Affirmative Futures

Narrative Strategy & Message Guide

Technology should be a tool that supports and affirms our individual and collective well-being, but as we've seen in areas throughout our society, its continuous, rapid and boundless expansion has led to real-world disruptions and the proliferation of deeply systemic harms. And now, we've reached another pivotal point in technological advancement that warrants reflection and preventative action to ensure humanity is at the forefront of technology design, deployment and governance.

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools has created uncertainty about our futures. The novelty and hype surrounding AI has captured our collective attention – dominating headlines, ad campaigns, legislative action and has facilitated increased integration of these tools across varying areas of our lives. Fueled by capitalistic incentives and corporate competition, technology corporations and the billionaires backing them are working to aggressively advance these tools — marketing their potential while simultaneously selling us a bleak, predetermined future that doesn't affirm our humanity.

This future is not inevitable. We don't have to accept the dystopian, frictionless technology future that billionaires who are solely incentivized by profit are trying to force on us. Leaders across the field of public interest technology have worked for years to uncover existing issues of algorithmic bias and discrimination, while offering solutions to ensure technology is created with potential harms in mind. As we seek a technology future that truly supports our well-being and collective humanity, the field is positioned to continue providing critical inquiry to these tools and potential misuses, while building an affirmative narrative for our shared future.

This narrative strategy and message guide is designed to support technology justice advocates and movement partners in their efforts to advance a new narrative that centers an affirmative vision for our technology futures.

The development of this narrative strategy has been a process of surfacing and clarifying narrative threads with leaders in the field, including:

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Why this Narrative Approach?

This narrative framework provides a versatile approach for evaluating and communicating the impact of AI on various levels – from individual experiences to societal dynamics and future aspirations. For the individual, it offers a relatable and powerful entry point to see through the complexities and politics that underscore our technological ecosystem. For groups, it offers ways to harmonize with one another and sing from the same songbook at different registers.

How can we create an affirming tech future when so much of our technology production is anchored in exploitative, racist or classist policy and practice?

Our narrative form is a two-part way of thinking. It is not only a messaging frame or story template. It is a strategic orientation grounded in three goals:

1. **Create new surface area and ways to question power**
2. **Put tech in the right context**
3. **Offer new ways of seeing the world**

For advocates and movement leaders using this guide, our hope is that it sparks ideas for new strategies, helps reclaim our right to talk about tech on our terms and provides an entry point for people that matters to them.
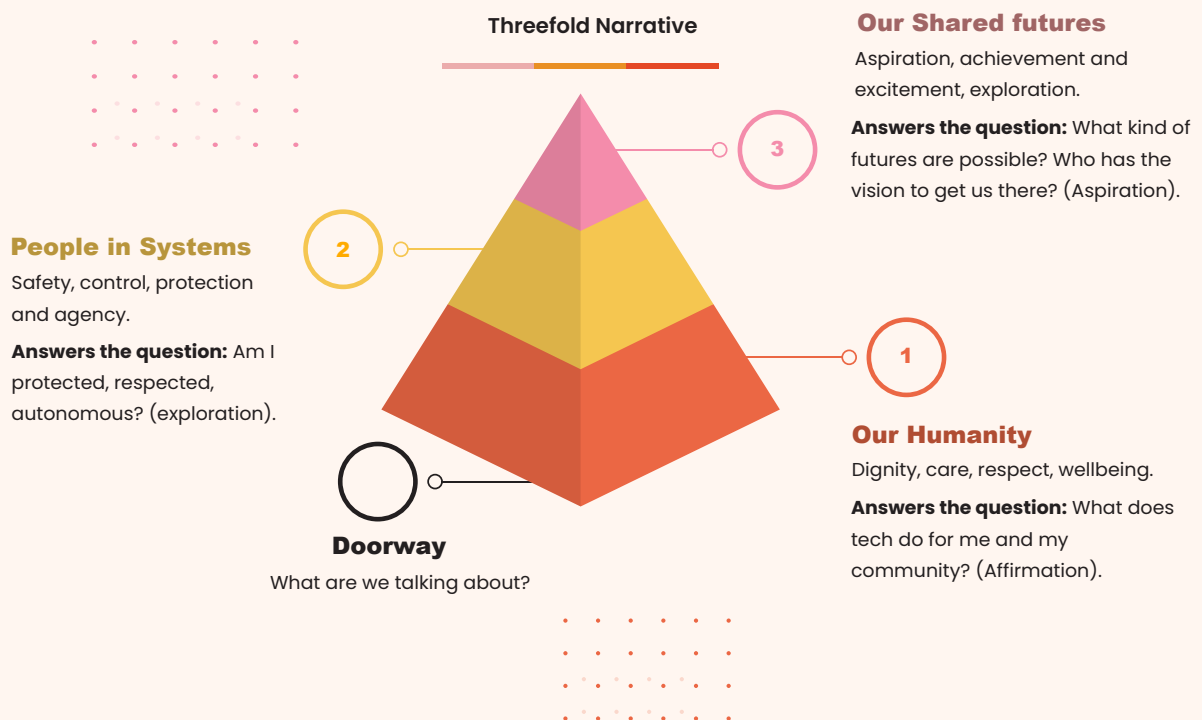
Rules of Narrative

