Conversation with Romain Vakilitabar
Ashley Hopkinson
February 15, 2024

Ashley Hopkinson: Hi Romain. Can you start by introducing yourself? Tell me a little bit about what you do, a little bit about the company, kind of your origin story, so to speak.

Romain Vakilitabar: My name is Romain Vakilitabar. I'm the executive director and founder of Pathos Labs. Pathos is a nonprofit laboratory focused on finding ways in which media and entertainment can change dominant cultural narratives in our country and beyond. We do so by testing out different interventions, seeing what works, but really our recipe is two-fold. [We ask] can we co-create new narratives in collaboration with the people most affected by the damaging dominant narratives? And two, can we find ways to catapult those narratives so that millions of people are seeing them and are exposed to them. We believe if we can create new narratives, written, co-created, centering people whose lives are most affected by a lot of different social issues; if we can get those narratives out there, then we can slowly start chipping away at these damaging dominant narratives and make way for better ones to hopefully shape society.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's amazing. As a storyteller I have a core belief that narratives are powerful. But how would you frame the power of narratives as an agent of social change for anyone that doesn't immediately see the connection between how dominant narratives can impact us?

Romain Vakilitabar: I'm obviously biased through the work that we're doing, but I think narratives shape everything. How do we know how we're supposed to behave? Well, we look at how other people are behaving. We look at the stories of how people have historically behaved. How do we know what's really going on in the world? Well, we turn to our local news or we turn to international news. We turn

the television on to interpret what's going on in the world around us. Our perception of what's going on in the world around us completely dictates how we behave and what we believe as a result of it. So I think our narratives completely construct our reality and if we want to change our reality, then we have to change the narratives altogether. We believe that we need to change the locus of power in terms of who has access to shaping those dominant narratives. That's a very important part of it. So I do think it has a very widespread effect on how we behave, how we define ourselves as citizens, how we perceive what's going on in the world around us.

Ashley Hopkinson: Yes, narratives are all around us. It's like the air we breathe.

Romain Vakilitabar: Yes, and I think specifically in relation to capitalism, right? Most people don't realize that capitalism was a choice, was something that we created, was an invention. Because we've been born into the system. And when we're born into something, it's like a fish in water. What is water? We don't really realize that we can be agent in changing it. We don't realize that there's something that we created, that we have agency in adapting in ways that serve us as human beings.

Capitalism in general is so insidious because it's an invention that we created originally to support us, to create a model that takes care of us better than the previous economic models. And now what we're finding is that we are laboring and suffering in support of capitalism as this institution. We are suffering in order to strengthen this capitalist model that we had once created to serve our needs.

So what does it take to change our relationship, to wake up to the fact that yes, for a fish, there is water around us, to have that sort of awareness, I think narratives play a huge role. Stories that are told, whether it's entertainment media or news media or political media, the conversations of influential people who we turn to for guidance. If we can change the ways in which those collective narratives respond to this sort of model of capitalism being broken or being something that we should work on, then I think that would be a great way to go.

Ashley Hopkinson: Last year I was leading a health equity cohort and the goal was to help newsrooms reimagine the way we cover health issues since it is often crisis centered. And that perhaps it's as important to focus on the best performing hospital for e.g. than just the worst performing. To widen the scope of narratives we tell. Do you find that this is the damaging aspect of narratives, a tendency to focus on the negative narratives?

Romain Vakilitabar: Sure. Yeah, I mean, we believe that there are four main ways in which narrative efforts can actually play the biggest role. One is illuminating existential risks. How do we as human beings understand the threats that are ahead of us? Two is defining where we come from. How do

these narratives shape our perception of our history and how we are products of the history? Three is creating a shared imagination of what is possible. Right? If we can't imagine a better future, then we won't be able to create that better future. So what does it look like to really focus narrative efforts on building a shared imagination of a better world that's possible for all of us? Actually there are five. The fourth is behavior modeling. So how do we take the stories that we're telling and use them as ways to model what positive citizenry can look like, so that people can see what other people are doing, people that they might admire on a television show that they're watching or someone that they care about on screen.

