

PREPARED FOR



NESAWG
Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

NESAWG COMMS REPORT

MARCH 2021

PROPOSAL BY

FIONA TENG 鄧穎恆

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From **November 2020 to March 2021**, I had the privilege of diving deeply into NESAWG's work. In this report, you'll find observations, analyses, resources, and suggested ideas, tools, and processes you could try to leverage communications for greater impact.

According to The Communications Network, "**comms for change**" aims to:

- **Elevate and advance** an issue
- **Influence** attitudes and beliefs
- **Inspire action** for social change

It's through this framing that I approached this report.

Comms Principles Highlights

1. **Knowing your audience** and their behavior, having consistent branding and content, and having a goal (or goals) in mind are great principles to follow.
2. **Testing is everything.** For testing to be most informative, having a sense of what's currently happening will be helpful. Benchmark your digital performance first, then test to see how changes perform.
3. Comms is like water, filling up an impressive river or flowing through a narrow stream. **Comms and campaigns can flex up or down based on need, capacity, or other factors.**
4. Whatever new content will be featured in the newsletter can also be featured on the website. Always try and **think across channels** and determine where best to place them.
5. Like with accessibility in website design, **incorporating comms early on** in any project / initiative will allow for the best runway for excellent comms support, minimizing hiccups or last minute changes further down the line.
6. Regularly **use a shared team calendar** to help break down silos, keep everyone aligned, and make smarter decisions.



Comms Ideas Highlights

1. Select **organization-wide themes** to integrate across your programs and products can help bring more integration across departments and programs.
2. For every program, project, or initiative, start practicing the use of a "**spectrum of effort**," and decide where NESAWG wants to place itself depending on all important factors.
3. Conduct a **few tests in your upcoming newsletters** to better understand your reader and refine your content with them in mind.
4. **Test new newsletter content** to see what your audience might be excited about.
5. With annual themes selected, test a **new newsletter process**.
6. Conduct **market research and capacity analysis** to determine if starting an Instagram account is the right move for you.
7. **Test new ways of leveraging Sankofa videos** to continuously engage your audience and emphasize NESAWG's educational value.
8. Create a **separate brand look** for all policy content for clearer differentiation.
9. Actively **pursue subscribers** to the policy list by launching promotional campaigns.
10. **Audit the website's pages and content.** Review each page with an eye first toward what is obsolete and can be removed or deactivated. Of what remains, identify redundancies and where possible, combine or relocate with an eye towards highest likelihood of user engagement. During this process, consider where to put content that doesn't currently live on the site, but should.
11. Recognizing that the **homepage is highly valuable real estate**, create a more dynamic and robust experience when people land there. Check out Girls Who Code's website for checking all the boxes in terms of features and functions of a homepage.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Comms Outlook	5
Organizational Observations	6
Types of Content	9
Ideas for 2021	10
Newsletter	11
Social Media	14
Sankofa	16
Policy	17
Calendars	18
Website	19
Ideas For the Future	22
NESAWG Network Listserv	23
Earned (and Shared) Media	24
Testimonials	25
Polling	26
Narrative Shift	28



Look out for
orange lightbulbs
throughout the report for
implementable ideas!



**COMMS
OUTLOOK**

ORGANIZATIONAL OBSERVATIONS

"5 Words"

Towards the beginning of my time working with you all, each of you responded to my prompt "**what five words would you use to describe what NESAWG represents?**" Though team members may not talk about an organization in exactly the same way, they often view its underlying values similarly.

Here's how your words ranked:

1. **Network** (defined as a "web of cross-geography and cross-sector" connections, and a "hub that hold space, brings people together to share.")
2. Tie #2 **Connection** (collaboration, interconnected)
3. Tie #2 **DEI** (equitable, increasingly diverse)
4. Tie #2 **Conference** (convening)
5. **Food systems**

Other words included "dialogue," "aspiration," "evolving," "complexity," and "sustainable."

