principal, Impactual
Stevie Valles, Executive Director, Chicago Votes

Some Key Observations about Shortcomings in Progressive Campaigning

Long before the Lab attracted the funding needed to go forward, a few key observations emerged that would shape the project’s work, including, most egregiously:

1. The persuasive effect of talking points and policy memos had sunk essentially to zero, especially with young people already fed up with advertising’s tactics. Lab partners agreed that narrative played a critical role in the 2016 election.
2. Despite the rise of digital and other non-traditional communications, too much campaign money was still being spent on TV, which had waning impact, particularly in the context of a presidential race where factors like cable news talking heads and social media filter bubbles were creating intractable narratives.
3. Another failed strategy was the habit of approaching young people (or any people, really) only every two years (or four years) to demand that they vote. Lab partners agreed that political and cause-related campaigns had to adopt an always-on strategy centered on what was genuinely valued by the audience. From the perspective of grassroots organizers, the near-exclusive focus on voter mobilization was tantamount to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.
4. Finally, not listening to the voices of the audience being addressed was another huge problem identified by Lab partners. Young people of color were frustrated that older white funders generally would back only the projects and approaches proposed by the funders and rarely, if ever, backed ideas that rose from the ranks of youth organizers.

As the Lab took shape, its consultants — especially those from corporate, not political, marketing — were struck by the lack of current marketing knowledge among senior progressive advocates. (Indeed, among progressive campaigners and social justice advocates, the very idea of “marketing” was suspect: a lying machine to distance ourselves from, rather than a communications strategy to understand and harness.) Very few young organizers, and an inadequate number of old campaign hands, are familiar with creative processes: how strategy is formed; how effective communication ideas stem from strategy; how ideas turn into executions; how strategically connected executions create action; and so on.

All these observations and experiences formed the background of the Midwest Culture Lab. They helped shape a research process that, as the work progressed, confirmed again and again how urgently progressive and social justice movements — if they wish to be effective — need to listen carefully to their audiences’ voices, replace talking points with relevant stories, consistently work long-term and not just leap from one election to the next,
and make time and budget for training staff in cultural organizing and content creation so they can spread and win support for progressive ideas.

It became clear that one critical task for the Midwest Culture Lab would be to design, test and evaluate a whole new way for the political and cause-related establishment to organize, operate and communicate; a way that incorporates creative processes and culture-shaping; a way that unites long-term and short-term goals; a way that incorporates the power of proven field engagement; a way that is anchored in listening intently to — and uplifting — the voices of the affected.

The Overall Goal of the Design Phase

The Midwest Culture Lab’s kick-off planning session in New Orleans on January 31, 2018, was attended by the eleven members of the Lab’s design team. At this meeting, the partners identified the project’s target audience and set the project’s primary goals and connected the achievement of those goals with the need to champion the deep personal goals of the young people the Lab addresses:

“To find a resonant core narrative that will encourage and expand the political and civic participation and power of young people — especially young people of color — in the Midwest and across the country.

“To activate and increase youth voting in the short-term. To change the culture over time.

“These short- and long-term goals are inextricably linked because young people are extremely skeptical of voting and can only be encouraged to vote if they see casting a vote as a step toward achieving their most important personal goals. Changing the culture of their world is one of those personal goals.”

Does Storytelling Work? And How Does the Story Platform Workshop Process Help?

To pursue the Lab’s goals, the project needed a tested, proven and research-based narrative strategy to determine the project’s design and direction. Midwest Culture Lab found such an approach in the Story Platform Workshop process.

A story platform is defined as the core narrative that most powerfully creates an emotional connection with the audience being addressed by a brand or campaign. This is critical because research shows that emotional connection is what produces the greatest and longest-lasting power to spur engagement, action and change. (The audience — “voters” in politics and “consumers” in corporate advertising — is the group of people who must be reached and with whom a relationship must be created if a campaign is to succeed.)

If a narrative is to resonate with its intended audience, it is imperative that it reflect in some important way the audience’s real lives and their view of reality. Stories not connected to the audiences’ lived experience are likely to be rejected. So every story platform starts and ends with the audience, taking into consideration the stories the audience members tell to themselves and each other. In the Midwest Culture Lab’s story-listening, we focused on youth organizers and volunteers. They are part of our intended audience — young people from the blocks and communities we want to reach. They also made the choice to participate and the stories that motivate them are exactly the stories we seek to spread.

Once a story platform is established, a virtually infinite set of stories can be built on the platform and they will connect with the intended audience and be connected with all the other stories we tell by laddering back to the same core narrative. In this way, a story platform is the essential organizing mechanism of narrative persuasion
it defines the kinds of stories that fit and do not fit within a given narrative strategy; it organizes priorities. It’s the core that makes all related content and campaigns recognizable as being related and cumulative in their impact on the audience — as well as authentically reflective of the audience's lives and point of view.

The story platform process is a method for gathering thousands of isolated stories from the audience and converting them into thousands of connected stories which all share a single core narrative. (The simplified schematic below shows the main stages of the Story Platform Workshop Process.) Such connected stories that acknowledge an audience’s own narratives and also embody collective aspirations are a powerful tool to drive behavioral, narrative and culture change.

Storytelling and cultural organizing are indispensable tools for advancing political and social justice causes. This is especially true in a digital age when all media, including TV, are shifting to digital channels. Audiences, especially young people, are rejecting advertising’s interruptive tactics and are rebelling against ads with a wide range of digital tools that allow them to avoid, ignore, block or forever banish messages that don’t interest them.

Based on studies by Pagefair, eMarketer and others, it is estimated that some 700 million devices worldwide, including those used by 30 percent of Americans, now use ad blockers. Those estimates predate the launch in March 2018 of a native ad blocker in the planet’s most popular browser, Google Chrome. Stories and cultural organizing reach their audience through organic methods, give value to their audience and make their persuasive arguments through story arcs and characters who reflect the audience’s own reality.

Building Knowledge About Narrative, Story and Culture

A growing volume of scholarship and experiments in psychology and sociology now recognizes the unique persuasive power of narrative and documents the impact on culture of various narrative forms including political communication and pop culture. Professor Michael D. Slater, director of The Ohio State University’s School of Communications, has done pathbreaking studies of narrative persuasion. Multiple studies from Slater and others show that narratives not only persuade those predisposed to agree with a particular idea, but also are able to defeat the audience’s tendency to disbelieve information with which they disagree for political or other emotional reasons. As Slater observed in one political study, narrative — particularly long-form stories unfolding
through the eyes of believable characters — tends to suspend disbelief, which, in turn, tends to suspend
counter-arguing. Slater explains that people find it difficult to “counter-argue the lived experience of others.”

With the practice of communications and marketing now bending more and more toward the use of narrative
instead of ad-like tactics and talking points to activate, influence and persuade, the question is not whether
stories “work” to advance causes and candidates. We know stories can and do produce superior results. The
real question is how to create a rigorous, research-based process that will reliably find, create and pinpoint
how to spread the right stories — the stories that will most effectively advance a specific campaign with a
defined audience in the short term and help to change the culture in an intended direction over time. That’s
the purpose of the Story Platform Workshop process, which was created and first used in 2007.  

The story platform process has three parts — research inputs; the exercises undertaken during the workshop
day itself; and the analytical and creative outputs following the workshop, including the story platform and this
Story Platform Report.

**Timeline**

**Exploration** (July–December 2017)
July–December: partnership organized, experiment conceptualized, fundraising
December: funds raised

**Phase 1: Design Phase** (January–April 2018)
January: design team kickoff meeting; goals, audience, working agreements established
February: pre-workshop research
March: story platform workshop, story platform write-up, creative brief
April: create concepts from the brief, testing, report writing, implementation planning

**Phase 2: Implementation Phase** (May–December 2018)
May–June: Toolkit (including key creative assets) & training materials prepared; team & funding established
July: Training in the story platform, cultural organizing and content development; media planning
August–September: First-round content production, distribution and testing
October–November: Iterate & optimize content and media strategy for general
December: Reflection and reporting, planning for 2019–2020

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2 See also: “Can Narrative Journalism Overcome the Political Divide?” by Danny Funt, Chava Gourarie and Jack Murtha,

3 Since the story platform workshop process was launched by Kirk Cheyfitz’s former agency Story Worldwide, it has been
continually improved and validated over the years in projects for dozens of major commercial brands and nonprofits in the U.S.
and other countries. The process has been recently redesigned by Kirk in collaboration with Liz Manne and Erin Potts (through
their partnership *A More Perfect Story* ) for political and cause-related work and now includes cultural organizing and cultural
auditing, components which significantly enhance the power of the process to deliver the most effective stories and spread
them most widely.
3. The Story Platform & Story Pillars

The story platform is the result of the pre-workshop research — all the quantitative, qualitative and cultural research described in Appendices A, D and E — and the ideas expressed and decisions made by the participants in the Story Platform Workshop described in Appendix C.

The story platform is not a tagline, not a message, not ad copy. It is the emotional and rational heart of our offering — the core of our story. It is the single thought that should be apparent in everything we communicate. It is the essential tool we will use to shape and guide all communications during the Implementation Phase of the Midwest Culture Lab so everything we do will be coherent and cumulative.

It is, ultimately, built on the audience’s lived experience and the stories that audience members share when explaining to themselves and one another how the world works, how power is exercised and where and how change begins. But it is more than sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild’s “deep story,” which she presented in her book “Strangers in Their Own Land.” Because the story platform goes beyond the audience’s deep story to create a credible narrative path to social change — short-term changes in behavior and long-term changes in culture.