1. **Narratives benefit from countervailing forces of great power against which to grow.**
2. **We do not need to give space to opposing narratives** (but sometimes we must talk about opposition in order to align on strategy).
3. **Narratives live in stories, frameworks, messaging and strategies.**
4. **Narratives tap into broad accords and values. They don't come from nowhere.**

Narrative change requires an activation strategy designed to foster connection, resonance and longevity across varying audiences. This is why the narrative starts with expressions of humanity and personhood, because both levels are fundamental to understanding the core values of people and the aspirations individuals have for themselves and collective society. Doorways are the power analysis tool for identifying key audiences to engage, messages and stories that will garner their attention, and activities or tactics that will be most effective in reaching them.

Narrative Framework

Threefold Narrative

Our Shared futures

Aspiration, achievement and excitement, exploration.

Answers the question: What kind of futures are possible? Who has the vision to get us there? (Aspiration).

3

People in Systems

Safety, control, protection and agency.

Answers the question: Am I protected, respected, autonomous? (exploration).

2

1

Our Humanity

Dignity, care, respect, wellbeing.

Answers the question: What does tech do for me and my community? (Affirmation).

Doorway

What are we talking about?

Humanity

By humanity, we mean what it means to be human, what it means to be in community and connection with one another.

Current uses of AI are challenging our humanity at the basic level by facilitating the breaking and weakening of human bonds, the displacement of accountability, and the devaluation of our human labor and cultural production. This level is paradigmatic and prelegal, and it offers an articulation of what people are feeling. Whether humanity is respected and affirmed is something people feel in their interactions with technology, sometimes in unexpected ways.

This expression of the narrative incorporates both general principles and personal experiences. It encourages individuals to assess how technology positively or negatively impacts their personal lives and values — such as **human worth, dignity** and the **ability to thrive** — and whether certain tools or applications of technology support and affirm their **individual well-being and goals**.

People In Systems

Talking about people in systems allows us to question how power is used and put power to work for us.

By people in systems, we mean respect for our personhood in the context of **political, legal and technical** systems. This can be secured through universal human rights, civil rights, privacy, etc. But as feminist and critical race scholars warn, legal, political and technical theories often fail to affirm the personhood of marginalized groups by refusing to engage with and make meaningful change to rectify the systemic depredations that are racism, classism and misogyny. **Our narrative seeks to center personhood and full respect for all.**

Moving beyond our individual experiences with technology, this expression allows the narrative to extend to the collective level — encompassing people, communities and societal systems. It focuses on where and how technology is used and the effect it has on groups of people through social and political dynamics, allowing for the examination of technology's broader impacts on our **civil rights** and **liberties, justice, equality** and **well-being**. It is rooted in notions borrowed from moral and political philosophy that have been used as the basis of law and social consensus-making in the U.S.

Shared Futures

We are building toward a multiplicity of complex, nuanced and rich shared futures that distribute power instead of hoarding it.

Technology should support radical imagining and connection. But what does the affirmative future hold? And whom should we follow? Who are the bearers of that vision? We have answers to these questions. Our shared future, which will grow out of humanity, is full respect for personhood and is exciting and personally empowering. Technology should be a tool for justice that affirms creativity and human endeavor and that is not captured by power.