Integration

- Team members reflected that having **greater integration** on the team would be positive.
- It appeared as though as it stands now, **work remains separated** by department or program, with minimal connection to other departments or programs.
- This can **feel isolating and create silos** within the organization, and externally, the organization's products and content can appear to lack cohesion or connection with one another.



Use themes to bring cohesion and integration across programs and departments.

If the month's theme is "climate change amplifies inequities in food systems," then what policy angle can connect to this theme? Are there any young people you want to lift up? Will there be a track on this at ITAR, or maybe a lived experience expert will be speaking on this in the coming Sankofa? Can you poll your network to ask their thoughts on the issue? A unified theme has the potential to thread all of your programs and areas of work together.

Tracking Your Work

- Tracking and analyzing your digital content performance can be used to **check against gut decisions**, and help **inform any pivots or adjustments** that might further optimize your content's reach and impact.
- It can be really eye-opening to see all the information in one place, and from it you may **glean trends and insights** you didn't even know were possible.
- Feedback can come from **anecdotal responses** too! If folx wrote you a sweet testimonial, ask if you can use it for promotional purposes, and consider where it might make a big impact.
- For quantitative data, I created a **[digital tracker](#)** to get you started.

Minding Capacity & Need

I realize that the team is already carrying a lot of work on their plates! And that capacity to take on more work varies from individual to individual, and across the year.

Everything in comms can be "tiered" to offer **flexibility in effort**, flexing up or flexing down as needed or as capacity calls for.

Here's an example of a **spectrum of effort**:

- **100%** -- Edit Mrs. Shirley Sherrod's Sankofa video into 5 short clips and distribute into socials according to a predetermined schedule. Place the 5 clips into a blog and share in Field Notes.
- **80%** -- Edit the same video into 3 short clips and put them all in a blog post. Include in Field Notes. OR extract 3 audio clips and turn them into social graphics for posting.
- **50%** -- Take the full video as is and place it in a blog post listing 3 favorite moments and their timestamps. Include in Field Notes and social.
- **30%** -- Put the full video link directly in the next Field Notes email.
- **0%** -- Don't engage with post-event video.



For every program, project, or initiative, consider where you want to be on this spectrum of effort.

TYPES OF CONTENT

I've found it helpful to remember that digital content often falls into these categories:



Educational

Trainings, workshops, by NESAWG or others

Examples: Sankofa Series, parts of ITAR conference



Informative

News, resources, updates

Examples: Policy updates and actions, NESAWG racial justice analysis, some ITAR content



Inspirational / Motivational

Personal, profiles, on the ground work, by NESAWG or others

Examples: December reflection email, board member profiles, inspiring social media posts related to food justice



Entertaining

Brings joy / smiles / laughs

Examples: memes, gifs, trendy moments

Activity

With a NESAWG newsletter or social media handle in mind, spend **10 minutes browsing through its content**. What is the current content mix? **What content mix** would you like to achieve? You could use the desired mix to drive what content you'd like to create / elevate.



**IDEAS
FOR 2021**

NEWSLETTER

According to the [Digital Tracker](#) I've created for you, which includes newsletter data from the past 13 months, the percentage of top 5 links clicked came from:

- 54% introduction
- 27% resources
- 11.5% policy
- 8% header image / caption

Knowing this information (and continuing to track it) can help you all make decisions about future newsletter. Some **ideas to test** include:

- Shifting the introduction to be less narrative heavy and **more highlights**. Would this get even higher engagement?
- Shifting the policy section to be less narrative heavy and **more highlights**. Would this get higher engagement?
- Balance the newsletter in general with less narrative and **more visuals** (photos, graphics, icons). Does engagement look different? You can test this in just one section to see.
- Test **two versions of upcoming Field Notes**: one with same policy section as before, another with a brief summary + link click to a blog post with full report. Would we see a difference in engagement?
- **Survey the list** with 1-2 thoughtfully crafted questions to get at the depth of their engagement / interest in policy. What we learn could then be tested.



