“We deploy narrative strategies”: Mónica Roa, founder of Puentes, on shifting narratives, building movements, and knowing your audience.

Rollo Romig
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Rollo Romig: Could you start by introducing yourself and giving an overview of what your work has been?

Mónica Roa: My name is Mónica Roa. I'm Colombian. I used to do strategic litigation, and I [worked on] a constitutional case that opened the door for the liberalization of abortion. It used to be completely banned, and I got the constitutional court to allow it in several cases, including mental health. There were also a lot of cases where girls were raped and needed to end their pregnancy.

Because of that, I had a lot of security problems and eventually I had to leave Colombia, which is why I am now based in Spain. I was working at the time with Women's Link Worldwide. We were [working on] strategic litigation in different countries around the world. I left Women's Link in 2015 and then I worked as a consultant for a couple of years. Very importantly, during 2016—that was the infamous year of Trump and Brexit—in Colombia, we lost the peace plebiscite. And in a way, it was the year where many of us doing social change realized that we

were surprised, and therefore we did not know the societies that we wanted to change that much–otherwise we wouldn't have been surprised.

I did a couple of consultancies on that, trying to explain what was happening, giving some recommendations to donors. And then some of them gave me feedback saying that no one was doing what I was proposing, and that I should begin my own organization to implement some of those recommendations. So eventually I did, and I created Puentes. And it's been working since 2019.

At Puentes, what we do—we didn't use this language at the beginning, but we have realized with time that this is how [to describe] this type of work—we work to strengthen the narrative power of social movements in Latin America, and then in connection with the global majority. Even though we work in Latin America, we think of ourselves as a global actor and we're in connection and collaboration with other groups doing similar work.

Last year we held the first global conference on narrative power. We had it in Colombia. I think there is a lot about narrative change and around the reason why I started Puentes that can connect with the issue of child sexual abuse. Many of the groups that are instigating moral panic around sexual education, for example, or reproductive rights more generally, are the same that are attacking democracy. And for them, it's so easy to see [our] different social movements as one big movement that shares values and a different worldview than theirs. But it is so difficult for us to recognize ourselves as being part of the same movement.

For example, for the longest time, I would probably have not seen sexual violence against children as something that I worked on, even though the issues were clearly overlapping. And that there was another, a larger, "us" that we're still trying to build. And I think that can be one of the first important lessons. We have to be able to build a larger us and learn how to connect across movements, but also across geographies.

In Colombia the people that were against the peace plebiscite used the "gender ideology" narrative to scare people, and they counted the number of times where [the word] "gender" had been included in the peace agreements, and it turned out to be 144. And then they said, "This is proof. This is evidence that the gender ideology is encoded. They are going to try to turn your children gay if peace moves forward."

This narrative gained momentum maybe a month and a half before the referendum was actually held. And according to many analysts, it lost by a super narrow margin, 0.5% or less than 1% of

the vote. And because this was one of the last narratives that gave them momentum, people say that this is one of the reasons why we lost that referendum.

We have three strategies that we implement throughout all our work at Puentes. One is to inspire with hope. I think for many of us, ever since 2016, an increasing sense of dystopian future has been looming over us. [Then] join that with the traditional understanding of activism, which is that what we do is denounce injustices. We talk about what we do not like, because the world around us is awful, and it seems to be getting more awful. What many people have understood is that this creates an apocalyptic fatigue.

Originally we were thinking about apocalyptic fatigue for our audiences. They are tired, they feel powerless, or they're just too overwhelmed, and they just disconnect emotionally. Just hearing about, “Imagine how many children were raped, plus how many women were killed, plus Roe [v Wade] is being overturned, plus the climate crisis, plus Gaza, plus Ukraine, plus the list of injustices around the world just keep piling up one on top of the other.” People are just done, even those that care. We realized that the burnout was not just [among] the audiences, but the activists ourselves. It's like, “I cannot continue doing this work because I have mental health issues, and I just kind of keep going.”

