



POSITIVE NARRATIVES

Creating positive narratives as means of advocacy

The main objective of this activity is to better understand the narratives our public is exposed to and to generate different narratives which allow for changing the mindset of the target audience and to advocate for a particular cause.

This activity can be put into practice with **participants of any age group**; it helps if the age gaps are not too big and if participants have similar interest in mind, but experience has shown that, no matter the group, a unifying interest will emerge after discussions. As for the **materials needed**, the activity can be organized with just a couple of sheets of paper and writing tools as well as with a presentation, online input by participants and other tools. It focuses more on fostering discussion and requires minimal materials. The trainer can explain all tasks orally if a projector or printed handouts are not available.

Groups can vary from as little as three participants to 8-10 people, but the optimal number seems to be around 5. If there is a larger group, participants can be split into teams of 4-6 people for best results, doing the discussing in parallel and presenting their results to one another.

The **time format** is lenient, but rather dependent on the number of participants. The presentation of the concept and the task at hand requires at least 30 minutes, with 60 minutes minimum for discussions and resolution and at least 10 minutes per group for presentation and feedback. If more time is available, is for the best, as it allows participants to focus more and to better define their ideas and solutions. This exercise can take up to a day's worth of training (three 90 minute sessions with breaks) and it might be the optimal format it it's meant to be used to yield actual results; if it's presented as an exercise, it can take the minimum amount of time previously indicated.

Through this exercise, we wish to come up with **another way of understanding advocacy**, at least on a basic level. While methods vary on a case by case scenario and even the issues themselves are better suited for different approaches, the basic skills needed are always to correctly assess the issues at hand, to choose one main issue the group feels they can tackle and to devise a strategy, based on their target audience, in order to advocate for their cause. This activity is complementary to other exercises and presentations, such as presenting the tools citizens have at their disposal to get involved in policy making, means of protesting and other communication- and strategy-focused trainings.

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Description, methods and process

The trainer starts by discussing a bit on **what narratives are and how they can influence us**. By asking the group if they can identify certain narratives, the trainer can better understand the group's perception on the matter. Afterwards, a discussion on narratives ensues – the trainer explains that narratives are, at their core, neutral, but practice has proven to us that people can use them to sway others' opinions. In this case, a small talking point about fake news can be fostered, with accessible and relevant examples.

Narratives are any sort of story-like elements we come across – think of a traditional fairytale from your childhood, how it uses certain techniques to get you hooked, how it follows a rather set course, with an initial situation that changes, how it culminates at one point and then there's a resolution; sometimes, there's talks of heroes or good people and their enemies. Stories are an integral part of our life and they appear everywhere, all the time. Think of a shampoo commercial: there's the initial situation (your matted, split-end hair), how it affects your life, then the heroic, problem-solving shampoo appears, you use it, your life changes and you live happily ever after. This is a narrative. Movies, conspiracy theories, pranks, all these are narratives, humans have a natural tendency to tell stories and to react to them, this is why they are such powerful tools.

In regards to conspiracy theories or false narratives, the trainer should also mention that, while factchecking is a noble process, it has its limitations and puts the people that do the heavy lifting (the ones that verify and expose false narratives) in a defensive position and always on step behind, with no control of the agenda. In other words, if you stick to factchecking, you are always dependent on what the others throw your way. By understanding the narratives at hand, one can not only harness the same power, but can set the agenda themselves and can even advocate for their point of view.

Afterwards, the trainer asks the participants to please discuss (in teams or as a whole, it depends of the number of participants and profile of the group – teams should not be larger than 6 people and they can be grouped by interest, age group or randomly) and **identify an issue that they find affects them and that they would like to change**. If the exercise is linked to a specific overarching theme, like students' rights, deficit of democracy, transnational issues youth face etc., the trainer can ask the participants to only look into this area of interest. If the exercise is part of a series of trainings that should deliver tangible solutions, the participants should be made aware that they have to pay extra attention and focus on real issues. Otherwise, the exercise works just as well (sometimes, even better) if the issues the participants pick are more humorous (like petitioning to bring back zeppelins). It all depends on the scope the trainers have in mind. There should be at least 10 minutes of discussions going on, with the trainer eavesdropping and intervening in order to make sure the participants follow instructions.