Our process revealed problems with a narrow focus on voting and a set of messages based on the admonition to “Vote!” We can see how this has bred more distrust, not more voting or participation.

Our most compelling finding is the tight fit between today’s dominant pop culture stories and the motivating personal stories told by young people themselves — especially (but not exclusively) by young people of color.

➔ The narrative all these personal and mass entertainment stories share is about gaining localized power to protect and shape home, block, community — to create safe spaces where people can thrive. It appears that motivation is strongest when the story’s object is closest to oneself.

As Amber, an 18-year-old African-American activist from Cleveland, said: “[We] ... were really invested in building a community amongst ourselves, first, that was based on ... an active love and an investment in one another ... and then allowing that to ripple outwards into the community that’s around us.”

Our most powerful story platform will come from this narrative territory, a territory where young people together create the communities they want and need to thrive in.
Co-created by us, truthful, real, with joy: the world we need.
The story pillars that rise from that story platform point the way to a unified narrative that connects thousands and thousands of stories about co-creation, about everyday life in the neighborhoods, about the power of love and art and joy, about what community really means. And more.

The story platform, together with the pillars, should be understood for what it is — a declaration from young people themselves — particularly young people of color — of what they want and intend to do.

A declaration, first, that it will be youth who will do it themselves. That they will create their own future. And they will do this together. That they will be ferociously honest and 100% real in the struggle. They will never bullshit anyone. Never say what's difficult will be easy. Never say what's possible is out of reach. That they will be filled with joy to be about this work together. And, ultimately, that they will triumph and build the world they need.

This is their vision. Given a chance, it can and will motivate a whole lot more than just voting, because just voting ain’t enough.
4. Testing Creative Concepts Based On The Story Platform

Testing Is Learning, Not Deciding.

To begin establishing a baseline for future implementation of content based on the story platform, the Midwest Culture Lab gladly accepted our funders’ request to subject the results to some kind of national testing. We did so understanding in advance the limitations of testing, especially on a limited budget and across a broad national audience. It goes without saying — and every experienced marketer knows — that concepts which test well do not always do well. Everyone also has examples of concepts that tested very poorly and performed brilliantly. So no one should base final decisions about communications solely on test results. But there is much to be learned from testing and we believe Midwest Culture Lab learned a great deal from the initial concept testing we undertook.

Creative Brief

The first step in turning the story platform into a set of concepts was to create a “creative brief” — a document to guide creative people — writers, designers, artists, filmmakers and so on — in creating ideas and concepts consistent with the story platform. A brief typically defines the goal of a concept or campaign, the audience being addressed, the desired outcomes. It also gives the creatives a set of specific guidelines about tone of voice and personality to be reflected all concepts and executions. Click here for Midwest Culture Lab’s initial creative brief.

To augment the brief, we also supplied all creatives with access to the Story Platform Rapid Readout Report containing research results, workshop results and the story platform and pillars. (We did not, however, provide in-depth personal briefings about the story platform to the external creatives, which likely impacted their outputs.)

Creative Concepts

Once the creative brief was ready, recruiting of creative individuals, teams and agencies began. Midwest Culture Lab recruited four individuals, one two-person team and an agency to create at least three concepts each. We also formed an internal team to work up concepts. When the final deadline passed, we had some three dozen concepts to choose among for testing. (Click here to see all of the creative concepts that were submitted.) We selected three concepts to test— two from creative individuals we had recruited (Outvote, We All We Got [which was tested as a pair]) and one from the internal team (We Choose Us).
Testing Methodology

System 1 is both the name of the research group we chose and the name used by famed psychologist Paul Ekman to designate one of the two systems that human beings can use when making choices. System 1, to simplify, is the emotional system for making choices. It works instantly and intuitively. System 2 is the rational brain and involves processing lots of information more formally and slowly in a controlled way.

Our aim in this initial test was to see what we could learn quickly and within our budget about how a national cross section of 18-to-34-year-olds would react to one or more creative ideas built on our story platform. We were not testing finished ads, finished videos or any specific kind of execution or call-to-action. Rather, we needed to test the audience’s emotional response to concepts that, potentially, could drive a multitude of finished communications across media channels, both online and in real life.

Testing in this way is not easy. Most such testing is conducted to gauge the effectiveness of ads for products and services. Results for potentially controversial or divisive political concepts cannot be compared to those obtained using the same methodology for consumer products, where social beliefs, racism and other core values are rarely at issue.

Testing can be very useful, however, in determining baselines as well as which approaches have the greatest positive impact, the broadest potential appeal and the best chance for impacting behavior short-term and cultural beliefs long-term. We also believe that testing a set of concepts, as we did, across a national sample without regard to the participants’ political beliefs is helpful in gauging the true nature and extent of polarization. Such tests are rarely conducted since most political communications are being tested against a small segment. Typically, campaign “messaging” — political, GOTV, ballot initiatives — is targeted to politically segmented audiences; to Democrats, not Republicans, for example. Alternatively, tests are aimed at one ideological group in the massively complicated segmentation schemes that now exist. Atypically, our national sample included no screening for party preference, right or left ideology, or any set of real or imagined biases. It included everybody, theoretically, from skinheads to Klansmen to Antifa.
We relied in our approach to testing on a growing body of research that finds virtually all decisions, including the decisions about what rational information or “facts” to believe or disbelieve, are based in the split-second emotional responses that psychologists call implicit associations. Implicit Association Testing or IATs are a way to get at those underlying emotional motivators.

Given what we know about the emotional basis of decision-making, given our aims for this project and the conceptual nature of the “stimulations” we were testing, using any particular audience-facing platform (like paid social and tracking reach and engagement metrics) was not appropriate. We elected to use System1 as the fastest (testing is entirely online), most affordable way to apply a form of implicit association testing to our concepts. As ad-like tactics decline and narrative approaches multiply, the ad industry has begun to use IATs to understand unconscious emotional reactions to communications concepts. System1 has a long track record with major advertisers and has validated its results scientifically.

Test Findings

System1 uses three distinct approaches in each session with a respondent. The most important test in System1’s hierarchy gauges how the concept makes the respondent feel on a scale where “surprise” and “happiness” are the most positive and “contempt” and “disgust” are most negative. To help explain this emotional reaction, System1 uses an Implicit Characteristics Test (ICT) that asks respondents to react in 3 seconds or less to each of 13 terms, indicating whether or not each term applies to the concept being tested. Finally, each respondent is asked to sum up the “key message” of each concept or, alternatively, agree with a previous respondent’s comment. (Clearly, the first respondents have no choice but to write their own.) In this way, as on many social media platforms, the most popular versions of the key messages emerge as more respondents vote for the ones they believe to be accurate.

Topline Results

Of the three concepts tested, “We Choose Us” tested highest for emotional connectivity, producing happiness and surprise — the response categories most associated with stimulating action and longer-term commitment — with 46% of the audience. The other two scored significantly lower, with Outvote at 35% and We All We Got at 32%. (We Choose Us was created by the Midwest Culture Lab’s internal team; the other concepts were produced by individual creatives in Detroit and New York.)

➔ The concept “We Choose Us” tests highest on System1’s emotional scale (46%), outperforming System1’s average for concepts tested by not-for-profits (which is 34%). It underperforms the norm for commercial product and service ads.

➔ Respondents’ most upvoted “key message” for We Choose Us is: “To bring people together in unity to make the world a better place for us.” The concept “drives positivity for its focus on unity and people coming together to make a difference,” System1 notes.

➔ Far behind We Choose Us for emotional engagement were “OUTVOTE” (at 35%) and “We All We Got” (at 32%). OUTVOTE, while taking a very different approach from past “vote” campaigns, urges voting directly.

➔ Despite the significant lead of We Choose Us in emotional engagement, all three concepts garnered similar scores (averaging more than 70%) across 13 positive attributes in the Implicit Characteristics Test, including “important,” “hopeful,” “real,” “inspiring,” “truthful” and “relevant.”

➔ All concepts scored significantly higher for emotional engagement and all the ICT attributes with African-Americans vs. all others. (Note that all concepts we tested featured images of people of color.)

➔ Emotional engagement also was higher among those with some college vs. high school or less, and with regular voters vs. infrequent and non-voters.

➔ System1 found no significant difference in how the concepts were received from region to region.
Principal Conclusions
The conclusions here are based on System1’s findings and informed by the findings of Midwest Culture Lab’s story platform workshop and our qualitative research (story listening and reviews of similar story collecting by other youth organizations):

1. The scores and comments associated with We Choose Us represent a validation of the Midwest Culture Lab story platform. The “key message” most upvoted by respondents is almost a precise rephrasing of the actual story platform, which the respondents never saw. The key message shows that the concept clearly and precisely communicates the story platform’s goal-driven core narrative of co-creating better communities. These results demonstrate the platform’s emotional engagement for the audience.

   ➔ The key message chosen by 13% of respondents — “To bring people together in unity to make the world a better place for us.” — is a virtual paraphrase of the story platform itself, “Co-created by us, truthful, real, with joy: the world we need.”

2. Civic and political participation must be redefined to mean more to young people than just casting a ballot. Combined findings from System1 and from Midwest Culture Lab’s cultural audit and story listening strongly suggest that civic and political participation tend to be seen primarily and, in too many cases, solely as voting and this view tends to depress youth participation.

   ➔ This is supported by the second- and third-most upvoted key messages for We Choose Us, which were each chosen by 11% of respondents. The concept mentions voting in passing and casts it as a chore, but both of these “key messages” involved getting people “to vote.”