Learning from neuroscientists like George Lakoff—I don't know if you're familiar with *Don’t Think of an Elephant!*---his point is that this is happening precisely because we have always focused on talking in that way. We're always saying, do not think of the elephant, the elephant being all the injustices that we are trying to fight. But we are very good at articulating everything that's wrong with the world. We're not very good at articulating our vision: What would the world look like if all our causes win? That's how we can get people to join us.

I don't think I have to elaborate much, because if you are in the US right now you're living exactly the point. For the longest time, we were trying to tell this to activists, and in many cases they're like, “[That’s] toxic positivism. How dare you say that we should be hopeful. Look at the way the world is, blah, blah, blah.” But I love having a real-time example that we can point to people, and the amount of energy that you can shift when you talk about what you're for, when you bring back joy, when you focus on celebrating the communities that get together to do the work that needs to be done in order to change the world and build that future that we want.

So that's strategy number one, just shifting change. I like to say that we're changing the DNA of activists. And I can imagine that there's a lot that can be done when it comes to sexual abuse of

children, because we're always talking about the horrible cases and how awful it is, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

Rollo Romig: But what's the positive destination?

Mónica Roa: Exactly. That's the challenge.

The second strategy that we use is connection. We promote connection first across movements, then across geographies, and then across audiences. Across movements, meaning that it should no longer be reproductive rights separate from gender justice, separate from children's rights, separate from LGBT, but rather recognizing that we're all part of the same movement. And that even though we have distinct agendas today, the future that we all dream of is very similar. So we should start creating common ground. We call it connective tissue across movements, by focusing on those values and that worldview that we all share. And it is connected to the point I was making before: what's that worldview, the positive [vision] of what would the world look like if we all win?

That means reaching across the aisle to other movements. I think in the past, there were many spaces of democracy and human rights where we were the only ones occupying those spaces. And the fight was, who gets the mic, who gets to speak the longest? So we're used to elbowing each other for a space, for visibility for our agendas. I think this is about overcoming that, understanding that there's a bigger picture in which we have to create a larger us.

Then connecting across geographies. This is very much informed by the experience I had when I was doing the consultancy after the experience in Colombia with the referendum. I attended a conference and there were people from Eastern Europe, what's called Eurasia, saying [that they'd dealt with] the "gender ideology" narrative. They said, "We lived it five years ago, and we have publications with lessons learned." I was like, wow. We had no idea. And when it hit us, we didn't know what it was. Part of it is that it's an empty signifier, so it's very difficult to grasp. It's more like a white sheet that people can project the goals that they want to see.

Rollo Romig: Partly because it's made up. It's invented.

Mónica Roa: Exactly. But it works so well.

I understood then that we do need to think of ourselves as a global movement. Maybe we have regional nodes, but we need to have enough connections to be in conversation and be able to learn from each other, and not have to reinvent the wheel every time.

On the other hand, I think [our opponents] are very good at working globally and creating blue books from all the lessons they've learned. And what worked here is very easily transplanted and adapted to other geographies. So certainly we need to improve that.

And then the last connection is with different audiences. We [believe] that for movements to be successful, we have to activate sympathizers, engage flexibles, and neutralize antagonists. Most people tend to think about audiences in a binary way: those with us, those against us, full stop. It's important to think of flexibles as a separate category. And it's important to consider them, even though we usually don't hear them that much. They're not as convinced about their position, therefore they're not vehemently speaking about it out loud or on social media. They sort of go under the radar. But when big decisions come up, they end up deciding which side wins.

The reason we call them flexibles is because sometimes we're able to persuade them. Sometimes the other side is able to persuade them. They do not have that strong, unconditional commitment to any of these worldviews. And according to our audience research in Latin America, they account for 40 to 50% in the 19 countries of Latin America. So the percentage is huge, and nobody has been thinking about them systematically. Maybe people in politics, but certainly not in social movements.