Emphasizing both abstract visions and concrete aspirations, this expression invites individuals and communities to envision a future where technology supports their humanity and well-being. It provides space for the field to emerge as leaders holding the vision and expertise to move us toward a future that is **affirming** and **exciting.** This level taps into people's urge to think boldly and creatively about what might be and to play a role in shaping their individual and our collective future. As the shine continues to come off of much hyped AI tools and as the devastating human and environmental consequences loom larger, people will start looking for a way out of this imaginary dead-end. Our shared futures are built on the understanding that they will be **complex, nuanced and rich** in ways we can't yet even imagine.
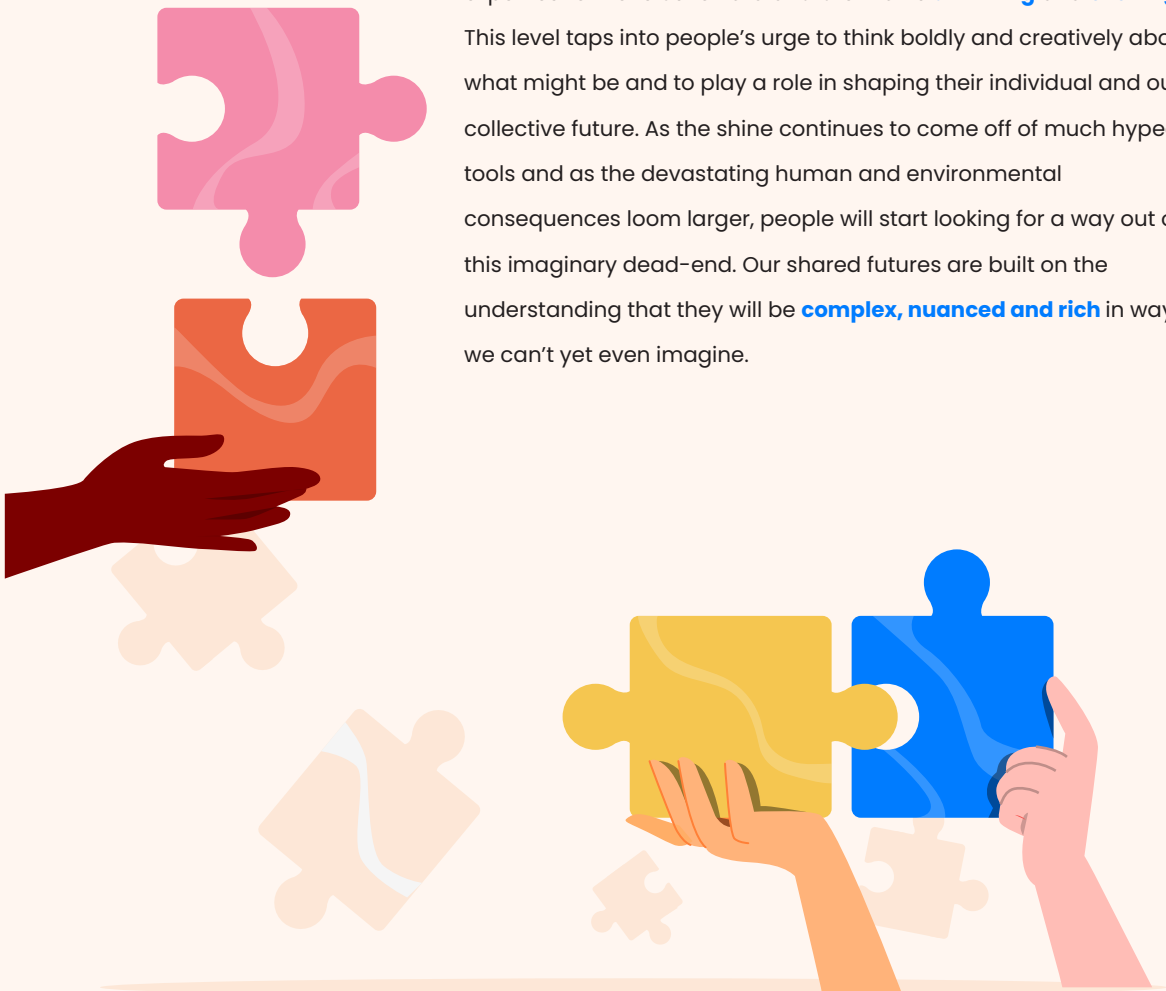
How We Activate the Narrative:
## Doorways & Pathways

As pervasive as technology is, most people inside and outside the field of critical inquiry don't think about it abstractly. They encounter specific, concrete instances and issues that relate to the technology challenges we want to overcome. It is for this reason that the widespread promotion of ChatGPT and image generators has allowed people to see the implications more clearly than at any point before — it put a new tool in people's hands. This is an example of a doorway into the conversation. In this section, we identify several narrative doorways through which we can bring our views into prominent aspects of people's lives and our social fabric (community, policy, family, education, etc.).