Test a few of these in your upcoming newsletters.



Test some new newsletter content ideas.

1

Monthly stat. Each newsletter features a fun fact / statistic regarding food equity broadly, or more connected to the monthly theme.

2

Connecting equity. Features anything you want around how you're learning, shifting, and showing up in service of equity in food systems space. [This resource could help jog ideas!](#)

3

Multimedia shoutout. Each newsletter can feature one piece of multimedia content you're loving. Can be a podcast, video, meme, book, documentary, etc. Should visually stand out from text.

4

From the network. Promote a project, article, piece of work, etc. of one of NESAWG's network org.

5

Social Media stars. Feature your favorite social media moment(s)! Could be a tweet, photo, petition, etc.

6

Events. Feature yours and other organization's upcoming events.



Resume conference updates. Regularly keep your readers up to date regarding conference planning.



Check-in question. Each newsletter features a check-in question, directing folx to a digital white board to see everyone else's answers.



Resume monthly profiles. People love learning about awesome and interesting humans!



With annual themes selected, test out a new newsletter process.

- Have **individual docs** for each month (rather than updating the same one over and over), with its theme in place, to reduce blockages.
- **Set newsletter dates** through the calendar year. Therefore, there are no more surprises and more time for planning.
- **Fix newsletter dates** to be same every month. This can offer consistency and predictability, but of course remaining flexible is always important.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Performance in social media is an indicator for how you're reaching your network and how much influence you could have with them, but not of how well you're advancing your mission. Performance should be routinely viewed and analyzed, and also held lightly.

- There's no one-size-fits-all formula to social media success. It's all about **testing** to see what your audience takes to.
- Taking time to write more personalized messages, taking positions, sharing opinions could yield better engagement. But be sure to test this "**quality over quantity**" theory.
- Be mindful of how much time you want to allocate to social, flexing up or down as you need to. Realistically **choosing the right boundaries** for you is good practice.
- As much as possible, have **consistent bios, logos, and colors** across your handles. The more consistent you are in your public presence, the more easily folx are to recognize and remember you.
- Strategically consider whether there's a **mix of content** types that you want to publish. What's the right mix for you?



Instagram

Remember that orgs can **prioritize effort** depending on where their audiences are most active. This can help you decide if you should open an IG account / have the capacity to sustain it, and if so, how active you'd want to be in there vs. in other platforms.



Conduct market research + capacity analysis to determine if starting an Instagram account is right for you.

- **Research** which orgs in the food equity space are currently on IG. **Ask questions** like, what does their following look like? How active are they? This is an indirect way to try and gauge how much of your audience could also be active in IG.
- Internally, how much **spare time** is there to dedicate to this? What is, if any, the **trade-off** that you're willing to make if needed?

Starting an Instagram Account

In addition to reviewing helpful resources like [Classy](#), here are some IG tips:

- Know that **feed vs. story content can have different purposes**:
 - They often **reach different people** within your followers
 - Stories are more temporary, and therefore allows for a more experimental / less polished feel, whereas feed is evergreen content that more closely aligns with your brand's look, feel, and messaging.
 - Stories offer more interactivity with audiences, a lot of features available for custom
- Unlike other platforms, IG really strives off of great visuals. Organizations' handles are often judged on their aesthetics as well as their content. **Getting nice graphics made takes time.**
- Creating your **own brand's hashtag** can be cool, or you can jump on others that are already out there. But be sure to check the hashtags to make sure they're appropriate for your content.
- Be strategic in **building your followers**. Tagging folx closer in your network in the earlier days of your account can be seen as a way of gaining support. For attracting bigger organizations / individuals, tag them when your handle is more full with content so it's clearer what you're about.

SANKOFA

The recorded webinars serve as a type of educational and inspirational content that could be really interesting and valuable to your audience.



Try some new ways of leveraging Sankofa videos.