One of the things that we have done when we research them is understanding each of those three big audiences. Sympathizers are rebels with causes—rebels because we do not care about our parents' opinion when we're making decisions. We do not care about God, and we do not care about tradition. There are exceptions for sure. But we do care about our causes very much.

Then the flexibles. They're open to our causes, but they're not rebels at all. For them, the opinion of their parents is important. God is super important, and tradition is super important. I remember what I understood when I first saw those results. It's like, that's why all our content clashes with them, even though they're open to it. Substantively, they're open, but the rebellious tone clashes, and they feel that we are dismissing their values and dismissing what's important to them. And that's why it's so difficult to bring them over.

And then antagonists. What I understood is that they truly begin [with the understanding that] there's a natural order where God governs over men, men govern over women, heterosexuals over homosexuals, humans over animals, etc. There is a natural order, the way the world should work. And the reason they dislike us so much is because they feel that we're disrupting that

order. I think it was interesting to understand the why of them, as opposed to just rejecting it or thinking of them as evil people. They have very different values and understanding of the world.

Rollo Romig: It's interesting that you've recognized a couple of different broad categories of religious believers. Because progressive activists can sometimes be dismissive of religious communities in general, even though there's this long history of progressive action from religious communities. But like you're saying, there are a lot of people who are really engaged in those communities and who are very open to some of the ideas that you're trying to put across. And it's really self-defeating to dismiss the whole category.

Mónica Roa: The whole thing. We're shooting our own feet.

The other thing that I wanted to talk to you about is that we have some platforms where we deploy narrative strategies, and there are two that I think are especially relevant for you.

The first one is about reclaiming the family's narrative. When we ask people what's their priority, family is always the priority, no matter how you define family and no matter whether you're antagonist, flexible, or sympathizer. So even those that do not care about our parents' opinion when we're making decisions, we are trying to create our own families with different values, different compositions, different dynamics—but our families are very important to us.

We realized that at some point, we just gave up. We didn't even try to talk about families. I remember when I started as an activist in reproductive rights thinking, "This is *their* thing. That's what they talk about." So we never even tried. And of course we knew that using the family discourse, they oppose abortion, they oppose LGBT marriage, they oppose sex education, etc., etc. So many of our issues were opposed with the big narrative of the family. And when I say “the family,” it's a family where the father is the breadwinner, the mother is the caretaker, children are obedient, girls want to be pink princesses, and boys want to be blue superheroes.

What we have been doing is getting together groups from different movements to come together in a platform that reclaims the narrative discourse. One of the things that I find very interesting is that family is such a broad frame that we can bring together people from many different movements. You can talk about women's rights, children's rights, LGBT, elders, people with disability, housing, education, healthcare, environment, and you can go on. So that is a very good frame that allows us to create that strategy that I told you about: of creating common ground, talking about families in our way, in a way that is harmonic with human rights, gender justice, etc. And in my experience, I've never been surrounded by a more diverse set of activists.

We finally have activists from the different movements coming together and thinking about, okay, what's important for us when we think about families?

We came up with a five-point declaration. We started working in Colombia, then we moved to Chile. In Chile, we participated in the constitutional reform that was not successful. Unfortunately, I think they didn't listen to us enough about flexibles.

But I think the interesting part is that with the platform, we were able to come up with 10 constitutional points that we wanted to be included in the constitution. And it was across the different movements. Recognizing the autonomy of children was part of it, and sexual education, and facilitating life for families that want to do it right with respect and autonomy. So that's one interesting experiment in which certainly the conversation about sexual abuse of children is part of it. How do we think about families in which this doesn't happen? In which talking about the problem, or solving the problem, is more important than the reputation of the family. Which is what has happened traditionally—the family as an institution has to be protected. And therefore we don't talk about what happens within the family.

Narrative work is pretty much about telling stories, just telling a different type of stories and doing it on a scale that is big enough to start disputing common sense and what people perceive is not only possible but desirable. So we want to talk about these other types of families and show that they're just as loving. But the important thing is care and the well-being of people, more than the structure, the composition, what has traditionally been highlighted.