The last one is widening circles of empathic concerns. So typically our empathy is felt for the people in our small bubbles, and our empathy doesn't expand beyond those small bubbles. And what I think entertainment in certain narrative vehicles have been really effective [in doing] is widening that circle of empathic concern for individuals that maybe you don't come across on a day-to-day basis, but still deserve your humanity, your care, your compassion. Those are the five places where I think narratives can be really useful. And being really strategic about how we actually shape the narratives that pervade society in ways that do one of those five things intentionally.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's really powerful. And that last one, I thought about books in that sense, of widening the circle of empathic concerns, that stories can expose you to different cultures, geographies and experiences. In my case, my circle has widened from growing up in a multicultural country and what's representative in my social connections as well. But you're saying for many others it could be the books you read, you can do that through stories, right? It could be the film?

Romain Vakilitabar: I think it's the only way. How would you be connected to the suffering of a community on the other side of the world if you're not traveling there? If you don't necessarily know anyone who's there, how do you care about them? How do you show up for them? The only way you would ever care about them or show up for them is through the stories that you're receiving about what's going on over there. And we've seen how those stories can be different with the Israel and Palestinian war going on right now. It's a battle of narratives. Who's the better storyteller, who's the most influential storyteller? What narratives can we get to as many people to get them on our side? And so I think the world really depends upon [narratives]. Narratives play such a big role.

And again, I know I'm very biased, but I can't really imagine what the world would be like if we just completely ignored narratives as a potential vehicle for impact. I think mis- and disinformation as well. Those are just nefarious narratives that are being pushed onto people to make them believe certain things that are dangerous, that are violent, that push us away from democracy…that push us

towards violence towards one another. So I feel like a lot of the potential wars that might ensue, whether it's in our country or beyond, will be very much a result of the sort of narrative ecosystem that we either protect, invest in, or don't.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think is the greatest challenge in doing this kind of narrative work? And trying to do the kind of work that pushes back against damaging dominant narratives?

Romain Vakilitabar: The biggest difficulty, and this is something that we have been addressing as a team, is the fact that it's, the narrative landscape is just so diffuse. What can you do as a single organization to change that? People are bombarded with narratives, from so many sources, whether it's on the news, whether it's in papers, whether it's on television, whether it's reality TV or scripted, whether it's social media. Everywhere, we're being bombarded with narratives.

The biggest issue is just there's so many narratives, so diffuse, and we're seeing people getting more and more polarized, and these sort of algorithmic bubbles are exposing them to just a certain subset of the narratives that are out there that can obviously push us apart as humans and make us turn against each other rather than towards each other.

And so if that's the case, is it possible for a single organization to do anything about changing the dominant cultural narratives that people live and breathe? So the answer is likely no, right? And so what we've been working on these past six months or so is building a coalition [The Sway Collective], a network of organizations who collectively, if we align strategy, if we align funding, if we align timelines, then maybe as a bigger coalition of organizations, we could actually make a dent.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's a good segue, because [The Sway Collective] gets you closer to that idea of that shared imagination that you were talking about. A coalition can help to accelerate that, right?

Romain Vakilitabar: Yeah, absolutely.

Ashley Hopkinson: Let's talk about polarization for a moment. Even for groups that have similar visions on equity issues, housing and education can be divisive. Have you found in your narrative work that it's brought people together in some ways? How do you feel like it might bridge that gap, since we're all receiving different buckets of information from different sources?