The narrative form gives us a clear messaging structure, both to envision new ways of thinking, creating and engaging with technology, as well as responsive messaging opportunities that pop up every day. **The structure allows us to:**

Engage with people through the right context by giving them an entry point (doorway) that matters to them.

Sets us on firmer footing that allows us to talk about what we want and need, not let the opposition drive the conversation.
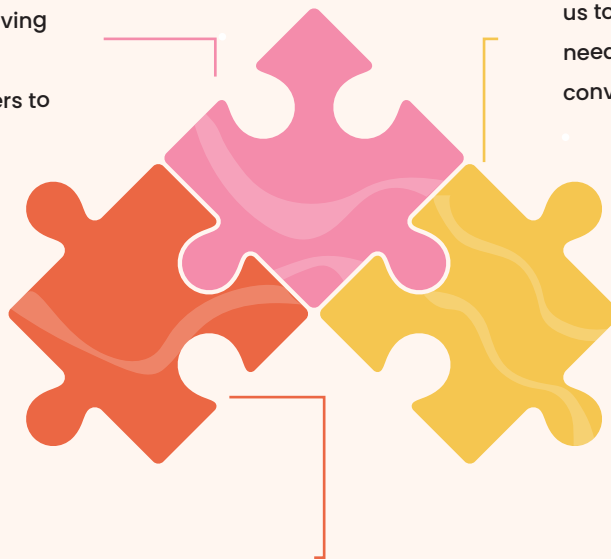
Creates headroom for grounded imagination by giving us space to imagine a future where technology serves our needs, not the other way around.

Doorways

Doorways are opportunities for **narrative intervention**. They're emotive issues and concepts that capture people's attention. Doorways are loosely defined, but they make intuitive sense and are naturally the subject of interest and media coverage, and they give us entry into spaces of cultural, political or economic influence. For this narrative to take root, we must focus on proactively identifying and engaging audiences through these doorways of opportunity. This will give our field the chance to illuminate pathways that lead to an affirmative shared technology future. These are largely negative entry points, but they provide ample space for the narrative to grow, evolve and lead us to positive pathways for our shared futures. We also note what sites of social, economic and cultural influence — **media, entertainment, education, family, religion, business** and **government** — they give us access to.

Pathways

Leveraging entry points that doorways provide, pathways are broad solutions shared to disrupt the dominant narrative and help audiences understand that an alternative — and affirming — technology future is possible. It is important that pathways name the systems at play. The system's role in facilitating harm while offering solutions that place responsibility back on those systems rather than on individuals. And for affirmative visions, the system's intended purpose and limitations should be clearly articulated. Pathways are intentionally broad, because they enable partners across the field to include specific solutions that are authentic to their individual values and priorities. Below are a set of fieldwide principles that ultimately reflect pathways for the future.

Technology must be for collective well-being. Our technology ecosystem is inherently extractive. The people, systems and corporations responsible for developing, deploying and governing technology are incentivized by profit. This results in technology that doesn't reflect or address everyone's needs and interests yet is continuously forced upon all people. When technology is created for the purpose of supporting everyone's well-being and overall humanity, those responsible for making sure it works for everyone will be accountable to those affected by technology — rather than those who profit from it.

Technology must start with people. Technology can only work for everyone if all are included in its development, deployment and governance. People and communities have to be considered from the start of technology design and development, and they must have active ownership in its application and governance.

Technology development should have smart limitations. AI and technology broadly are deeply informed by a colonial narrative of endless scale in terms of resources available, technical capabilities and potential money value. Both of these are spurious and deeply harmful to the majority of people. We must focus on concepts of enough, sustainability and regenerative growth.