Keeping in mind the **spectrum of effort** and choosing what's right for you, here are some content ideas to consider:

- During each webinar, choose one staff or board participant to **take note of their top 5 favorite moments**. Mark the time of those moments. And when you're ready to create post-event content, you can leverage those five moments as "board member Sis Anna's top 5."
- **Poll attendees** to see which was their top moment, giving them 5-6 big moments to choose from, or they can write their own. In the next newsletter you can share "the groups favorite moment."
- Pull out **powerful quotes and create quote graphics** after the event.
- If there's capacity, creating simple **opening and closing slides for the video** could look like [this one](#).

Remember that where possible, templatize your work so future efforts will become much easier, a sort of "plug and play."

POLICY

Policy works with time-sensitive content that often requires quick action. Currently policy content is pushed out through any planned outgoing emails or through its own Mailchimp list. There is uncertainty about whether the main NESAWG list is the right place for policy-heavy content.



Create a separate brand look for all policy content for clearer differentiation.

- To add consistency to all policy content, and differentiation from other NESAWG comms products, create a light **"brand look" for policy**, including assets like email header and a suite of icons in a few different brand colors. These can be used in any policy content no matter the channel.
- Start using **consistent subject line nomenclature** throughout all policy emails.



Actively pursue subscribers to the policy list by launching promotional campaigns.

- To actively build the already-very engaged policy list, ask partners in the food justice realm to **add a "subscribe" box** in their newsletter (in exchange for us doing the same.)
- Put out a specific, policy-centric **"look at what we do!" offer** to all relevant audiences showcasing what the policy newsletter offers, with a call to action to subscribe.

CALENDARS

A calendar can serve as a unifying tool to visually see all of NESAWG's activities in one place.

With it, departments can work in a more integrated way by **being mindful of others' activities**, which can help inform **smarter decision-making** that deploys content in a timely way, and avoids overloading any staff members. These are some tenets of **good, org-wide planning!** As the collective usage of shared calendars becomes more natural, you may even find that you are better prepared to manage things you cannot plan.



Bird's Eye View Calendar

Primary purpose: high-level planning, make strategic decisions around themes, see high- and low-activity periods

Primary user: All hands

Timeframe: 6-12 months

Sample: NESAWG's 2021 [Organization-wide Calendar](#)