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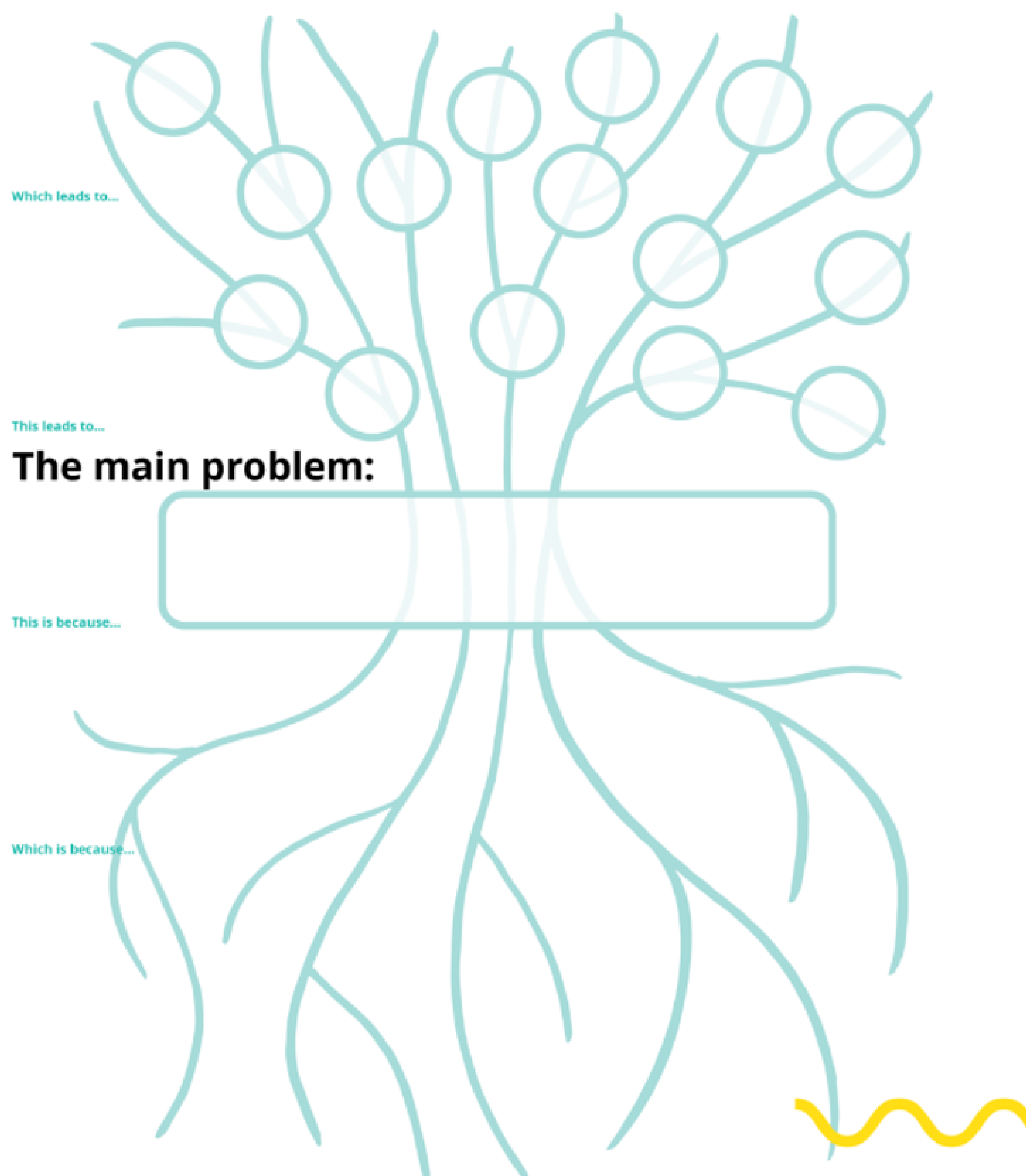


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After participants have their issues identified, the trainer brings up the so-called problem tree. This can be done via projecting the schematics, via handouts with the printed diagram or by just explaining how this works. At the center, we have the issue identified by participants, described with a phrase than answers the questions who?, what? when? where? (or at least all that apply); underneath, causes (these are bullet points that answer the “why?” question) and their follow-up effects. Corresponding to this, above the central issue, participants are supposed to list possible obstacles one might encounter when trying to solve the issue and linked solutions to each branch.



This is one template for the problem tree out of the many versions available online, a much more simpler version can be used to illustrate it, it can be drawn by the facilitator or participants using a sheet of paper with the problem in the center and two tiers of “branches” above and beneath it.



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This is a group effort and should be assigned at least 15 minutes, with the trainer dropping by each team and supervising participants don't get stuck along the way. When the time is up, teams should briefly present their work and then decide upon one of the branches – a cause, its effects, possible solutions and what can hinder the solution. If the time allows for it, a break should be scheduled afterwards.

The next step is to **further discuss the cause identified, this time bearing in mind a target audience**. If, for example, we are talking about civic involvement of youths, the cause is that they don't feel listened to and the solution being to create involvement groups on a small scale, like a university or a city, this is the point where the team should narrow down the age of their target audience (college age vs still in high-school vs fresh graduates), geographical factors (is this on a country-wide level? Is it an EU issue?) or other criteria (we only target capital cities). Remind the participants that, since they do not have access to a sociologist at this point, **it's best they pick a persona they are very familiar with** – themselves, their parents, their teachers.