There's all that work within the families platform, and then we have another one that is doing pretty much the same, but with faith. In our audience research, 70% of people in Latin America rated that from one to five, God is a five in importance in their lives, however they define God.

If we come up with messages that make people feel that believing in God or giving God an important place in your life is in tension with the protection of human rights, we have lost 70% of the region. So the challenge is, how do we find people that are religious and support all these agendas so we can elevate their voices and start telling stories about how they live their lives in a way that they support abortion, same-sex marriage, comprehensive sexual education, etc.? We started out a platform trying to identify these people and bringing them together. There are a few, but so few that they feel absolutely lonely. So just introducing them to each other. The idea of connecting comes back, and facilitating the strengthening of their storytelling capacities and communication capacities in general.

Most of them are already telling the stories. In the case of families, we didn't find a group that was already doing this. So we created it, sort of as a mandate from the different organizations that we convened. Here and there were activists doing it, but they were separated. We created the platform to work as an umbrella to bring them together, introduce them to each other. They're from different countries in Latin America. And then use it to offer them the tools and the training that they need to strengthen their narrative power. I think those two are very relevant, because the issue that you guys are interested in falls within both of those conversations.

Rollo Romig: The question of narrative change has come up so much in these conversations. It seems that so many people working on social problems maybe didn't start with a focus on narrative, but they've realized that narrative is one of the central things. Can you give me another example of how narrative has been effective in your work?

Mónica Roa: I'll say first that the reason why none of us knew that narratives were so important is precisely because it has invisible power. It's very powerful, but it's invisible. You cannot point at it, because every story by itself is not powerful enough. But it's the repetition of stories that share values or worldviews that are being told over time in different formats, voices, spaces.

But, for example, the narrative of the family. There's a father that goes to work, there's a mother that cooks and takes care of the children. There's the children that have to be obedient. And that story comes up in your conversations with people around you, in TV, in books, newspapers, in prayers, every time, everywhere. And it's so omnipresent that it determines what you think is possible, desirable, and worth listening to.

Precisely for this reason, narrative work is a long-term game. And I don't think we have been there long enough to be able to tell you this is something very concrete that we were able to win. However, I can say that it has been successful in organizations understanding that they need to do their activism differently, that these thematic silos are not working, that the denouncing of what's wrong is not working. And you can see the shift in people.

We had a couple of focus groups in Chile. With the research that we had, we knew how to filter in flexibles, so we just recruited flexibles for the focus groups. And one of the things that we offered them was, “We're going to present you with two ideas. Please choose the one that you are in most agreement with, even if it's not 100%." One was that abortion, same-sex marriage, sexual education, and “gender ideology” are dangerous for children and their families. And the other was that the important thing about families is that they are about care and well-being.

So we presented the two narratives to flexibles. 95% of them chose ours. They said that the other sounded too extreme, and they said that ours was what everyone ultimately wanted for their family.

That was a very good indicator that our narrative was strong enough to dispute the narrative for flexibles. I think it's important to understand that we're thinking about flexibles. If I speak about families to sympathizers, they're probably going to say, "You sound like a decaffeinated activist," or, "This is what *they* talk about. Why are you helping them?" So part of the work that we've had to do is to help the sympathizers, our hardcore base, understand that this is a way of expanding our audience and then being able to engage the flexibles through something that is valuable for them.

Rollo Romig: One thing that we've been learning is that if you don't present a positive destination, then your opponent is going to invent their own destination that you have in mind, like with this "gender ideology" stuff, or even the family stuff. If you surrender the idea of family, then you're going to get called anti-family.

Mónica Roa: Of course. But I think it's true that for the longest time, we gave up on that narrative. We didn't articulate it enough within our campaigns. And therefore, I'm not surprised that people see us as anti-family. We never talked about families. It's not that I'm against them, but I never talked about them when I was doing any of my campaigns.