Romain Vakilitabar: One example is we had a convening last year where we brought 50 TV writers, some popular shows on television, together with 50 individuals whose lives have personally been

affected by climate change. The idea was how do we tell the human story of climate change. We've done a decent job of telling the scientific story of climate change and that hasn't totally stuck with some people. So if we can tell the human story, then maybe that's a better way to actually compel people to think about these issues differently. These are issues that are experienced across political lines, across racial lines, and there is a higher concentration of people affected by different social issues. So I'm definitely not making a blanket statement here, but there are certain issues that affect all of us, like food or housing affects all of us. And so if we can honor the experiences of those who might have a different political perspective or predisposition, but honor them as an expert in housing instability, if they've been unhoused, then I feel like that's a way in which we remove the position from the interest. We focus on the interest of like, "Hey, we want all of our people to be housed, to have a place where they can call home, where they can feel safe," right? Rather than the particular positions that we typically focus on as points of divisiveness in society.

How do we honor the people whose lives are affected by these issues irrespective maybe of their political predispositions, and bring them in a space where they can actually feel seen from their experiences, from their lived experiences as being an expert in the field. And by doing more of that we can overcome some of the polarization traps that we fall into, only honoring a certain community of people as experts if they have a particular similar political inclination as our own.

It's not easy. There are definitely some social issues that affect one community far more than another and wouldn't want to dilute that in any way.

Ashley Hopkinson: When I think about what it means to create new economic systems that are better about serving people and serving communities I wonder how you make a case for narratives? How do you demonstrate the value of this work in terms of, this is a part of our well-being, stories and narratives are a part of our well-being?

Romain Vakilitabar: I think there are better economic systems. What are those versions, right? They're not seen, people don't know about them. People don't know that there are amazing people that are working on solutions or that are proposing alternatives. A huge opportunity here is just getting people to see what better versions of these economic systems can look like.

This is the challenge that we've been trying to push against. You can create a documentary or you could have a TED Talk, or you can write a book about new economic systems and sure, that's good to get the word out, but the word out to who? To economics wonks, to people who are in the field. How do we actually get it to the layperson, the person who is feeling hopeless, the person who may not have a college degree, or someone who hasn't really been thinking about the philosophy of capitalism

and economic systems. We need to reach them. We have to reach them for it to actually build up the sort of grassroots support that we need to actually change these things. This is a long-term game. I don't think it'll happen overnight, but we have to focus our attention on the laypeople. And we're not doing that.

I don't think we're doing that in many fields. I think the ivory towers of academia release amazing academic studies that don't ever end up getting understood or interpreted in a way that's accessible to people beyond the ivory towers of academia. We need to push more towards accessibility of these narratives, pushing some of these ideas, sharing these ideas with folks where they are at right now, not expecting them to come in and watch a documentary on a topic that they're not necessarily aware of or passionate about.

So that's where we have done a lot of our work. Who are the existing TV writers who are creating shows on network television, even the streamers maybe, but how do we actually reach the people who wouldn't otherwise watch the TED Talk, pick up the book or watch a documentary on a particular social issue? We need to do that with building imaginations of a better economic system for sure.

Ashley Hopkinson: Yes, I see what you mean and this kind of siloed information sharing also happens at conferences as well.

Romain Vakilitabar: There's definitely space for that [conferences]. But it shouldn't be the only approach. And that's what I'm trying to push more people to think about is like, okay, that's great that you're having this conference, but how do we create more accessibility for these insights to actually reach the people that wouldn't otherwise be reached by the insights that are contained and shared at a conference.

Ashley Hopkinson: What kind of support do you think is needed to accelerate things like that? Is it interest? Is it getting more people into the coalition, so to speak, to have that shared imagination? Is it funding? Is it partnerships, rhetoric? What do you think is needed?

Romain Vakilitabar: Honestly, we're in a situation where we have so much demand for our work, which is amazing. We feel very blessed. We have a network of over 300 TV writers who've been coming to our convenings who are consistently engaging with us in our topics. So that feels like such a point of pride for us. But it's just tricky to get the funders to really understand the benefits of doing this work. We don't have enough funding to fulfill the demand of what we're doing. And that's a sad situation to be in, especially when you see organizations that don't have any demand and are getting a lot of funding.