Narrative in Action:
Message Framework

Shifting Big Tech's narrative about our technology futures requires seeding a new narrative – **one that centers the needs and aspirations of people.** Our work is to ensure people don't linger on the threshold of AI and tech harms but instead step over on the path toward an affirming future. This messaging framework is a tool for use when developing and sharing messages that invite people to explore what an affirmative technology future can and should look like. It will also enable advocates to activate this narrative with audiences in varying formats or forums.

While you do not need to follow the format in exact order, it's important to note that your messages should always start with what people want and need for themselves and their communities **(affirm)** and your message reflecting a possible future **(pathway)** should connect back to the needs and desires of your audience.

The Doorway:
Opportunities for narrative intervention

Using this strategic messaging framework, advocates can identify the right entry point for engaging specific audiences and then help them walk through the doorway to understand your perspective on the issue and what you want to do about it. The doorway is about connecting to people's individual lived experience with technology, and using that opportunity to engage with them to envision a better way forward.

The doorway can be rooted in little (such as love of live music) and big (such as bodily autonomy) values that people already hold. Below are a set of example messages rooted in doorways that are already or continuously top of mind for people.

How Our Format Works

- **What we need/want as humans:** First, we **affirm** our human needs and desires and use that to clarify what we want.

- **What futures are unlocked:** Then we invite people to **aspire** to a greater and more full expression of our humanity and make clear the role that technology **may** play.

- **What our systems can offer**: We then explore the systems (technical, political, legal etc.) that we want to activate to better support our goals.

- **Pathway toward shared futures:** Finally, we connect and engage them by offering ways to adapt, collaborate and **envision** a shared future rooted in people's aspirations. **Please note:** This portion of the message framework is intentionally left open-ended, so that advocates can include their own call to action or solution for the future.

We want to be safe and free... not surveilled.

For too long, solutions for public safety have been confined to the status quo of policing, criminalization and incarceration. We know the harms of this approach fall unequally on Black and brown communities already marginalized. Law enforcement agencies are using AI and algorithms with this same framing in mind, imputing the same biases and causing the same harms.

Affirm	We should be able to speak freely and take a stand for what we believe in without risking our safety.
Explore	But if governments and Big Tech, instead of people, are the only ones who have a say in what technologies are developed and how they are used, we can't build safe and caring communities.
Aspire	When we have a meaningful say in how tech is designed, we can use it to build stronger communities and speak truth to
Shared Futures (Pathway)	**[Call to action]**

We want to feel connected and seen... not isolated and lonely.

The youth mental health crisis is perpetuated in large part by irresponsible, profit-driven actions of social media companies and the algorithms powering their platforms. AI has supercharged this trend with more false and inflammatory information and more exploitative and more personally harmful content. As young people, and their families, continue to make their voices heard in a hostile online environment, there is an opportunity to stand in solidarity with those who are demanding change and a brighter future by bringing the creative and intellectual weight of leading academics, movement leaders and advocates into the conversation.

Affirm	Regardless of our age, we all want to feel seen and cared for in our connections with others, both off- and online.
Explore	Instead of helping us build rich, meaningful connections with others, social media platforms are creating an epidemic of loneliness, often siloing us from our communities and making us passive consumers online.
Aspire	At their best, social media platforms can help us build a safe and affirming community outside our immediate geographic location, unlock our creativity, bring forth new economic opportunities and provide spaces for us all to speak truth to power. We have the power to design and create social media platforms that allow us to better understand ourselves and those around us on our terms, not those set by Big Tech's profit margins.
Shared Futures (Pathway)	[Call to action]

We want to be educated... not profiled.

Through the pandemic, parents and students gained a much greater understanding of the state of surveillance in schools. The integration of AI-powered surveillance technology for online test proctoring has already led to wrongful punishment and criminalization of students, particularly Black and brown students and students with disabilities. Now the emergence of generative AI tools, and especially the ability to generate plausible-sounding words at scale, has led to a scramble for more (ineffective) tech tools to address the threat of plagiarism.

Affirm	Every one of us deserves quality education. Fair and equitable access to opportunity starts with fair access to education.
Explore	Facial recognition and anti-cheating tools that surveil and punish students, generative AI that prioritizes sounding right over being right and similar tools are only going to close off opportunity and reduce the quality of education.
Aspire	We should strive for a future where technology, when used, helps students learn better, teachers teach better and allows families to more easily get their children quality education.
Shared Futures (Pathway)	**[Call to action]**

We want technology to make our jobs easier... not eliminate our role in the workplace or devalue human labor.