I'll give you another example that I love, because with my background on abortion, I was always facing people that were very resistant. Traditionally, some of the slogans are, "Take your rosaries off our ovaries," for example, or, "My body is mine, and I'll decide," something that we chant in Spanish. So you can imagine the reaction that creates in different audiences.

But on the families platform, we told a true story of a great-grandmother who's telling her great-grandchildren, "I had 15 kids. I love them all. But what I want for my great-grandchildren is that they only have the kids that they want, out of love, and that it's their decision."

You change the messenger. You tune the message, the messenger, and the channel to the audience that you want to reach. Ultimately, the goal is the same. We're just getting there through different ways. And all these decisions are made based on a deep understanding of who your audience is. And what we have seen is that our followers didn't have any discourse like that offered to them. And part of understanding the audience was also understanding that they're people that do not have professional degrees, that do not have that much time, or they do

not do civic participation as much. They declare themselves religious, but they don't go to church that much. They're between 25 and 35, so they're a lot younger than I expected. That means that the references that I originally had in mind would not work.

Do you remember that album called *Love Is*? I wanted to do the 2.0 version of that album. I think that album shaped what many people from our generation understood about love—and it's awful. If you go back to what they said about what love is, it was awful. So I wanted to do the updated version. And then I realized that people from 25 to 35, they don't remember that old album, and it wouldn't resonate with them.

Rollo Romig: How have you navigated the way that some narratives can be more universal, while others need to be more tailored?

Mónica Roa: I get that question a lot, and my answer is that the narrative should be the same. It should be global. But the stories are local. The stories have to make sense locally, but the concept of the narrative should be shared, and is very much values-based.

Rollo Romig: Can you give an example of how that difference between narrative and stories has played out in your work?

Mónica Roa: Well, everything that I've told you about, we developed for Latin America. But these days we are presenting it to activists in Kenya. In Kenya, they have filed a law that's called the law to protect families. What's within it? Abortion, LGBT, marriage, comprehensive sexuality education. I'm not surprised, but I have been on the board of this organization in Kenya for the longest time. And I'm telling them, "Be prepared. We have to reclaim that narrative."

Finally they are seeing the relevance of it. I am presenting to them everything that we've done: the five points in our declaration, and some of the stories that we have populated our narrative with, from the Latin American point of view. But then, for them, the question is, the realities of families in East Africa are completely different. What are the stories that you want to tell about families? What do you think makes sense and resonates with people here?

Sometimes it's about cultural differences. But sometimes it's about how mature, how right the political moment is. For example, they say, we cannot present same sex marriage within a video of other happy families and pretend that they will blend, because we're not there yet here. So I get back to them and say, okay, but we want to talk about diversity within families. How can we talk about diversity within families?

And so, for example, the families have a different way of cooking certain recipes. Families celebrate certain traditions differently. The way families dance is different. So there are all these ways that you can talk about diversity within families, that you can start slowly introducing the value of diversity in families in a way that resonates with them, in a way that helps them advance the conversation. And eventually, they will get to differences in the composition of families, and who you love, and which families are worthy of respect and protection and which ones aren't.

Rollo Romig: Collaboration has been really important in your work, and you're connected to organizations in a lot of different places. Tell me a little more about how collaboration happens for you. What have you learned about how best to foster collaboration and make it more effective?

Mónica Roa: There is a saying, I don't know who said it, but I hear it repeatedly in the world of narratives: collaborations occur at the speed of trust. That means that we need to invest a lot of time and effort into fostering trust among the different members. If there is anyone that doesn't feel comfortable, or feels they are not being heard, or that is suspicious about the intentionality of others—just taking all the time to create those bonds that eventually would lead to trust within the groups that are participating is very important.

Working under the logic of narratives, as opposed to the more traditional strategic communications—narratives allow for diversity, because the point of narratives is that you need to have different people telling different stories through different voices, formats, spaces. You just need to have a common understanding of the values that you're sharing.