   ➔ Seeing participation primarily as voting works against youth participation because voting engenders widespread skepticism, hostility or neutrality, none of which spurs action. An important area for additional research is around defining the range of activities that young people recognize as participation in a democracy, as well as identifying the activities they believe actually create change.

   ➔ Overcoming neutrality — which is driven by the feeling that voting doesn’t make change — is the biggest hurdle to significantly increasing youth participation in both the short- and long-term.

3. There is no statistically significant evidence of any differences in audience reactions from region to region, based on the primary emotion test as well as the consistent levels of agreement with the 13 positive terms in the Implicit Characteristics Test. The approach that works in the Midwest can work across the country and vice versa. (The Lab’s findings about the power of close-to-home stories clearly show that the right core narrative can work nationally, but the most powerful stories are local and hyper-local ones that align with the story platform and its pillars.)

4. Looking closely at the ICT scores, it is evident that pathways exist to make inroads with non-voters and multiple races/ethnicities:

   ➔ There were few significant differences between how regular voters and infrequent or non-voters responded to the 13 positive ICT attributes as applied to each concept. This indicates potential pathways to use the story platform to turn non-voters into participants.

   ➔ Looking at the ICT attributes of We Choose Us, differences between whites vs. non-whites were very small, indicating potential pathways to fashion a single motivating narrative that would create engagement across a multiracial audience.

5. An average of 75.8% of the audience embraced each positive attribute that they found in We Chose Us. The key message that garnered the highest percentage agreement was: “To bring people together in unity to
make the world a better place for us.” This is a very close paraphrase of the Midwest Culture Lab’s story platform, which the test respondents never saw: Co-created by us, truthful, real, with joy: the world we need.

The complete final report from System1 can be found here.
5. Building Participation & Power With The Story Platform

The connection between strategy and action — between researching and framing an engagement approach and actually engaging someone — is not always clear in the world of politics, advocacy, marketing or advertising. The lag or disconnect between strategy and action has given strategy a bad name (or no recognition at all) among many organizers and campaigners. But while action without strategy may be fast, it is also usually scattershot, inefficient and, most critically, ineffective.

The story platform approach was developed, in part, to solve this endemic problem by being relentlessly practical in leading quickly from theory to action. The story platform, as one of its creators said, is “not about developing a process for thinking about what might be the right thing to do. It’s about having a process that allows you to know what’s the right thing to do, so you can do it right now.”

The story platform is a tool that provides the anchor organizations of the Midwest Culture Lab — Ohio Student Association, Chicago Votes, We The People (Michigan) and the Alliance for Youth Organizing — as well as other organizations and campaigns that share similar goals — the necessary assets to launch strategically aligned cultural organizing and creative campaigns:

- Core idea to connect with the intended audience;
- Creative guardrails, so it’s easy to determine what fits and what doesn’t;
- Essential guardrails to ensure that everything — whether created internally or by independent artists and creators — shares a common core narrative and a common connection to the audience’s lived experiences and deep aspirations;
- A way of understanding immediately where to look for the most important stories;
- Essential guide so new artists and creators can get up to speed and quickly produce work that is consistent with the strategy;
- The tone, look and approach of the “brand” (in all of its complexity, authenticity and humanity); and
- More.

While the Midwest Culture Lab began with strategy, it has always been focused on action — action aimed specifically at building participation and power. In the Implementation Phase, the Midwest Culture Lab will support and empower grassroots organizers, artists and other cultural influencers to create and spread connected stories that are based on and reinforce the story platform. From door knocks to digital, from concerts and events to T-shirts and more, the stories we co-create with young people — especially young people of color — will help empower youth to build power and co-create communities where needs are met and everyone is accepted for who they are.
Appendix A: The ABCs of Pre-Workshop Research

Research Methodology

To ensure that the workshop’s outputs are fact-based, the first part of the process involves intensive research across four areas which we refer to as the “ABCs”:

**Audience**  
The audience and their view of reality — their own stories about the worth or worthlessness of participating in civics and politics — are central to locating and crafting a narrative strategy that will expand participation. Existing quantitative and qualitative studies of the audience are reviewed, including syndicated market research and other publicly available data. We also received nonpublic studies from several partners and media companies. In addition, our research relies on approaches from journalism, cultural studies and allied fields. We do in-depth interviews and story-listening sessions, typically with dozens of internal team members and audience members. We audit the pop culture products most popular with our audience and listen to the stories being consumed by our internal team and their audience.

**Brand**  
Any brand — whether a simple bowl of breakfast cereal or a complex idea like social justice — is a set of differentiated promises and benefits intended to improve the lives of the audience. In the commercial world, the brand is often self-evident (cornflakes) as are the promises and benefits (crisper than Brand X, good taste, better nutrition, convenience). In politics and social-justice communications, the brand often is more elusive. But any narrative strategy — any communications strategy, really — demands a precise and differentiating definition of what is being offered to the audience and exactly how that offering will make life better for them. Defining and differentiating the promises and benefits being offered is critical to the workshop process and setting the stage properly means researching how similar and related ideas are perceived by audience and how they have been “sold” to people in the past. This is why we undertook research on past voter registration, GOTV, civic participation and similar campaigns as part of the Midwest Culture Lab.

**Competition**  
Understand what competes with a particular set of ideas or campaigns is important to succeeding. Understanding competition in public-interest communications means locating directly competing storytelling that has goals which are similar to the campaign you intend to wage. It also means understanding how totally unrelated campaigns or bodies of content compete for the attention of the same audience you are trying to reach. Without such research, it is not possible to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, to learn from the successes or to know what is truly differentiating.

**Culture**  
Shared stories are the content of our culture, influencing the culture and, in turn, being influenced by the constantly shifting context that culture creates. At any given moment, culture-as-context is being acted upon by the output of popular culture and the pop culture stories to which an audience or groups of audiences are paying the most attention. It is not possible to create an effective narrative strategy or a powerful story platform without researching and understanding the content of the culture, especially the elements most popular with the audience being addressed. We call our cultural research a Cultural Audit.
Audience Findings

Quantitative: Studies, Polls, Surveys
Topline results of our quantitative audience research tell us that whether you are selling cereal or a progressive ballot issue, millennials are a key audience, forming the biggest, most diverse demographic group in America. Available data shows that online media and live events are the best ways to connect with this generation, but targeting them with social media advertising — or, indeed, any traditional advertising-like sales messages — is not a good idea. Looking at voter data, we also see that young people in the Midwest have exceptionally low turnout rates in off years and represent a target for potentially significant gains in 2018. Nationally, this cohort’s turnout rates have been in decline since peaking in 2012.

The Midwest Culture Lab defines its primary audience as young people in the Midwest between the ages of 16 and 34. The Lab focuses especially on people of color. The recognized cohort that matches the Lab’s target most closely is the so-called millennial generation, presently 18 to 34 years old. A collection of dozens of relevant quantitative studies we reviewed can be found in Appendix B.

Quantitative data — ranging from analyses of U.S. Census data to survey reports from Pew, Brookings and others — underscores why millennials have dominated corporate America’s target lists for a few years and have been studied (virtually) to death: They are America’s most numerous cohort (roughly 75M people and 30% of the voting-age population) and most racially diverse adults (55.8% white versus 75% for those aged 55+). A majority (61%) of those under 30 think of their generation as unique, mostly because of their use of technology (24%), but also because of their “liberalism and tolerance” (7%), according to Pew.

The diversity of millennials is a regional as well as national phenomenon: the Lab’s target demographic is more racially diverse than the population as a whole in each state covered by the project.

Millennials are correct, of course, to identify heavy use of digital as a marker for their generation. A 2018 Pew study says 54% of 18-29-year-olds in the U.S. get their news daily from social media as opposed to less than half that (26%) for those 50+. But they also demonstrate a desire to gather together in real life, as shown by the growing demand for smaller private spaces and larger, better appointed common spaces in offices, hotels and apartment buildings catering to this generation.

Young people’s turnout rates have been low and they have been relatively unmoved by traditional GOTV campaigns. Youth voter turnout in Midwest Culture Lab’s key states, while relatively high in presidential years, was very low in 2014. With youth turnout in the mid-teens, Midwest rates were half the national average.

Interestingly, we found no in-depth studies of the underlying reasons for not turning out to vote. No data surfaced that actually provided guidance on how best to raise participation. The Census Bureau’s biennial “Reasons for Not Voting,” which surveys registered voters who did not vote in each national election, provides little insight why people don’t vote. This survey asks non-voters to choose one answer from 12 possible responses, including “Other reason” and “Don’t know or refused.”

Prior to 2016, the most popular response was “Too busy or conflicting schedule.” But this is hardly a helpful answer for political organizers as it leads only to the inference that voting simply wasn’t important enough to bother with for a quarter of those registered. It offers no insight into how to elevate the importance of voting to move the needle on turnout.

In 2016, “Did not like candidates or campaign issues” was chosen by 24.8%. Again, it’s interesting that this was almost double the percentage who picked the same response in 2014. But it’s not enlightening in terms of how to boost turnout.
Some of the more interesting data sets are found in marketing and media studies that show millennials do not like advertising tactics, especially not online, where the generation’s members spend most of their media-consuming hours. While studies from PageFair (the anti-ad-blocking service) and others show ad blocking is now common across all ages, the largest percent of ad blockers are aged 18 to 34. Perhaps more importantly, given the emphasis placed on Facebook by political campaigns and millennials since 2008, 74% of millennials and the next younger cohort (Gen Z) say they don’t like being targeted on social media and, startlingly, 57% say they have “actually stopped or cut down using certain social media sites because of paid advertising that appears in their newsfeed,” according to a 2018 Harris Poll. (And, of course, all this research predates the recent Facebook crisis and the uptick in the #DeleteFacebook campaign.)