Editorial Calendar

Primary purpose: ground-level planning, execution

Primary User: Comms personnel

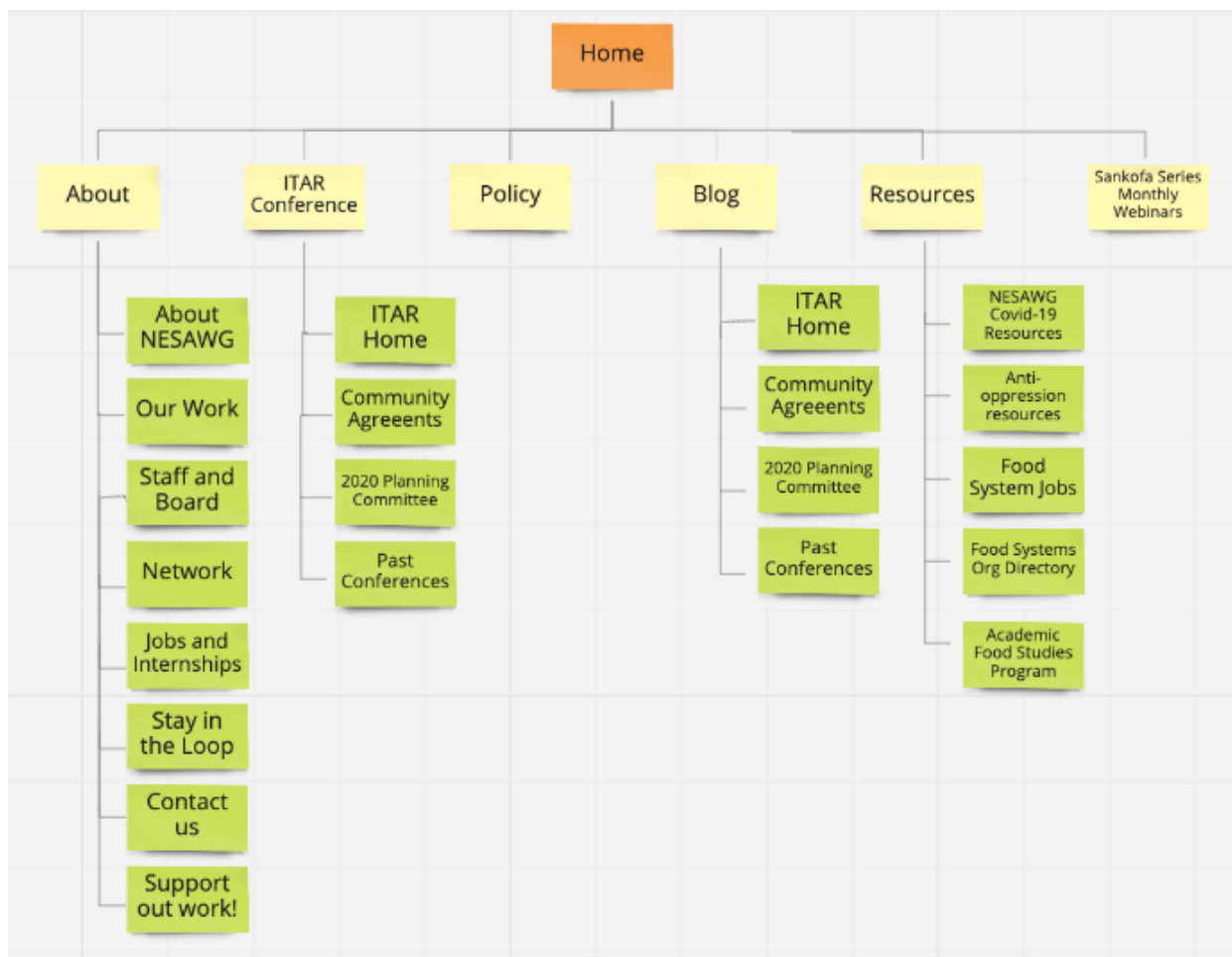
Timeframe: weekly, monthly

Sample: NESAWG's [editorial calendar](#)

Because **comms folx are closest to the operationalization of comms ideas**, their insights into messaging, framing, audiences, timing, and tactics can be invaluable in the project's ideation phase.

WEBSITE

Without having explored with you all about the website, my thoughts are only as good as my experience and intuition. Having clearly defined strategic goals can lead to more refined ideas!



NESAWG's website sitemap, created in [Miro's Mind Map](#)

- Each green page is a standalone page. Consider **consolidating some pages** so that experientially, it could be less confusing and overwhelming for the user. A lot of bifurcation of information can make it hard to find content.
 - For **example**, "About NESAWG" and "Our Work" could be combined into one page.
- "Stay in the loop" and "donate" are already in the upper right hand corner. Consider moving them out of the "About" menu and actually giving them their own blocks on the home page. That way they'll stand out more and give your users **immediate calls to action**.
- The "Policy" page appears to serve two purposes, 1) to tell folx about policy work at NESAWG, and 2) to sign them up for the newsletter. The first can be done in the "About / Our Work" page, and the latter can be another block or box on the homepage. These changes serve to **consolidate and drive greater attention**, respectively.
- Increasing connectivity throughout the site by **linking users to other pages** can help guide visitors to see more of your work.
- Currently the four items under the "Blog" menu item appears to be used as categorization. It could be a cleaner user experience if there were no drop down menu, people clicked right into the blog, and there, each blog post is "tagged" or categorized. For heightened searchability, you could add a search or filter function there so if they could choose a specific category. But when they land, they **gain exposure to all of your excellent content**.
- The homepage is valuable real estate, and currently it's fairly light on content. Consider what content types / categories you want on the homepage to achieve the right balance, and **maximize your homepage**.