After a consensus is reached, the next step requires the participants to **flesh out a member of their target audience**, in accordance to the previous discussion, by listing their age, their gender (if relevant), their interests and all other relevant criteria. This should take at least 10 minutes, but more time yields better results. The portrait should be complementary to the problem tree from earlier, just more targeted – if the tree, for example, lists the main issue of young people not voting and the branch chosen is “they don't feel listened to”, after this exercise the team should have reached a more detailed question, such as “why don't young students from X country feel they are not listened to, thus abstaining from voting?”.

The next step is to look deeper into what your persona thinks and **who influences them**. This is why it is important to know the chosen category of people quite well – the participants have to act as detectives and identify at least three influencers and three agreed realities linked to said influencers. For the aforementioned example, let's say they choose parents, politicians and peers; parents might dissuade their children from getting involved by their own attitudes, be it “voting never changes anything”, “you're too young to truly understand what you're voting for” and everything in between; politicians might only campaign for issues that are of ...



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... little interest to young people, such as pensions or taxation for big corporations; their peers might have the same “it doesn’t matter anyway” attitude or civic involvement might be perceived as “lame”. This step is crucial because it exposes the narratives the participants aim to fight against. In the same time, the participants should be asked to explore where do these messages reach the persona at hand, directly or indirectly – via social media, via traditional media, is it more of an urban myth?

After we have all this precious information at hand, the trainer should ask each team to **recap their findings** – who is their persona, what issue affects said persona, who contributes to shaping the persona’s perception of the issue and using which platforms and, last but not least, if the solutions initially identified on the problem tree still apply. If all is in order, the discourse is logical and there is at least one viable path to follow, we can move on to the last and most important part of the exercise – **fashioning our positive narrative meant to counter those associated with the identified issue.**

Persona Template

Name

Age

Profession

“ Customer quote ”

Needs, wants & expectations

Bio

Motivations & attitudes

Relevant jobs to be done

Frustrations

Channel or product preference

This is a template of a persona used for branding purposes by advertising agencies – you can see how similar to our goal it is and how it can serve as an inspiration for our exercise and how a simplified, on the spot, version can be drawn on sheets of paper for the participants to use.



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The trainer asks participants once again to focus on one branch – let’s say, with the example used previously, they decide to tackle politicians and their discourse. The question is – **what can one do** in order to bring relevant topics to the conversation, topics that will kindle the interest of young students and eventually get them interested in voting? Teams discuss strategies and, when consensus is reached once more, they should write the basic message for a future campaign. In this case, the message could be one of empowerment, aiming to encourage young students to make their issues loud and clear, and then to use the issues identified from students to force politicians to give relevant statements. This can be done as the teams see fit and with the limitations set by the trainer – if the end result is supposed to be an actual strategy, focus more on resources at hand; if it’s more of an exercise, focus on the message and encourage the participants to overlook most resource limitations. This is rather important and should be allowed to cover at least 20 minutes, with a generous 45 minutes at best. **The end product is the brief “elevator pitch”-style discourse the team will use to draw people to their imagined solution.**

The exercise ends with all teams presenting to one another how they reached their chosen persona, issue, and solution and with one or more members of each team acting out their pitch for the campaign as if they would be filming a spot for social media of approaching someone on the street.

All teams **receive feedback** from other participants and trainer(s). If there is a goal attached to the exercise, the participants archive and share their work. Similarly, they can be asked to continue working on the identified issue and persona by following the other leads at hand (in our example, we targeted the “politician discourse” branch, but peers and parents can receive the same treatment).





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Other remarks:

- The exercise can even be done online, with one moderator for each group, though engagement is a bit more difficult to reach.
- Materials can be provided, there can even be a form that would help participants throughout the exercise, but the main focus is discussion and exploration in teams, thus even blank sheets of paper/ flip-chart paper and writing tools do the trick.
- If the end goal is to devise a strategy, not just to teach participants what can be done it, at any point, they wish to do so, a short introduction in communication and campaigning should be a complementary training. Similarly, the trainers should go over the workshop notes, provide participants with a concise version of their chosen topics and present to them the tools they have at their disposal to follow up on the topic at hand.
- If a new trainer wishes to implement this model, they should first be familiar with the main concepts at hand, which are narratives, a bit on fake news, how to create a problem tree, what is a persona etc. Afterwards, they should try the exercise out with other trainers in order to familiarise themselves with the flow of the training.

Sources:

ToT by TechSoup Europe on Countering disinformation, adapted for the project's specifications.

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