Power of Pop Fund

Pop Culture for Social Justice:
A foundational framework
April 2024
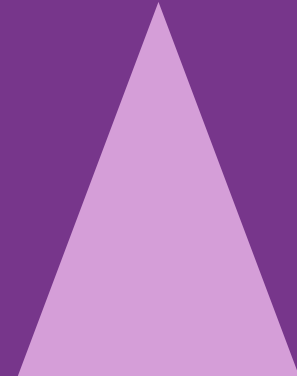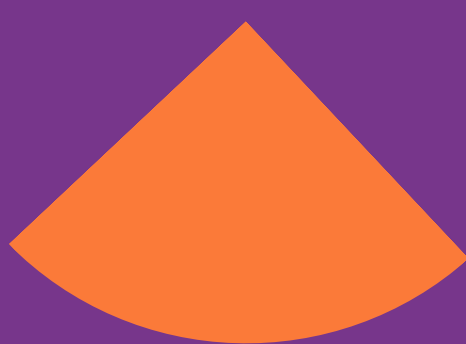
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INTRODUCTION

This framework was created in Spring 2024 to better understand how strategic funding interventions could advance pop culture as a tool used for social justice.

Creation of the framework was funded by the Power of Pop Fund to underpin the fund's future work and capture current understanding of spaces and flows influencing change in the field of pop culture for social justice.

This document aims to make clear the logic behind investing in interventions fitting within the framework with a series of if/then statements connecting theory underlying this work.

While the Power of Pop Fund currently focuses on migration and racial justice, the framework presented can be applied to intersecting focus areas, such as issues of climate justice, gender equity, youth justice, and so on.

This framework builds on existing research which outlines the ways in which arts, media, and culture transform our perspectives and reshape our world. Trusting the robustness of this foundational research, our exploration leans into *how* pop and mainstream culture are created and maintained, such that we can build a more socially just world.

Additionally, this work rests upon robust scholarship and practical learning in the following fields:[1]
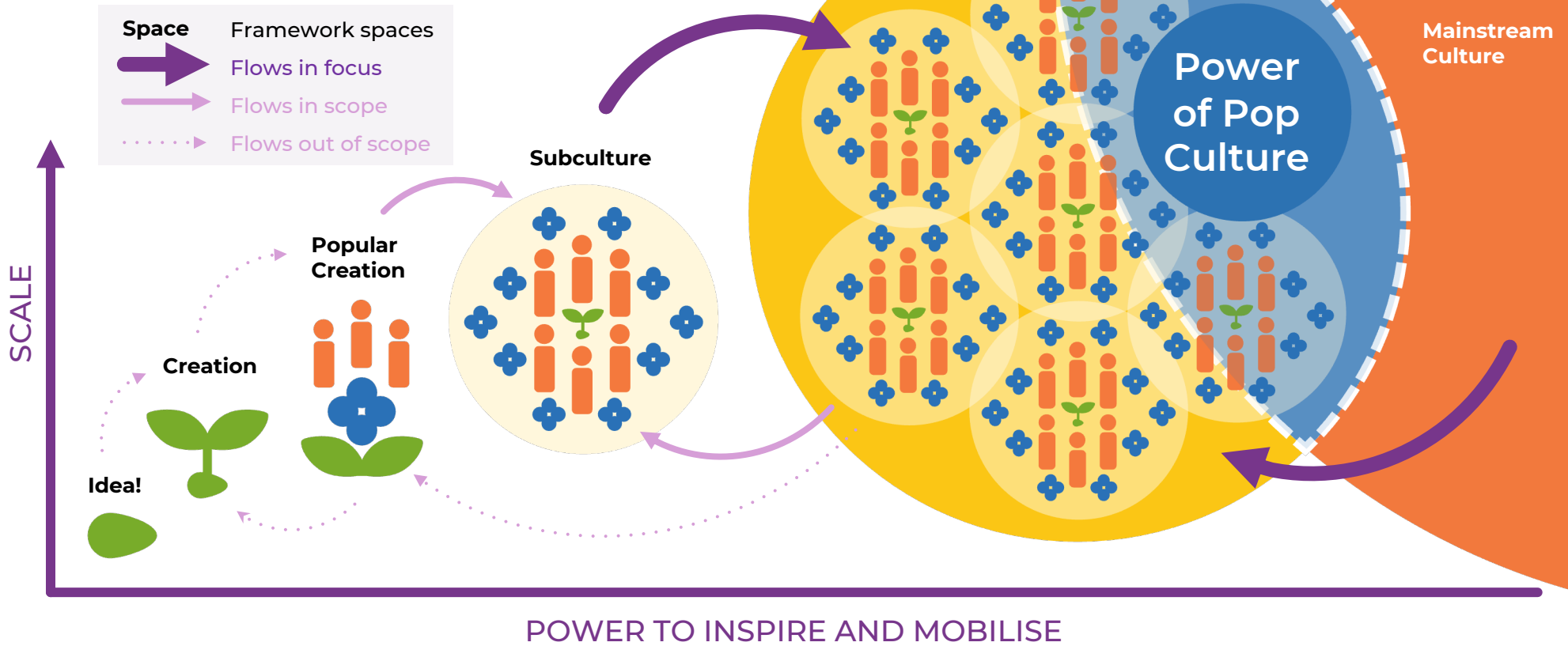
- pop culture for social change
- narrative change and cultural strategy
- cultural democratisation
- representation in media
- movement building
- social marketing and behavioural change