Most importantly, perhaps, is the number of times experts warned about how bad the voter file data is on young people, particularly young people of color. A recent analysis by Pew reveals that commercially-available voter files underestimate participation of young people. Young people move a lot and often have several relevant “home” addresses at any time (homes of parents, a dorm room, a temporary apartment). Re-registrations during moves are infrequent. Commercial files only update lists with state-based files sporadically. And especially low-income young people are less likely to be well-tracked in commercial databases bought by voter file providers. As a result, while we can learn a lot from voter file analysis, we have to accept healthy margins of error. And practitioners in the field know that “knocking to the file” is often not the best way to reach their communities.

**Qualitative: Story Listening**

The qualitative information gathered during one-on-one interviews and small group conversations by the Midwest Culture Lab was critical in establishing the direction and the guardrails for the narrative path that led to our story platform.

In choosing whom to interview, we decided to focus on youth organizers and volunteers in the Midwest, particularly youth of color. This choice was determined by a key insight: youth organizers and volunteers model precisely the civic and political behavior we ultimately seek to expand through inspiration and encouragement. They are examples of young Midwesterners who choose to be actively involved and who continue to work hard to involve others from their communities despite the difficulties and frequent frustrations of the effort. They organize, demonstrate, petition, protest and vote.

In more than two dozen in-depth interviews and story-listening sessions, we focused on organizers and volunteers between 18 and 29, predominantly people of color, asking them to tell the stories of how and why they became involved and remain active in civic or political work.

We listened to the lived experience of these young people, primarily in Michigan and Ohio. We also checked what we heard in our first-hand interviews against video gathered in Detroit by We The People (Michigan) and stories collected nationally by NextGen. Here are three of the significant, repeated themes we found:

➔ Many youth organizers are college students or recent graduates who feel guilt and isolation stemming from separating themselves from their home communities. These feelings can be resolved, as many said, by feeling “part of something larger” that is pressing for justice in those same neighborhoods.

  **Jonathan, an African-American organizer in his mid-20s in Detroit:**

  "I saw my older brother for the first time in 3 years. I was working at a shelter ... and instead of embracing him, I turned away. I felt ashamed ... All the time I did public service ... and talked about ... justice, it often felt inauthentic because I couldn’t really confront that part of who I was ..."

  [Near the end of college, the dining hall workers went on strike and a student said they didn’t deserve
health benefits and higher wages because they weren’t educated.

‘And that just brought me back to my brother and ... I realized that if I wanted to do this work, I need to center it in my experience. I need to center it in who I am. And recognize that the opportunities that I have don’t make me special, but they make me a part of something larger.’

➔ The most powerful motivation for activism is personal and close to home — a search for power to improve conditions for family, friends and neighbors on a block or within a neighborhood. The energy to keep going depends on the deep sense of belonging that comes from struggling for a common goal within a small group whose members are dedicated to the struggle and to one another. Like soldiers in an infantry platoon, youth activists and organizers keep fighting out of their solemn, shared, family-like obligation to one another. They are not moved by invocations of national purpose or democratic ideals.

Affiya, in her mid-20s, immigrated from Ghana as a small child and lives in Columbus:
‘There’s a lot of stuff in our communities that we’re personally affected by that makes it easier to understand why we organize. So, for me, whenever I’m going through something on a systematic level and it’s, like, bigger than me and I can’t handle it, all these people sitting at the table will be, like, ‘Hey, Affiya, what do you need us to do? How can we help you? How can we systematically dismantle this thing that is affecting you personally?’ ... And that’s what keeps me coming back. That’s what keeps me wanting to organize with them.”

➔ Voting, in and of itself, is viewed with extreme skepticism by both youth organizers and the young people they work to organize. Claims that voting will improve lives are seen as “bullshit” and “not real.” Youth, especially youth of color, believe in one another more than in any politician they may help to elect. This sense of skepticism was only heightened by the election of America’s first Black president and his failure to produce meaningful change in the country’s urban neighborhoods.

Gabby, mid-20s, from a Mexican immigrant family in Southwest Detroit:
‘My people believe in us ... We can do this. I think that can be more real to them than, ‘We can all vote for this person.’ They’re like, ‘No, we’re tired of that.’ And I get it. I am, too. ‘When I was out in the field (during the 2016 campaign) and I’m telling Black and brown folks to vote, they would come back with: Obama’s Black and my family’s been deported. Obama’s Black and my income hasn’t risen. Obama’s Black but my brother’s still incarcerated. So even though we got a Black president, for Black and brown people it still hasn’t made a big difference for the positive and, if anything, there’s a Black president and we’re still being deported, and we still don’t have quality education ... So when I have those conversations, I don’t fight that. They’re right.”

Brand Findings: Promises and Benefits

The Midwest Culture Lab defines “brand” as the differentiating promises and benefits that an idea, movement or product offers to its audience. In researching the recent history and audience perception of civic and political participation, we looked for brand-building communications aimed at young people to encourage or promote activism. Recent history shows we have good examples to follow in grassroots uprisings: Occupy, Black Lives Matter, the Dreamer movement, Standing Rock (#NoDAPL), Flint water protests and the Parkland students all inspired (and continue to inspire) increased participation. All these grassroots movements changed the national conversation. They share three common threads. First, they didn’t arise and were not affiliated with a party or recognized political organization or candidate. Second, their appeals were presented in stories about how people’s lived experience varies wildly from mainstream political rhetoric. Third, they were not primarily about voting but, instead, about protecting people and communities from economic, environmental and physical violence.
But the lessons of these grassroots movements seem not to have been heeded. Looking at recent GOTV efforts by established organizations, we found no credible promises or benefits being communicated to young people and no call to action broader than calls to vote. In short, we found no brand; no credible story about reasons to participate. This, of course, is a problem.

Virtually all the significant campaigns we could find were short-term efforts to increase youth voter registration and turnout in a single upcoming election. Instead of storytelling, we found a repetitive, narrow, non-narrative insistence to “Vote!”.

“Vote!” of course, is neither a promise nor a benefit to anyone. Given the intense skepticism we found among young people regarding the value of voting, it is not surprising that “Vote!” fails to motivate most millennials. “Vote!” is simply a directive to engage in a tactic. But to get people to engage in a tactic usually requires giving them reasons to do so — reasons that they find compelling.

When the communications we reviewed included reasons to vote, those reasons were mostly vague invocations of national good or references to civic obligations. At worst, the communications involved lying — overpromising that a vote would secure significant change. Lying to anyone is likely a bad long-term idea. With young people, it’s a terrible idea both short- and long-term. Mostly, recent communications about political participation fell into categories that, based on our findings, young people label “bullshit,” which is among the worst condemnations in their vocabulary. Just ask the young students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High.

To test these observations and conclusions with a group of experts, two members of the Midwest Culture Lab project conducted a workshop at frank2018, a leading conference of public-interest communicators at the University of Florida. The workshop was attended by some 40 professional communicators and leading academic researchers in sociology and psychology. All had experience in working with young people.

We led the workshop through a set of exercises that surfaced various facts and observations from the professional participants about millennials’ interests and information-gathering behavior. We then applied these learnings to evaluate recent youth-targeted GOTV messages. The workshop participants unanimously found the past messaging, at best, inauthentic and ineffective and, at worst, disingenuous and insulting.

**Competitive Findings: Everything Competes**

There is nothing in life or popular culture that doesn’t compete with efforts to encourage civic and political participation. This only underscores that if we are to get attention for encouraging or inspiring stories about participation, power and voting, we will need to spread compelling stories:
● Rooted in the audience’s real and aspirational lives;
● Honestly portraying voting as nothing more or less than a single critical step in a far longer journey; and
● Transforming the journey into an experience important enough to devote time to.

Cultural Findings: The Stories Pop Culture Tells Us

Our final research inputs were a first-of-its kind “cultural audit” to find the storylines existing in current popular and emerging culture that are influencing the audience (see Appendix D) as well as a cultural analysis (Appendix E), “The Midwest Has Something To Say,” by Lab partner and Ohio native Amber J. Phillips. The narratives in the shared culture of Midwesterners mapped directly to the individual stories we heard in our qualitative research processing, significantly aiding our process of uncovering a resonant story platform.
Appendix B: Bibliography


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Appendix C: The Story Platform Workshop

On Sunday, March 4, a crew of 14 youth organizers from Ohio, Michigan and Illinois gathered in The Summit on 16th United Methodist Church in Columbus, Ohio. Relying on the research and, more importantly, their own lived experience, and supported by a master soul-food vegan chef, a logistics chief, a videographer and three consultants, the group worked for seven hours on five rigorous exercises that contribute critical information to the creation of a story platform. It is important to understand that the consultants worked solely to guide and structure the day’s work. All the ideas offered and decisions made during the course of the workshop came from the participants. Their top-line ideas, thoughts, contributions and creation are summarized here.