During the past year, we have seen how labor leaders are powerfully positioned to discuss a human forward vision of technology. From the Writer Guild's signal victory around the use of generative AI to the AFL-CIO's powerful storytelling at the AI Insights fora, labor has a vision for how technology can benefit people. Partnerships and strategic collaboration with these resurgent efforts is a chance to fertilize the narrative in places where it has already sprouted and turn this into a meat-and-potatoes issue for millions.

Affirm	Workers are, and always have been, the backbone of our economy. Regardless of an individual's role, everyone wants respect and stability at work.
Explore	Technology can be used to support workers, not replace them. If we only focus on innovation, we miss out on opportunities to use what we have right now to make people's lives easier – both on the job and at home with their families.
Aspire	When technology is developed and deployed with what people want and need in mind, it can be used to make our jobs easier, safer and allow us more time to rest, explore our personal passions and spend more time with our loved ones.
Shared Futures (Pathway)	**[Call to action]**

Narrative Messaging Guidance

Lead with shared values to drive a narrative about abundance and what is possible, rather than scarcity. As many have noted, these values are first and foremost human, rather than technological or economic. Some values we have observed gaining traction, and specific examples of their expression, are below.

- **Civil rights and justice: Progress should bring greater safety, economic opportunity, and convenience to everyone.** Why this works: brings into the frame a vision of technology working to improve people's lives, not profit a few.

- **Human connection: Creativity and innovation are part of what makes us human.** Why this works: brings people who create(d) AI into the frame and seed a reminder that people are and should be our priority.

- **Economic opportunity: New technologies should mean more opportunities and better lives for people.** Why this works: begins to set up a frame that emerging technology should make our lives better, not worse, and that AI without accountability and regulation will limit economic opportunity by concentrating wealth.

- **Hope: We all have dreams for our future.** Why this works: begins socializing what's possible, rather than reiterating an apocalyptic frame related to AI. Brings into the frame that AI does have serious implications for our shared future, and establishes for audiences a vision for a better future, not worse.

Do not repeat the opposition's message. When people hear a phrase or message, it sticks with them, regardless of follow-up debunking the message. Save space to share your own important narrative.

Avoid phrases such as:

- "This isn't about stopping out-of-control robots"

- "While innovation is important, we need to make sure…"

- Emphasize that generative AI is not sentient while not using the word sentient. This can mean using language such as "trained" "designed" "written with code to ensure…"

- Emphasize process over hypothetical outputs to bring the design of AI into the conversation. It benefits Big Tech to keep AI design in a black box — it means that audiences have little imagination on how to regulate or change it.

Be careful not to amplify Big Tech's frame. Be mindful of the narratives that serve Big Tech in skirting accountability, which include:

- "Tech has the power to save or doom us all." The narratives that tech is either a tool for destruction (think: sentient robots or existential risk) or the key to saving humanity (think: 'code to end hunger' type hackathons) both play into a notion that technology and new development are inevitable, rather than planned for the wealth creation of a few.

- "Invention and entrepreneurship are the heart of our country. We can't regulate creation."

- "If we don't own the future, China will."

Name big tech's motivations to protect their profits by evading responsibility for the algorithms that increase their profits. Tech and social networking companies would have us believe that AI applications are complex or challenging beyond what's feasible to regulate. This only serves their interests. This is about money, pure and simple.

Make the problem align with the solution. It's important that you point to a problem that is related to the solution you're proposing. For example, if the problem you name is about the harms of generative AI, that AI is growing rapidly, or that AI is going to "replace people's jobs", the specific actors you are naming as responsible for this problem are inherently the people who are using ChatGPT, or worse, generative AI itself, reinforcing the false narrative that this is a fight to be won or lost against computers and technology itself.

- The solution you are driving toward and the accountability you're holding is not with generative AI itself, it's with the humans behind it, and so you need to name Big Tech as the party responsible for the problem. Otherwise, your proposed solution leaves loopholes for tech companies to skirt accountability or make it a moral debate about regulating invention.