So it's a minimal agreement allowing for maximal spreading and diversity of voices participating. As opposed to, this is the slogan, we need message discipline, stay on message, this is what you all have to say. Who do you think you are that you're telling me what I should be saying? No. Here you have enough space to give people freedom to say something that is true to them, that makes sense within their context. I am not saying that we completely get rid of the strategic communications logic. We do think it's part of the narrative work. That's why we study audiences so much.

Actually, we came up with the metaphor of the jazz band. Because some people were using the metaphor of armies, and weapons, and the soldiers being deployed. And it just didn't match the values that we were trying to defend. So at some point, I came up with the idea of the jazz band. The jazz band allows for fluid leadership. There's no director, there's no music sheet that

everyone has to follow. The jazz band has to be paying attention to the energy of the room, and then you are reacting to it. They're tired, let's slow down, or they're falling asleep, let's pick it up. And now it's your turn, and then your solo has been going on for too long. So we give you signals, and then you step back and let somebody else take the stage.

And ultimately, what we want to achieve is learning how to riff off of each other. We make people dance, to dance to our beat. So I think the metaphor works very nicely to illustrate how to collaborate. We use it a lot.

Rollo Romig: How do you build trust? What are some good techniques?

Mónica Roa: Allowing people to speak. Taking the time to go around. Everybody gets to speak. Recognizing everybody where people come from, no judgment. Making people feel valued, feel seen. From a narrative point of view, allowing people to tell their story however they want to say it first. And then trying to find the commonalities. What is it that allows us to create common ground? Which brings us back to values. So the question is, what are the values that are being shared in this group?

Doing a lot of co-creation. We have manifestos or declarations in each of our platforms. Even if we have a draft, we call it a martyr draft, so we're not blocked by the white page. It's meant to be changed, and scratched out, and altered, and foster participation in the manifesto that is going to be the anchor of our work.

All the content that we create can be used by anyone. For example, all the research that we do, that's open for any group in Latin America that is interested in using it. We say that we do not do consultancies, because consultancies are meant like, I work for you, and you own the product. Everybody owns everything that is produced.

And then we do what we call narrative exploration awards. Those are mini grants. And we open a call for proposals, and then we have the criteria. Regional diversity, movement diversity, capacity diversity, in the sense that we want the groups that are very good at narrative work that are pushing the envelope and letting us see what else can be done, but we also want the groups that are not good, that are just beginning. They're proposing the super beginner type of thing. So we're not looking for the best. We want everybody to be able to explore, to help us. Everybody has a role within the group. We like to say that the vision is shared, but the tactics and the roles have been divided and diversified.

So it's about understanding, how can you best serve this movement? Are you excellent at activating sympathizers? Are you very good at talking to flexibles, and engaging them, and being pedagogical with them? Or do you have the personality that you go into doing research of what the opposition is doing? Who are they? Where are they meeting? Maybe infiltrating the meetings, coming back, and telling us what they're planning to do.

Actually, we include this in the jazz band metaphor. We each shine under our best light. We're not asking them to do something that they're not comfortable and great at doing.

Rollo Romig: Is there anything that you want to say that others could learn from your work that we haven't touched on yet?

Mónica Roa: Maybe just to make it explicit that I think the collaboration between children's rights groups, feminist groups, and LGBT groups is key. And it goes all the way from activists to donors. I hope that we have achieved the point in which we see it. But for a very long time, donors especially didn't see it. They were actually afraid of, if we get into the same group with you, we're going to get your enemies, or get all the backlash from the resistance to your issues. I'm like, guess what? Enemies were already shared, and actually we need to get together. And what I just told you: the vision is shared, and the tactics and the roles are different. But we have to get together and understand that we're in this together.

Rollo Romig: Thank you so much for your time. This has been fascinating.

Rollo Romig (he/him) is a freelance journalist who writes most often for The New York Times and The New Yorker. He is the author of the book I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India. He teaches writing at The New School in New York City. He was born and raised in Detroit.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*