Workshop Attendees

Participants
- Troy Alim, Chicago Votes
- Sarah Audelo, Alliance for Youth Organizing
- Steven Cole-Schwartz, Alliance for Youth Organizing
- Prentiss Haney, Ohio Student Association
- Shaunte Harris, Ohio Student Association
- Christopher Layton, Ohio Student Association
- Gavin Leonard, Ohio Voice
- Kortni Malone, Brightmoor Alliance/Color of Change
- Old Soul, Ohio Student Association
- Casmiro Pena, Chicago Votes
- Art Reyes, We the People (Michigan)
- Darshel Shehbi, Ohio Student Association
- Stevie Valles, Chicago Votes
- Camille Williams, Chicago Votes

Workshop Design & Facilitation
- Kirk Cheyfitz, A More Perfect Story
- Liz Manne, A More Perfect Story
- Amber J. Phillips, The Black Joy Mixtape

Support
- Allison Phillips
- Carnell Willoughby, Willowbeez Soulveg
- Wyze

Workshop Exercises

Brand: Co-Creating Community

Our research found and the workshop participants agreed that there was no set of promises and benefits to define what the Midwest Culture Lab wanted to offer to the people being addressed by the project — the Midwest’s young people. There was, in effect, no brand for civic and political participation. So the day’s first exercise was to define the offering to explain why someone should participate in civic or political action; why someone should vote. We needed to be able to provide a realistic, honest and compelling answer when people ask: ‘What’s in it for me?’

We went around the table and each participant talk about why they were active politically and how they explained the reasons for their activism to others. (Some of the relevant quotes are below.) We urged them to think about explaining why anyone should or would stop doing nothing and start doing something.

The group arrived with unanimity at a compelling goal to define the benefits of participation:
The goal young people are seeking is the power to create together a community free of isolation where human needs are met and everyone is accepted for who they are.

Quotes from the Brand exercise:

- “Voting is not relevant. It’s bullshit.”
- “Voting is a tactic, it’s not a goal.”
- “Young people don’t know who’s going to help them get ... basic needs.”
- “Few know what to do after they vote.”
- “I see voting like paying the electric bill.”
- “Tactics are voting ... but the goal is to be treated like human beings.”
- “To have human rights.”
- “To be seen and loved for who you are.”
- “To end loneliness.”
- “To end isolation.”

Archetype: The Creator

Carl Jung, one of the two pioneers of psychiatry in the 20th century, created the theory of human archetypes — universally recognized, primal personalities. Advertising has used Jung’s theories since the late 1920s, when the archetypal Green Giant first appeared on a can of peas. The classic marketing book “The Hero and the Outlaw” presents a set of 12 archetypes (below) that have been employed to guide decisions about tone and personality for many brands. While we customized the photos to be more diverse, the archetypes and the words that define each are taken directly from the book.
The youth organizers at the workshop table were split into three groups and asked to discuss the archetypes and select the one on which to model the tone and personality that would most powerfully connect with the audience and represent the campaigns to be launched by Midwest Culture Lab. As the quotes below show, the conversations in the breakout groups were diverse:

**THE INNOCENT**
Wholesome, pure, forgiving, trusting, honest, happy, optimistic, enjoys simple pleasures

**THE EXPLORER**
Searcher, seeker, adventurous, restless, desires excitement, independent, self-directed, self-sufficient, values freedom

**THE SAGE**
Thinker, philosopher, reflective, expert, teacher, confident, in control, self-contained, credible

**THE HERO**
Warrior, competitive, aggressive, winner, principled, challenges wrongs, improves the world, proud, courageous, brave, sacrifices himself for the greater good

**REGULAR GUY/GIRL**
Unpretentious, straight-shooter, people-oriented, reliable, dependable, practical, down-to-earth, values routines, predictability, status quo, tradition

**THE LOVER**
Seeks true love, intimacy, sensuality, passionate, sexy, seductive, erotic, seeks pleasure, follows emotions

**THE JESTER**
Clown, jester, trickster, playful, takes things lightly, creates a little fun/chaos, impulsive, spontaneous, lives in the moment

**THE CAREGIVER**
Altruistic, selfless, nurturing, compassionate, empathetic, supportive, generous

**THE CREATOR**
Innovative, imaginative, artistic, experimental, willing to take risks, ambitious, desire to turn ideas into reality

**THE RULER**
Manager, organizer, a “take charge” attitude, efficient, productive, confident, responsible, role model

**THE MAGICIAN**
Shaman, healer, spiritual, holistic, intuitive, values magical moments and special rituals, catalyst for change, charismatic

**THE OUTLAW**
Rebellious, shocking, outrageous, disruptive, feared, powerful, counter-cultural, revolutionary, liberated
● One group quickly dismissed the Hero and the Ruler as “one-person shows” who lead but do not collaborate;
● One group believed the archetype delivering the story should be the Regular Girl/Guy, but a different archetype should create the story;
● Once group fastened on the Jester to create something “that brings you joy.”

But when the groups came together again and began presenting their breakout discussions to everyone, the workshop quickly coalesced around the Creator, even though most of the participants did not know whose photo was representing this archetype. (The image that was used in the workshop for The Creator was Pablo Picasso. After discussing Picasso, the group chose Issa Rae to be the face of the Creator.)

Most importantly, the group saw the Creator as a collaborator eager to co-create a vision with the entire community. The Creator as joyful Co-Creator was the workshop’s clear choice of archetype.

Quotes from the Archetype exercise:
● “The Hero and the Ruler are one-person shows. If they win, it’s only their victory. If they fail, we all lose.”
● “The Creator inherently contains a lot of the other archetypes.”
● “The deliverer should be a hybrid of the Regular Girl/Guy and the Outlaw ... fun & engaging.”
● “The Jester ... to be part of something that makes you smile ... brings you joy.”
● “The Creator can build a vision.”
● “The Creator invites in the community.”
● “Creators are naturally collaborative.”
● “Being a Creator creates choices.”

Our Audience & Their Journeys
This exercise is designed to make certain the story platform is:

● Aimed at real people — specific people who can be personified; and
● To help make effective choices down the road about how best to reach those people using all forms of paid and organic content — media, experiences and products.

As with the Archetype exercise, the workshop split into three breakout groups to identify the audience members we most wanted to connect with. Each group also was asked to sketch out the prime audience members’ “journeys” — where and how they would encounter the Midwest Culture Lab’s campaigns as they traveled their neighborhoods, cities and online media in their daily lives.

Our Audience
When the breakout groups came together, they presented different personas. In the ensuing conversation, the entire group agreed that:
Our primary audience is not the identified leaders of the community, but the young person who is connected to networks within the community and trusted to play the informal role of spreading news and sharing opinions. This person may be active on blogs and social media. This person is aware of what’s going on, knows that things must change, but has no idea what specifically to do about it. This person is ready, therefore to reach out to others and bring them along.4

Quotes about the Audience from Our Audience & Their Journeys exercise:

- “A bridge person, connecting the community.”
- “Knows something better is out there. Does not know what to do.”
- “Influencers in the community.”
- “Trying to build something.”
- “The Creator within all of us.”
- “Host of “Poppin’ Vlog.”
- “Culturally and socially aware.”
- “Adapted to tough environment.”
- “Afrocentric. Fashionista.”
- “Doesn’t believe in the system.”

Their Journeys
This second part of this exercise was particularly valuable because it allowed participants to learn actively about planning outreach that uses online media as well as traditional organizing tactics. The exercise also emphasizes accommodating organizing to the lives of the audience, rather than asking people to change their lives in order to be organized.

In one breakout group, the four organizers initially agreed there was “no way” to reach the primary audience. But as their thinking progressed, they quickly identified a set of media habits for the persona they had just identified. This thinking by the entire workshop, created the following picture of the audience’s journeys:

Our primary audience can be reached face-to-face in her/his/their community and is connected online, using Snapchat, Instagram and Black Twitter, reading selected blog/news sites, listening to music and podcasts, watching videos.

Quotes about Audience Journeys from Our Audience & Their Journeys exercise

- “Contact in person: 1-on-1, subway, grocery store, door knocks.”
- “Snapchat”
- “Black Twitter”
- “Instagram”
- “How-to’s on YouTube”
- “Breakfast Club”
- “WSHH (World Star Hip Hop)”
- “SR (Subsonic Radio app)”
- “A lot of organizing is, ‘How do you be a part of our thing?’ This is flipping the script: ‘How do we be part of your thing?’”

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4 Regarding the ability to trace and harness the power of informal social networks, we note the work of Hana Shepherd, assistant sociology professor at Rutgers University, who studies social networks and how different types of social processes contribute to social change. Her recent projects include a year-long field experiment in 56 middle schools that used theories about social norms in relation to social networks to change school-level behavioral patterns around bullying.
“Create new systems of community organizing.”

**Story Circles**

Brands, campaigns, causes — all have ideals and goals that they claim guide their communications and behavior. Communicating and living these values is a critical part of establishing credibility and telling the right stories, especially when the audience is millennials. But all too often, the claimed values are the same for everyone and there are no real reasons to believe them. Every organization claims to value honesty and transparency, for example, to serve people and contribute to communities. Few, of course, really live or communicate such values and goals.

Story circles are intended to give meaning to such values and goals — to define each using stories, anecdotes, examples to nail down exactly what each means. And to do so in terms of events and experiences that are concrete and credible to the audience. In effect, the stories attached to each goal or value are lived experiences that lend reality and resonance to each.

The entire workshop group did this exercise together, first brainstorming some 30 different terms and then, through consolidation and elimination, honing that down to seven terms.

Then the entire group worked through the list of seven goals and values, tightly defining with stories and examples exactly what is meant by each term. This collection of goals and values and defining stories will form the guideposts for the stories that Midwest Culture Lab will tell as it works to expand youth civic and political participation.

Each term and what we mean by it are presented below using quotes from the Story Circles exercise:

**Community**

- “Accessible.”
- “Community includes diversity, unity, respect, connected, self-determination, love.”
- “Celebrating & recognizing difference.”
• “Being seen & valued for who we are.”
• “Safety without borders.”
• “Multiple choices.”
• “Wakanda”

Create
• “Transcending time & space.”
• “Sacred”
• “Innovation”
• “Intuitive, ambitious, willing to be experimental ... ”
• “No one can take it away from you.”
• “Beauty in the everyday.”
• “In order to shift culture, you have to create culture.”
• “Collaboration.”