Audit the website's pages and content. Review each page with an eye first toward what is obsolete and can be removed or deactivated. Of what remains, identify redundancies and where possible, combine or relocate with an eye towards highest likelihood of user engagement. During this process, consider where to put content that doesn't currently live on the site, but should.



Recognizing that the homepage is highly valuable real estate, create a more dynamic and impactful experience for users.

Some ideas for website homepage content include:

- Leverage **testimonials** from individuals or organizations in NESAWG's network throughout the site, so as to reinforce NESAWG's value propositions.
- Demonstrate impact by sharing an important **statistic or two** of yours and your partners' work.
- Continue to **conduct profiles and expand the funnel** to profile individuals from member organizations within the network.
- Demonstrate the extent of your network by **creating a map** showing all the organizations within the network and region. (Like the one already started for NEASDA!)
- Emphasize NESAWG's educational value by adding a block just to **view past webinars or conference content**. And inviting folks to upcoming learning opportunities.

CASE STUDY: Girls Who Code

If you strip away the fancy designs and cool animations, and simply view their blocks of content for their purpose, you'll find that [their website](#) contains a **diverse and robust array of content**, pointing to their mission, profiling people who've benefited from their programs, statistic of their industry, geographic perspective of their work, and diverse calls to action / entry points into their programming,

Their homepage feels like an easy flow, in part due to the beautiful designs, but it seems they also strategized around **what value propositions + calls to action they want to highlight**. It's a nice mix that works.



**IDEAS
FOR THE
FUTURE**

NESAWG NETWORK LISTSERV

Engagement on the listserv happens on a passive level.

Since "network" is the number one thing that NESAWG staffed reflected as its identity and value, perhaps **engaging this listserv more intentionally** is of interest.

This will add time to someone's plate! Something to keep in mind.



Engage in more active facilitation of the list.

Here are some ideas on how to engage your list more intentionally.

- **Check in questions:** Could be about food systems topics, or occasionally a wellbeing check might also be welcomed. Once a month frequency. Putting check-in responses in a public "white board" could really allow others to "meet" and "see" each other in a casual, digital way. **Example:** Check out this collective visioning from an organization called Media2070, where they asked their network "what do you see when you envision media reparations?"
- **Polls:** Polls are pre-populated with responses already so that's how it's different from check-in questions. These might be used to get a pulse or feel for where the group is at on a specific topic. Maybe it can be used to gauge sentiment around a recent food justice topic? The group may benefit from knowing the results of the poll.
- **Convene a meet-n-greet:** This can easily be done in Zoom, where breakout rooms of two people each would get a few minutes to answer a simple prompt as a way to get to know one another, put a face to a name, see where work / lives may align. Casual,

EARNED (OR SHARED) MEDIA

According to HubSpot, “earned media, or earned content, is any material written about you or your business that you haven't paid for or created yourself.”

As opposed to paid media, like advertising, or owned media, like self-authored blog posts, earned media can also be thought of as how people view—and talk about—you in public.

Similar to testimonials, it can be great to leverage the voices of other individuals, organizations, and platforms to help amplify your organization's work. In mutually admiring relationships, NESAWG could also offer the same back, which is why creating a strong network of like-minded partners, where an exchange and flow of content and engagement is both high quality and relevant, can lead to some sweet earned media.

Examples

- NESAWG being featured on the **Laura Flanders show**
- If an organization within the NESAWG network decides to feature NESAWG in an **article** titled “5 organizations to watch in the food equity space.”
- This is more “shared” media, but **co-authoring pieces with partner organizations or like-minded individuals** means double the minds and ideas, double the reach, double the promotion, and it also decenters (or broadens) thought leadership to a more community feel.



See how co-authorship can be a part of your approach to content.

TESTIMONIALS

Leveraging testimonials from folx who have engaged with (and love) your work can offer you a powerful "word of mouth" promotional impact.