Across these fields actors are seeking to understand who has the power to craft, tell, and spread stories that shape our collective consciousness.

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1. See endnotes for further reading and inspiring organisations working in these fields.

FRAMEWORK OF POP CULTURE AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

SCALE ↑

Space — Framework spaces
→ Flows in focus
→ Flows in scope
⋯→ Flows out of scope

Idea!

Creation

Popular Creation

Subculture

Pop Culture

Power of Pop Culture

Mainstream Culture

POWER TO INSPIRE AND MOBILISE

A pop culture for social justice story

Idea
Universal housing

Creation
A designer creates a new video game where the player must build housing for all, though not everyone can pay.

Popular Creation
The game is widely reviewed and shared among board gamers. Outside of this community, people have no idea it exists.

Subculture
Gamers begin using the game's jargon, making jokes relevant to the characters, and wearing t-shirts and other merchandise with the game's artwork.

Pop Culture
People who have never played the game are wearing the t-shirts. A singer references the game in her lyrics. New slang pops up and the release of an expansion is widely covered in the news.

Mainstream Culture
In part because of the game's popularity, a majority of the population is interested in new ways to provide housing for all and people in power can reference ideas from the game in creating and gaining support for housing policies.

DEFINING THE SPACES OF THE FRAMEWORK

Change starts with new **ideas**—ideas about how society is structured, what is possible, and what we deem desirable.

Artists, writers, and all variety of makers turn ideas into **creations**. These can be wide-ranging, inclusive of any medium and channel (film, TV, music, books, games, etc.).

Some creations are shared with others and become **popular** among a specific group. This means many members of a primary audience are engaging with (liking, using, sharing, seeing, recommending, consuming, etc.) the creation.

When people within a primary audience begin to own, shape and reshape the popular creation it contributes to a **subculture**, staying within a specific community.

When the popular creation is shared beyond an original/primary audience to new communities and those communities engage and participate in sharing and shaping it, then it becomes part of, or contributes to, **pop culture**. Pop culture is a collection of creative ideas and people's interaction with these ideas which creates emergent, commonly shared reference points at a large scale.

Mainstream culture is the prevailing set of norms, values, and practices that are widely accepted and embraced by the majority within a society or community. As such, it influences individual and group behaviours, mindsets, and beliefs which in turn shape everything from our politics to our social and economic infrastructure. Mainstream culture is much slower to change than popular culture and largely determined as existing power structures legitimise and control the flow of information and ideas that enter this space.

Pop culture and mainstream culture overlap, with ideas often entering and being absorbed into mainstream culture via pop culture. Because pop culture is emergent and mutable, it is a more rapid and accessible path of entry to influence mainstream culture. This is the **uniqueness of pop culture as a tool for justice.**
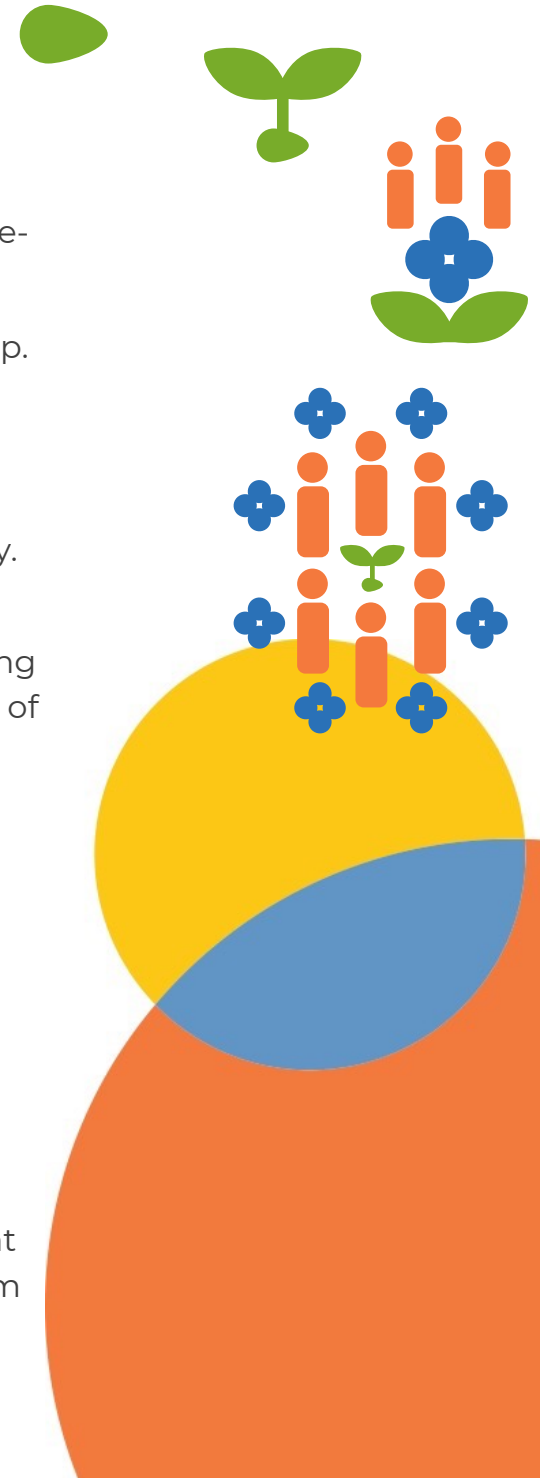
THE VISION OF POP CULTURE AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