Thrive
• “No ceilings. No barriers.”
• “Actually having opportunities & choices.”
• “Equity.”
• “Perseverance.”
• “Kujichagulia.” (Self-determination)
• “Resilience”
• “Self-sustaining”
• “Get it how you live, live it how you get it.”
• “Define your own success. #payblackwomen”
• “Survival: ‘Can’t give up now.’”

Authenticity
• “Keep it 100%.”
• “Real voices. NO BULLSHIT.”
• “Fearless, radical transparency.”
• “Tell the truth to acknowledge that the truth builds trust.”
• “Practice resonance: tapping into the power of empathy.”
• “Do what you don’t want to get what you want.”

Joy
• “Everlasting; release grief.”
• “Ultimate state of emotional balance.”
• “Absence of shame.”
• “Pleasure. Sexual liberation.”
• “Being alive, present, connected.”
• “Happens in the present/moment.”
• “Surpasses understanding.”
• “The arts, music, dance, laughter.”

Liberation
• “Education. Knowledge.”
• “Passport to the future — Malcolm X.”
• “Body autonomy.”
• “Restorative Justice principles.”
● “Freedom, agency.”
● “The movement we build will be for all of us or it will fail all of us.”
● “Intersectional.”
● “Grace, forgiveness, mercy, reconciliation (or conciliation).”
● “Choices.”
● “Freedom.”
● “Support to fail and be forgiven.”
● “Amends.”

Sankofa
● “Ancestors.”
● “Umbuntu — I am because we are.”
● “Inlakesh — You are my other me.”
● “Building on the past.”
● “Movement building — continuing to build on past movements; legacies from the past.”
● “Acknowledge and appreciate our ancestors work, but building forward, innovation.”
● “Wisdom in our bones.”
● “Never alone in this work.”

Brand Mountain
Differentiation is a critical factor in all political strategies and communications. Every cause or campaign needs to know how it is unique — how it differs from all other similar campaigns. The last exercise of the day involved all participants together describing how the Midwest Culture Lab differs from other, seemingly similar initiatives attempting to encourage voting and civic and political participation by young people.

The key to this exercise is being ruthlessly accurate in defining three levels of attributes in what we call a Brand Mountain:

1. At the base of the mountain are the attributes that every group must have to even claim an interest in youth civic and political activity — what we call “table stakes.”
2. Next comes the attributes that add extra power and credibility but are shared by a number of groups — the “nice to have” attributes and assets.
3. At the summit are true differentiators.
Based on the participants’ responses, we constructed this Brand Mountain for Midwest Culture Lab:

Quotes about differentiation from the Brand Mountain exercise:

- “It is 100% led by POC ... and no whitey is looking at you frustrated; believe it or not we know what we’re doing.”
- “There’s a real joy that this is all centered in; there’s an optimism.”
- “We’re grounded in everyday principles; those possibilities are boundless.”
- “… The level of honesty … that [usually] gets glazed over … We’re being honest … we’re trying to figure out the fit with our real communities.”
- “This is about our families to live and survive; ... y’all are the people this is for and you’re at the table to decide it. FUBU [for us, by us] for real.”
- “We are intentionally saying: this is how we do it and how we show the world.”
- “We’re rethinking the power that people have — what people have naturally — special influence and how creators are central to progress.”
- “The fact that we can come together and craft this narrative about who we are ... coming from who we are and how our communities are affected. Us crafting our own message — folks of color.”
- “We actually know and care about the communities and what’s ours is ours and you’re either giving it to us or we’re taking it. We’re coming for you.”
- “We don’t need a catalyst ... We do it for the sake of love and compassion ... None of us are free unless all of us are free.”
Appendix D: The Cultural Audit

Goals
The cultural audit seeks to find the storylines already existing in culture that are influencing our audiences. As such, it collects data on particular components or disciplines of popular culture (e.g., music, TV, Film) consumed by our audiences, and includes an analysis of overarching cultural themes, reinforced with research. It also gives new context and data to our thoughts on how popular culture, even if not consumed by directly our target audience, is shaping them and the environment that our work will happen in. As a recent article in The New York Times reports, “Art didn’t invent oppressive gender roles, racial stereotyping or rape culture, but it reflects, polishes and sells them back to us every moment of our waking lives ... We make art, and it simultaneously makes us.”

Methodology
The methodology, as outlined below, is a combination of quantitative and qualitative research, and cultural analysis, and is based on the work of Erin Potts, one of the Lab’s consultants, to convene a group of cultural strategists to create a rigorous methodology for cultural audits. The framework they developed is available upon request and includes three general phases:

1. Data collection through surveys, scans, existing studies, original research, interviews, etc.
2. Analysis of this data to identify relevant themes and trends
3. Recommendation for how to use this analysis in campaign design and implementation

The Midwest Culture Lab audit specifically includes:

- Scans of most popular culture in the Midwest region including:
  - Top 10 songs played on Spotify and Youtube, the primary sources of music listening for our audience, in major cities in each state
  - A review of the most popular cultural influencers, TV shows, podcasts, films, events and other relevant cultural outputs in the region
- Review of existing research:
  - A review of public (Nielsen, Pew, eMarketer) and non-public data (MTV, Trendera, etc) on our audience’s cultural consumption
  - Existing research synthesized in articles on the topics above
- Original research:
  - Lyric content analysis for the top 3 songs in all of the cities identified above to identify themes;
  - Interviews with and writings by cultural critics and influencers
  - A survey of community members — organizers or volunteers within our anchor organizations in each state — to identify mediums, influencers, “hot spots,” influencers, content, stories, etc.
  - Pulling relevant cultural data out of the project’s story collection research conducted as part of the story platform development

- Analysis & Recommendations
  - After the above data was collected, the team of cultural strategists and experts developed this document to provide analysis and a set of recommendations for the campaign.

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5 As a collaboration between the Alliance for Youth Organizing, Ohio Student Association, Chicago Votes and We The People (Michigan), all of the research is focused on Ohio, Michigan and Illinois and the major and mid-sized cities in each.
**Major Themes**

Several themes were found repeated throughout the different aspects of our research, including in personal stories, the content analysis of pop culture, the work of cultural critics, the survey and the research data.

**A search for power.** The culture that surrounds our audience tells a story of a search for power, and particularly through an emphasis on storytelling related to making money, having sex with women and guns. Repeated subject matter and terms, as shown in the word cloud below, highlight what is of value — at least metaphorically — to the artists and to some extent those who like their music. For the top 3 songs in each major and mid-range city in our states, “money” shows up 64 times and “bitch” (singular and plural) shows up 198 times (“girl” + “lady” show up 50 times). This is further evidenced in the popularity of trap and drill music, which, as a response to surviving under white supremacy and capitalist structures, focuses on these types of subjects. This indicates that there is an opportunity to create content, guided by the story platform, that uses this intensely popular narrative theme around a search for power to tell stories that are rooted not in guns, money and women, but in one’s self, one’s family and the community.

**A struggle with isolation.** The culture that surrounds our audience also tells a story of isolation. Again, this can be seen in multiple aspects of the culture audit findings, but one stark example is that the terms “I” / “me” are used ten times more frequently than the terms “we” / “us” (839 times vs. 84) in the region’s most popular songs. Spotify Insights highlighted that songs are beginning to move from “I” to “we” in general. Even the wildly popular film Black Panther is a story of a community that struggles internally over ending its isolation and invisibility. Given the other findings of the story platform and cultural audit, it would seem that content that focuses on co-creation and community, and that transitions from “I” to “we” will enable our work to reroute this common narrative, rather than go against such a strong narrative tide.

**Empowering female and femme creators.** In all of the popular cultural outputs that we surveyed, very few (in fact, none when it comes to music) are by or from the perspective of women. In fact, much of the creative industries, including advertising, continue to be dominated by men. And yet today, women are often leaders in political and social justice movements, and women of color particularly as can be seen in the women who are co-founders of Black Lives Matter and co-chairs of the Women’s March. Again, the film Black Panther and A Wrinkle in Time seem to see this gap and fill it with women of color who are the strongest and smartest when it comes to love, politics and war. As Amber J. Phillips writes in the cultural analysis she did for this project (see Appendix E), “It’s important to note that when gathering stories and information on who should be a central messenger in this developing campaign, Black women and femmes were constantly uplifted as cultural gatekeepers. Sadly, leadership and overall respect for this group is not reflected or treated with this same level of value in popular Trap and Hip Hop music. This is a nuance that we should constantly be aware of when using popular artist as cultural messengers for this work.”

**A focus on the local.** Amber also observed that the, “[p]opular culture content that centers Black and communities of color mostly focuses on communities in New York, California and the South leaving behind representations of communities in the Midwest. We see this in highly successful shows like Atlanta, Insecure, Empire and Black-ish.” She goes on to mention that a shift may be happening within digital media and emerging culture where new, local creators and voices are gaining visibility. Meanwhile, in the film Black Panther, the community finds resolution to its internal struggle around isolation by committing to sharing its considerable power with the world, starting first with restoring a local neighborhood.

Indeed, we heard over and over again through our research in discovering the story platform that people are motivated to participate in civic activities by the needs of their neighborhood and community far more than notions of a better America and saving democracy. There is a feeling of not being part of the political and cultural concept of America. Perhaps this is part of why we found little overlap in cultural consumption between the top ten songs and television shows nationally, and what is being watched and listened to in the Midwest,
until you break out the rural and largely caucasian areas of the region. It would be interesting to see if this reported and observed disconnect exists in other communities and regions where civic engagement campaigns are active, and then test the content we are creating in this project elsewhere.