Here are the steps you can take to get started.

1. **Create a funnel of testimonials** either through existing streams of communications or creating new ones. You can ask Sankofa webinar or ITAR attendees generally, or individually writing people or orgs whose testimonial you'd love.
2. Either immediately during the ask (preferred) or as a follow up, be clear that their testimonial will be stored for **later use for marketing and promotions** in print or digital forms. Be sure to receive their consent before storing.
3. Start a doc and **store all your testimonials in one place**, documenting who they are and from what perspective they are speaking.
4. Anytime you're getting ready to promote any aspect of NESAWG's work, **ask yourself**, 'is there a testimonial that can be a powerful addition to what I would share?'



Create a process to collect, store, and leverage testimonials.

POLLING

Polls can be an informative and fun way to engage with your network.

- When comms can often feel one directional, polls open up **a space where an exchange can happen**, and if done in an open and transparent way, you could even be facilitating the network to get to know one another.
- **Poll topics can range** from a light “check in” question, to more issue-based, serious questions. It could be one question in the Field Notes email, or a full on 5-minute survey on details of a possible membership model.
- Chances are the more you do them, the lower the return on engagement, so **being prudent and selective** is a good practice.

Bounding the Network Survey

In reviewing the report from the 2018 Bounding the Network Survey, I found these highlights interesting and I wanted to offer some thoughts from the comms lens.

Many organizations' primary challenge is visibility of their issues. There are great opportunities for comms to get creative and support this. If visibility is the desire, you have a platform and a network. How can you leverage these?

White nonprofit staff are concerned with how to engage with communities of color. Does NESAWG view itself as taking up a role in supporting other white-led organizations and white staff?

A desire for bilingual or multilingual spaces at ITAR. It sounds like you all are on top of this already. The Communications Network has a [checklist for accessibility at virtual events](#).

What are, if any, the next steps with membership? It seems there've been many conversations about this. In case it's helpful to consider: membership could definitely add clarity around to whom NESAWG is accountable to; it can be a complex process to try and define what membership looks like (free vs. paying vs. individuals vs. organizations vs. function-based vs. values-based); ultimately it seems important to be clear about what creating a membership model would serve, and whether that service is priority enough to test. If and when you get farther along in this process, polling your network more specifically on membership types, willingness to join, membership values, etc. could be illuminating.

Who is NESAWG accountable to? What does accountability look like? I am sure you all have way more thoughts about this having grappled with it for much longer, and much more deeply! I wondered, in the interim of not having a membership and therefore less clarity around the "who" in this question, if a different way of framing this could be "against what values are we accountable to?" This puts the ball back in your court where you have control to take positions based on your, say, anti-racist, anti-oppression values.

NARRATIVE SHIFT



“The mighty Mississippi River flows from an expansive watershed. Countless small tributaries braid their way across the land. The Mississippi gathers momentum and strength as culverts, streams and rivers flow into it. Big events, a storm for instance, will bring a massive influx of water and energy to the river. What happens when we see our advocacy as a mighty river made strong by individual sources?

The Narrative Initiative

It seems NESAWG isn't yet sure about what role it wants to play in contributing to narrative shift. To gain a better sense, here are **some questions you can ask** yourself:

- Are there clear positions we can take of narratives we don't like?
- Are there clear positions we can take of narratives we do like?
- Do we want to be in a position to hold organizations accountable for perpetuating harmful narratives?
- Are we ready to commit to putting our narrative shift efforts in a lot of places?
- Are we ready to commit to organizing our narrative shift efforts with a lot of partners?

Resources

- [Rooted, Ready, and Resilient Messaging Guide](#), by HEAL Food Alliance
- [We Make the Future Messaging Guide 2020](#), by Race Class Narrative Action
- [Narrative Strategies for Food System Transformation](#), by Food Solutions New England
- Fiona's [notes](#) on narrative change



THANK YOU!