We envision a world where communities drive the creation of pop culture and use its power to inspire collective care and mobilise action to foster a more just society.
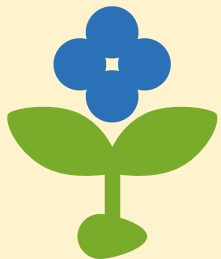
WHAT IS POP CULTURE?

Pop culture is a collection of creative ideas and people's interaction with these ideas which creates emergent, commonly shared reference points at a mass scale.
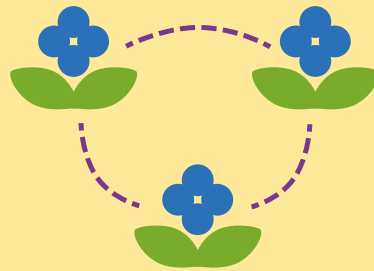
Characteristics of pop culture

CREATIVE

- A collection of creative ideas that are shared across communities.

- Art has an exceptional ability to open people's hearts and minds to new feelings and ideas.
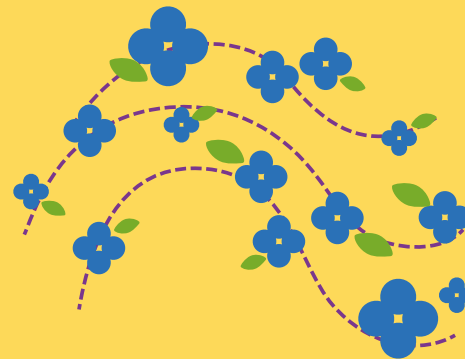
INTERACTIVE

- People playing with, sharing, and stretching these ideas.

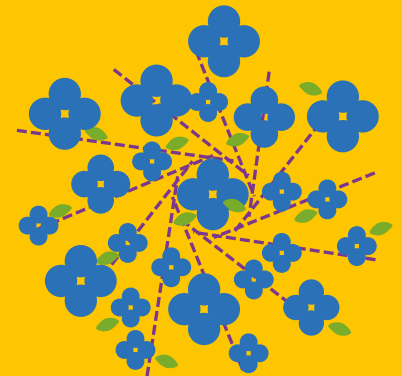- Through shared experiences we create community and establish norms.

EMERGENT

- Contemporary, relevant, unpredictable.

- Ideas can spark and quickly come into focus.

EXPANSIVE

- Reach and consumption at scale.

- The breadth of people and communities involved is massive.

Why is pop culture powerful?

USING THE FRAMEWORK FLOWS TO FOSTER SOCIAL JUSTICE

Ideas and creations move between spaces, sometimes linearly in either direction, sometimes quickly dropping out of fashion.

In general, for an idea to increase in power and scale, it needs resources:

- Time, money, and space to make quality, compelling, and relatable creations.
- Access to new audiences and channels for distributing content for people to consume, as well as interact with, ideas.

Here lies the problem.

Popular culture currently is broadly determined by those holding power from dominant institutions (i.e., entertainment, media, and tech companies within mainstream culture). Creative actors not within those powers are burned out, working in scarcity and disconnection, and ultimately have limited participation and impact with the popular art they are able to create.

Additionally, social justice messaging is often grounded in crisis, not maximizing the creative techniques that inspire mass behaviour change.