**The movement towards co-creation.** Our audience, and particularly the organizers who are modeling the change that we are hoping to inspire in others, are responding to the world that is by locally co-creating the world they want. While pop culture is just starting to pick this up and reflect it (for example, *Black Panther, A Wrinkle in Time*), digital and emerging culture and content are embracing it. Indeed, there are versions of Wakanda everywhere — communities that possess a joyful spirit to create a new kind of world. We are in a cultural moment when this movement is rising and will be seen in more and more of popular culture. Again, if we create content that focuses on the act of co-creating a new world, we may be able to step into this quickening cultural stream to propel our work forward.

**Conclusion**

There is an immense opportunity for the Midwest Culture Lab in its implementation phase to create content guided by the story platform that focuses on (1) building new forms of power (to redirect and replace the current narratives); (2) telling local political and cultural stories (and avoiding national ones); and (3) highlighting how our audience is already and can continue to co-create the world it wants. While there is a role for popular artists from the region in this work, it is our recommendation that these stories should, by and large, be created for and by young people of color in the Midwest, and particularly women. By doing so, the Midwest Culture Lab has the opportunity to shift both political participation and cultural representation for this important audience.
Appendix E: The Midwest Has Something To Say: A Cultural Analysis

by Amber J. Phillips

We are in a time where progressive values, actions towards justice, as well as empathy are spreading through the creative work and actions of historically marginalized voices. Audiences have witnessed this in the mainstream box office success of movies like *Black Panther* and its representation of the importance of Black women's leadership, Black women's equal pay gap storylines in shows like Issa Rae's “Insecure” and in the lyrics of songs like “*The Kids are Alright*” by Chloe x Halle in a time where young adults are taking over the movement to end gun violence.

While mainstream and traditional media platforms start to finally crack the door open to greenlight the stories and talent of people of color, digital media has created an outlet for young people to tell deeply personal and specific stories about their communities that also have a universal impact on culture as well as politics.

We are also seeing the impact of this in national and local politics. 50+ percent of white people, regardless of gender and even age, are voting in favor of candidates who support racist and sexist policies. Black, Latinx and LGBTQ folks are voting for progressive candidates who at times don’t completely align with their deepest held values. These communities are the heart and reason for many progressive victories across the country but have yet to have their constant support translated into strong political power and equitable representation amongst industry leadership.

**Film**
Mainstream media and culture representations of voting, politics and political leadership are closely tied to the singular experience of white men. These representations include highly successful movies like *American President*, *Primary Colors*, *Ides of March* and even *Definitely, Maybe* on the romantic humor side.

Representations that depart from the dominant narrative of white men as political leaders only go on to depict Black communities and women being terrorized by white men to gain access to their vote and political leadership. We’ve seen this most recently in major films like *Suffragette*, *Selma*, *Confirmation*, *Iron Lady*, *Hidden Figures* and *Marshall*. These movies are brilliant and necessary for our culture and the future of politics globally. However, movies that aim to tell the untold stories of women and people of color in leadership are often presented as historical films that recount the traumatic process of democracy for these marginalized communities. Until the recent release of *Black Panther* and *A Wrinkle in Time*, audiences are rarely given the opportunity to view people of color and women in active positions of power that reimagine a world where they actually hold leadership within and outside of politics.

**Television & Music**
Since the rise and capital success of Shonda Rhimes, television is making a faster transition to expand representations of communities of color. However, popular culture content that centers Black and communities of color mostly focuses on communities in New York, California and the South leaving behind representations of communities in the Midwest. We see this in highly successful shows like *Atlanta*, *Insecure*, *Empire* and *Black-ish*. To be sure, Black Lesbian and Chicago born Emmy Award winning writer Lena Waithe’s show *The Chi* is experiencing huge success with a storyline that depicts Black folks in Chicago, Illinois. However, the show still centers a dangerous and violent Chicago which is a singular narrative that continuously plagues Black Chicagoans culturally and politically. This single cultural story about Black communities in Chicago has led to major political consequences. Despite community leaders, organizations and citizens demanding support for better schools, jobs, political leadership and even hospitals to address the root causes of violence in the city, President Trump continues to refer to the city as “a disaster” in order to justify sending federal militarize police which will only led to more state sanctioned murders of Black people, people of color and low-income folks. Again,
this is a narrative that is unique to Black residents of Chicago. Popular shows like Joe Swanberg’s Netflix show, *Easy*, tells a much different story about Chicago where the most egregious crime that takes place is a serial Amazon package thief that plagues the neighborhood in an episode in Season Two.

Additionally, when communities of color use culture to talk about politics, we tend to present two realities, neither of which completely rely on “apathy.” The first reality relies on the false dilemma that we should vote because someone died for communities of color to do so as highlighted in Sean “Diddy” Combs’ 2004 youth civic engagement campaign “Vote or Die!” The second reality is that voting is a complete waste of time because our inclusion in politics tends to stop at the voting booth. This reality is often painted as youth and Black voting apathy when, in fact, it is a realistic well-informed decision based in the historic thought leadership of Black civil rights thinkers like Marcus Garvey and ex-pats like Assata Shakur. In 2016, even Sean “Diddy” Combs acknowledge the failure of the democratic voting process for young communities of color. He said,

“See the things that’s tricky about politics is there’s so much bullshit with it. We started Vote or Die and ... and from the community we’re in, we’re not with hearing too much of the bullshit. So that’s why we get disenfranchised, [we’re] disconnected because nothing that they’re saying actually relates to us.”

This also a themed amplified throughout hip hop music in the hands of Black artists as well. Music about “voting” or the “Black vote” yield the following lyrics:

*The Black vote mean nathan, who you gonna elect/ Satan or Satan? In the hood nothing is changing/
We ain’t got no choice who to choose*

*American Way* by Nas Featuring Kelis, 2004

*All eyes be my witness when I speak what’s felt
Full house on my hands, the cards I was dealt
Three K’s, two A’s in AmeriKKKa
I’m just a Black spade spawned out the nebulla
And everything I do or say today is worthwhile
Will for sure inspire action in your first child, yead*

*Land of Free* by Joey Bada$$

*Let’s get it, what if they told you this music bogus?
The government run it, they controllin’ the culture
Would you believe that? If you read that?
Yeah, what if they told you the iPhone was tapped?*

*Gullible* by Cee Lo Green

It’s important to note that when gathering stories and information on who should be a central messenger in this developing campaign, Black women and femmes were constantly uplifted as cultural gatekeepers. Sadly, leadership and overall respect for this group is not reflected or treated with this same level of value in popular Trap and Hip Hop music. This is a nuance that we should constantly be aware of when using popular artist as cultural messengers for this work.

Lastly, stories about the Midwest are generally tied to hardworking white families as depicted in popular shows like *This Is Us* and *The Middle*. Despite Black and Brown families being being a part of the fabric of industries that made the Midwest thrive (auto, coal, factories, etc.), they not only lack political power in these regions but media representations of their impact as well. Again, this lack of Black Midwest representation was only recently challenged through the recent release of *Fences* directed by and starring Denzel Washington. The original
screenplay was written by the late August Wilson whose most historic work is a 10-cycle play about the Midwestern city Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

**The Igniting Power of Digital Media**
Communities of color want to see their reality reflected back to them in politics and in media. Creative culture content that is native to digital media platforms and content is shifting media at large by democratizing who has access to information and to create information. This is large part due smartphones being highly accessible to most communities of color. Unlike desktop, laptops and tablet computers, **Black and Hispanic folks own mobile devices at nearly the same rate as whites** according to the Pew Research Center. **Black and Latino communities are relying on their smartphones for health information, banking, educational content, job seeking** in addition to entertainment and social media platforms.

Digital media platforms and creatives who are launching and housing their work online are uniquely positioned to change what is considered “popular culture” while also politicizing our next voting generation towards a more transgressive political future that values the voices of young people and people of color as well as their leadership to change what democracy has been to what it can be. The democratization of digital information, for example, **VerySmartBrothas.com**, recently acquired by **TheRoot.com**, is one of the few platforms that is gaining national recognition while also telling Black community-driven stories about **Pittsburgh**.

**Where Are We Gathering Our News:**
It is clear that young Black folks and young people of color are not getting their news from traditional news media platforms. Again, this is not because these communities are apathetic towards politics and information. The news as explained on platforms like CNN and MSNBC is not explained well, lacks excitement and an entertainment value, chooses to be “tone deaf” rather than employ bias when needed, and is delivered without any inclusion of authentic multicultural vernacular traditions to speak to the audience it claims to have the desire to attract.

As **Instagram’s daily active users** continues to climb while **Facebook struggles to maintain** its initial popularity with young people in general and communities of color specifically, Black-focused entertainment and news sites are drastically out-performing traditional news sites.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>News Site</th>
<th>Instagram Following</th>
<th>Facebook Following</th>
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<td>World Star Hip Hop</td>
<td>14.7 million</td>
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<td>Baller Alert</td>
<td>4.4 million</td>
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**What’s Turning Us Out and Bringing Us Joy**
Given the data and the shifts we hope to make through using the Midwest Culture Lab as an intervention to engage and shape young people’s views on politics and leadership as represented in pop culture, it’s clear that
we need to bring together unsung content creators, creative influencers and social justice-minded organizers to elevate a new narrative on civic participation. By testing content specifically for and about the Midwest, in partnership with young creatives of color that can be distributed across popular social media platforms, we can start to create an echo chamber that tells the truth about our current political times while bringing together communities to build towards a new future.