If we can get some more funders interested in narrative strategy and really interested in actually thinking about how we actually get some of these narratives to lay people who otherwise wouldn't necessarily engage with these topics, that would feel exciting. Not just for us, but for the field in general, because I think this is a field that should get a lot more attention than it is right now. I understand where they're coming from in the sense that funders want to fund something that works, that actually has an impact. And it's really hard to prove the impact of narrative work right now. The informational landscape, the narrative landscape is so diffuse, as a funder, where do you go? What do you fund?

Ashley Hopkinson: Right, so does the funding go into documentaries or another medium?

Romain Vakilitabar: Exactly, yes. And so that's why we feel excited about this coalition. What if you funded this coalition[Sway Collective] part of that would go to Solutions Journalism Network. Part of that would go to MTV. Part of that would go to us. Part of it would go to the Social Good Club, which works with social media influencers. And altogether, we commit to pushing some of those narratives out through our networks of influential storytellers. And so that's the idea. Hopefully, we can get some interest amongst funders. We're definitely in a situation where a little bit more funding would be hugely helpful in helping us do our work better.

Ashley Hopkinson: We can learn a lot from what's successful and also what's not successful. Can you share a lesson, an insight, a program, a practice, something that helped Pothos Lab to deliver on impact or the reverse, something that didn't work well and what you learned in the process?

Romain Vakilitabar: Good question. For us, quite a few things. What's worked well is not telling creatives what to do. You're a journalist, right, you don't want to be told what to do. That's not a fun experience. What we've chosen to do instead is rather than telling TV writers what to write, we just expose them. We introduce them to fascinating people and individuals with brilliant insights because of their lived experiences where you're creating a sort of incentive, you're creating a sort of level of inspiration amongst these creatives to tell those stories in collaboration with those people.

If you meet someone who totally inspires you and compels you, you feel really invested intrinsically to tell that story. So that's something that we've done. We really avoid being prescriptive in our approach with our creatives, but rather try to design an experience that inspires them to write their stories differently in ways that can actually bring forth the kind of change that we're hoping to bring forth. So that's something that has been really successful in terms of building out a community of creatives who really enjoy coming to our sessions because they're inspired every time and feel like we're exposing

them to really incredible new stories and that they wouldn't have otherwise come across. Funders, they want the prescriptive, right? So that's been a bit tricky, as they want us to push forward a certain narrative that we guarantee gets put on screen, which is something that's hard to balance because we obviously understand the funders' desires, but also want to protect the creatives and their process. We're always experimenting and things fall short all the time, for sure.

Ashley Hopkinson: Yes, that's a part of the process of building right? Does anything else come to mind?

Romain Vakilitabar: We're working on a project. We're calling it the IP List. And really the idea is how can we get authors, diverse authors, in front of Hollywood executives? Because I came across an article in the New York Times a couple of years ago that said that 95% of books published in 2020 were white authors. Horrific statistics. And in entertainment where the industry is always looking for good IP, that's how they basically create a lot of their shows, from existing IP, mostly books. And so our goal was to create a list of diverse authors that we could advertise to entertainment executives to say, "Hey, option these titles, option these books, because these are pre-vetted books that are available to be adapted into television or film." So we've been in that process, gone through quite a few hiccups along the way.

The entertainment landscape is also just, it's fraught right now, after the strikes. I think that's really where we're seeing some of the shortcomings in that work is just we're at the mercy of an industry that is in a precarious situation right now, and is also built in a certain way where voices have always been excluded. So that's something that I'm coming up against; we're trying to work with an industry that has been excluding voices all along, and so how do we actually work with that industry, rather than just recreate it.

So yes, one example of that is we've been creating and crowdsourcing this IP. We haven't released the list yet. I'm a bit nervous in terms of receptivity and whether or not it's going to change anything in Hollywood. But there's a lot of little projects like that where we're endeavoring.

Ashley Hopkinson: I like the endeavor. I think that that's so great. Thank you for your time.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

This conversation has been edited and condensed.