- Circumvent this by explicitly naming Big Tech's profit motivation. The issue is that Big Tech is profiting off of algorithms as a means of driving more engagement, and ultimately, more profit with even less accountability. That way, the solution you propose for regulation of any kind matches the frame of the problem. **The problems being:**
    - That secrecy around algorithms and the black box of tech companies' operations shield companies from regulation.
    - Algorithms "absorb" accountability meaning tech companies get off scot-free.
    - That tech companies profit off user attention and develop tools to garner site visits and eyes, rolling technologies out in ways that cause harm to people today.
    - By focusing us on the comically long term, tech companies are hoping to avoid real accountability for the harm being done now.
    - That our tech economy is fundamentally anti-innovation. We know that competition is the key to innovation, but right now the threat to future innovation is big tech's monopoly power, not foreign nations or regulation.

- The hardware that powers these models takes up huge amounts of raw materials including silicon, energy and water. As temperatures rise and droughts become more common, we need to ask whether new chatbots are worth the resources that could be spent on people.
- There are effective ways to regulate AI. The issues of regulating AI and tech are no more complex than medical device and drug approval, free speech or corporate competition. In fact, the issues are deeply interrelated, and we have strong regulations for them.

Use metaphors and social math to make your narrative stick. Metaphors such as generative AI as a magician's faulty magic trick help to undermine opposition narratives of AI being catastrophic or something that will save the world. Metaphors that bring the process of generative AI into the frame, such as a magic trick with a focus on the magician (Big Tech) dispel audience tensions that audiences may not know enough about generative AI to consider calling for regulation around it.

- Social math is the concept of breaking facts and statistics into relative terms: comparing data to known entities. When sharing information about the scale or reach of generative AI, be sure to put the numbers of information in context. Examples of social math include:
  - The tobacco industry spends more money promoting smoking in a week than the entire federal government spends on preventing smoking in a year.
  - One less coal plant is like cutting 40% of Washington's vehicle emissions. That amounts to all the cars and trucks in Seattle, Tacoma, and Spokane plus the 25 next-largest cities in the state, combined.
- Metaphor
  - **The AI Magic Trick:** Big Tech is using a range of tricks to try and make these chatbots feel like they're "thinking." The question and answer format, text appearing to be typed out and conversational tone are all window dressing. This sleight of hand is deliberate, we shouldn't buy the narrative. Smoke and mirrors don't make for real magic.

Resources and Frameworks

This narrative strategy and framework for building an affirmative vision for our tech futures seeks to honor and distill the richness of these efforts. Our process involved engaging with resources, frameworks and movements including but not limited to:

- **Algorithms of Oppression**.
- **Blueprint for an AI bill of Rights and EO on AI**.
- **Consentful Tech**.
- **DAIR's Possible Futures Series**.
- **Gender Shades**.
- **Liberatory Tech (Ida B. Wells)**.
- **Ludditism**.
- **Our Data Bodies**.

Narrative Worksheet

Narrative Power Analysis

What is the mission of your organization?

What is the dominant narrative about the issue you are trying to address? How does this narrative either support or work against the future you are trying to build?

What needs to change for you to achieve this future?

☐ Laws and policies
☐ Media practices
☐ Cultural values
☐ Norms and rules
☐ Beliefs
☐ Behaviors
☐ Systems
☐ Others _____

Describe how they need to change.

What values, feelings and beliefs does this narrative tap into?

How is this narrative supported by news media, pop culture entertainment, video games, sports, corporate branding or cultural values?

Shifting the Narrative

Doorway: What is the thing that's top of mind? What lived experience are you trying to tap into? Don't overthink it. (generative AI and devaluation of labor, automated discrimination, warehouse surveillance and its effect on workers, etc.)

Affirm: In this context, what is technology doing for you and/or your community? What should tech do for you and your community? (safety and freedom, human worth, freedom to thrive, community and connection)

Explore: How could technology and related systems (education, legal, political, community, technological) affirm or hinder your ability to achieve your goals? Does technology have a role to play here or not?

Aspire: Use the latter two to explore a possible future that is rich, nuanced and complex. What does a greater expression of humanity look like? Who (specifically) is involved in creating that? Talk about the people – artists, elders, teachers, workers, etc.

Pathway: What step will help you build toward this future? What needs to be learned or unlearned? Who can you collaborate with to make your vision a reality?