Amber J. Phillips is an organizer, writer, digital strategist and multimedia creative. Amber combines her electoral organizing background with social media platforms as a launching pad to shift culture and conversations while moving people to take action. Amber’s writings on Black women at the intersections of politics, pop culture and the media have been published on Huffington Post, For Harriet and Rewire. She has been featured as a leading voice on Black feminism on The Breakfast Club, ESSENCE and as a regular contributing panelist on Roland Martin’s NewsOne Now. Amber co-hosts and produces the Black Joy Mixtape, a weekly news and politics podcast for and by Black women. Amber is an Ohioan currently living in Washington, DC.
Appendix F: About

The Midwest Culture Lab is a 2018 experiment to increase and deepen civic engagement by integrating cultural organizing and story-driven content strategy with grassroots, youth-led organizing. It is a nonpartisan, nonprofit project of the Alliance for Youth Organizing, in partnership with Chicago Votes, Ohio Student Association and We The People (Michigan).

About the Organizations

**Alliance for Youth Organizing**
The Alliance envisions a new era of locally-led democracy with inclusive processes and equitable outcomes, where lots of young people engage in democracy as voters, organizers, and leaders, making the world more just, sustainable, and more awesome. The Alliance plays a key role in convening and supporting a network that is stronger together than any of our organizations could be on their own. Our expanded work is to serve as a hub for youth organizing across the country, which we do through four core strategies: strengthening capacity; achieving scale and impact; connecting national resources; and, incubating like-minded, local organizations in order to grow and diversify our network.

**Chicago Votes**
Chicago Votes is a non-partisan, non-profit organization building a more inclusive democracy by putting power in the hands of young Chicagoans. We’re engaging and developing a new generation of leaders by opening the doors of government and politics to young people from all corners of the city. We’re changing laws to make Chicago and Illinois a better place to be young, and in the process we’re making democracy FUN.

**Ohio Student Association**
Formed in 2012, Ohio Student Association (OSA) is a statewide organization led by young people. OSA engages in values-based issue & electoral organizing, nonviolent direct action, advocacy for progressive public policy, and leadership development. On campuses and communities across Ohio, we organize young people to build independent political power. We are young people breaking cultural, economic and political chains by collectively swinging back against systems of oppression. We do this through grassroots organizing, direct action, and leadership development. We are a vehicle for people who believe another world is possible.

**We The People – Michigan**
We The People is a project working to build multi-racial, working class alliances statewide to build a proactive progressive agenda working collaboratively with values aligned organizations and community leaders across the state of Michigan. We are focused on (1) building rigorous and disciplined organizing capacity in communities across the state, (2) developing a strong proactive narrative and people’s agenda rooted in communities and (3) uniting Michiganders across identities and geographies engaging people to build toward economic and racial justice.
About the Team

Sarah Audelo, Executive Director, Alliance for Youth Organizing
Sarah Audelo is the Executive Director of the Alliance for Youth Action, the nation’s largest young people’s grassroots organizing network in the country. Her passion is centering and uplifting young people, and particularly young people of color, in progressive movements and institutions. She has been an organizer, advocate, and policy wonk for progressive youth organizations, working on economic justice, reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, civic engagement, and more. After graduating from Georgetown University with a Bachelor of Science in Foreign Service, Sarah was a special education teacher with Teach for America in the Rio Grande Valley. She is originally from Bakersfield, California and lives in Washington, DC.

Kirk Cheyfitz, Partner, A More Perfect Story
Founder of Story Worldwide, the path-breaking content advertising agency, Kirk is a recognized pioneer in non-traditional advertising and content marketing, an award-winning journalist, author of business and children’s books, speaker and entrepreneur. He was a Pulitzer finalist for investigative reporting at the Detroit Free Press and a finalist for the National Magazine Award, among many national and regional journalism honors. A former senior executive at McCann Worldgroup before starting his own agency, he has created work for global clients, including Unilever, General Mills, Lexus Division of Toyota, Google, Bank of America and many more. He is a long-time member of the Global Advisory Board of the Wharton School’s Future of Advertising Program.

Renee Fazzari
Renee Fazzari is a consultant working with networks of funders and donors to bring a culture of learning, innovation, and responsiveness to philanthropy. Previously, as a Program Officer at the General Service Foundation, she managed a grantmaking program to advance civic engagement, leadership development, and justice in Colorado. She served the boards of State Voices and the Funders Committee for Civic Participation, developing extensive expertise in civic and voter engagement and always seeking better ways to collectively resource grassroots, frontline organizations.

Prentiss Haney, Executive Director, Ohio Student Association
Prentiss Haney is the Executive Director of the Ohio Student Association (OSA), a multiracial student power organization building a political and cultural bloc of young people to move a progressive public policy agenda. OSA aims to transform youth culture and climate in Ohio to one of equity and justice - where every young person is valued, living in the inherent dignity they deserve and has a fair shot at a thriving economy, quality education, and community free from police violence. Prentiss started organizing with Organizing for America, registering students and building campus teams across the state. He then joined OSA to continue building student power, serving in various capacities from training coordinator to regional team lead, communication director and more. Prentiss has trained hundreds of young leaders in grassroots organizing and led racial justice and higher education campaigns across the state.
Liz Manne, Partner, A More Perfect Story
Bridging the worlds of entertainment, marketing and social change, Liz Manne is a strategist dedicated to supporting nonprofit organizations and progressive campaigns. Liz is the former ED of FilmAid, and as a senior media industry professional (HBO Films, SundanceTV, Fine Line Features), she helped shepherd more than 100 award-winning films to market. An expert in cultural strategy for social change, Liz conceptualized and served as editorial director of #PopJustice: Social Justice and the Promise of Pop Culture Strategies. She is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and served on President Obama’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. Raised in California and residing in New York City, her people hail from St. Paul, Minnesota and New York. She spent the 1980s at First Avenue, Minneapolis’ downtown danceteria.

Rebecca Petzel, Emergence Collective
Rebecca is a founding member of the emergence collective, focused on accelerating social change through transforming the way we work together. She’s been called a collaboration ninja, a strategist, a facilitator, a designer, an organizational development consultant, an organizer, and a web geek amongst other things. Since writing a thesis on harnessing collective intelligence for the social sector through collaborative innovation networks, she’s called herself lucky to work with amazing networks of activists and funders on the frontlines of social change. Believing there’s real magic in the middle, she’s recently relocated back to Chicago after too many years away from the Midwest.

Amber J Phillips, Writer, Organizer, Creative and co-host, The Black Joy Mixtape
Amber J. Phillips is a writer, organizer, and creative. Amber combines her electoral organizing background with social media platforms as a launching pad to shift culture and conversations while moving people to take action. Amber’s writings on Black women at the intersections of politics, pop culture, and the media have been published on Huffington Post, For Harriet, and Rewire. She has been featured as a leading voice on Black feminism on The Breakfast Club, ESSENCE and as a regular contributing panelist on Roland Martin’s NewsOne Now. Amber co-hosts and produces the Black Joy Mixtape, a weekly news and politics podcast for and by Black women. Amber is an Ohioan currently living in Washington, DC.

Erin Potts, Partner, A More Perfect Story
Erin co-founded the Milarepa Fund and Tibetan Freedom Concerts with the Beastie Boys. She went on to establish and lead several nonprofits, including Revolutions Per Minute — a nonprofit agency she co-founded that supports over 1,300 musicians and comedians making change. Throughout her career, Erin has been a pioneer in the field of cultural strategies, worked with and organized over a thousand artists, and earned and raised over $20M for important causes. She is an independent consultant, and also co-founder of A More Perfect Story, Senior Fellow with the Pop Culture Collaborative and a Program Advisor to the Narrative Initiative.
Art Reyes, Executive Director, We The People (Michigan)
Art was born and raised in Flint, MI and hails from three generations of proud UAW members. He is the founding Executive Director of We The People, a statewide, multi-racial, working class organizing project. Before WTP, Art was the training director at the Center for Popular Democracy, where he led national training programs for organizers, lead staff, and executive directors. He spent much of 2016 working in Flint responding the water crisis and helped launch Flint Rising. Previously he led Michigan Voice, a statewide civic engagement organization. He has a BA from Michigan and MPP from Harvard where he taught a community organizing class with Marshall Ganz. He lives in Michigan with his wife Ashley and puppy Kona.

Matt Singer, Principal, Impactual
An organizer, writer, strategist, and three-time college dropout, Matt Singer is the founder of National Voter Registration Day, Forward Montana, and the Alliance for Youth Action. He’s supported efforts by young organizers and activists to mobilize millions of young voters and pass landmark public policy for voting rights, clean energy, police accountability, and more. He now is a partner at Impactual, a small consulting firm, where he advises campaigns, nonprofits, philanthropists, and companies on social impact strategies. Although he still strongly identifies with his home state of Montana, Matt is now based in Denver, CO.

Stevie Valles, Executive Director, Chicago Votes
Stevie grew up in Cincinnati and now lives Chicago. A proud graduate of Oakwood University with a Bachelors in Social Work, Stevie has committed his entire career to making sure all people have a voice. Prior to becoming the ED of Chicago Votes he was the National Campaigns Director for the Alliance for Youth Action (formerly the Bus Federation). In addition to this experience he has worked in the United States Senate, the Texas Legislature and on a slew of campaigns ranging from presidential, gubernatorial, and affordable housing. Stevie loves music, dogs, writing, singing, and most of all playing basketball.