For new ideas to move into and ultimately *change* mainstream culture to be more just, the following causal relationships are evident.

IF ➡ **THEN**

we understand the ways in which creations flow

we can design and fund strategic interventions that utilise these flows to advance social justice.

- **IF** organisations and businesses working in the overlap between pop culture and social justice have adequate resourcing and coordination **THEN** they can sustain and build their collective effort over time towards systemic transformation.

- **IF** there are places and spaces for convening, connecting, networking, and co-creating **THEN** ideas within subcultures are more likely to move between subcultures into pop and mainstream cultures.

- **IF** creatives have adequate resourcing **THEN** they have the time, money, and space to create quality, compelling, and relatable creations.

- **IF** an idea has access to channels for dissemination **THEN** it is more likely to find broader and more diverse audiences.

- **IF** an idea is relevant and of interest **THEN** it is more likely to be interacted with and consumed by many people.

- **IF** an idea is consumed by many people **THEN** it is more likely to be shared across subcultures and to have more influence at a population level.

USING THE FLOW FROM SUBCULTURE INTO POP CULTURE TO FOSTER SOCIAL JUSTICE

IF ideas can gain access to be consumed by more people without going through existing power brokers **THEN** pop culture will be more representative and diverse.

IF there is a broad and diverse set of actors who are supported and widely networked **THEN** ideas are more likely to cross subcultures and enter pop culture.

IF resources to create are available to subculture actors **THEN** they can produce compelling, relevant and diverse creations.

IF creations from subcultures are shaped for audiences of interest and/or to meet other market demands **THEN** mainstream power holders are more likely to use and promote them into pop culture.

Subculture to Pop Culture
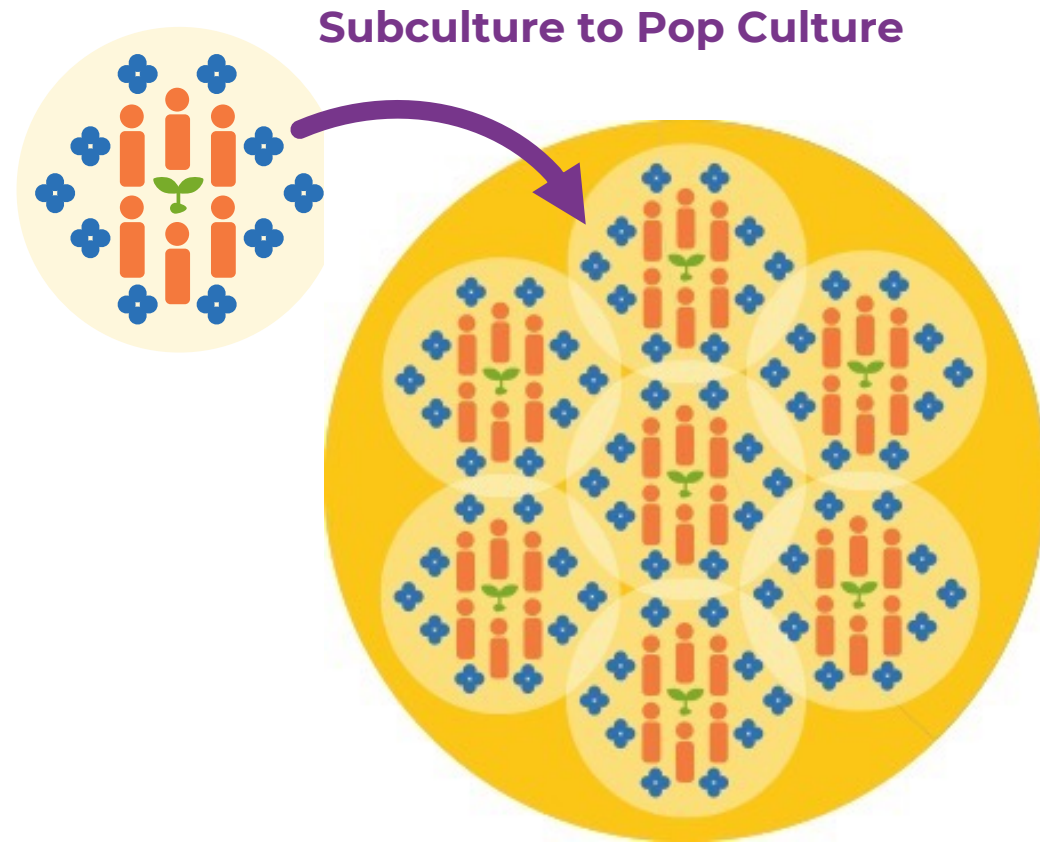
EXAMPLES

OF THE FLOW FOSTERING SOCIAL JUSTICE:

Renowned writer, musician, and actress Michaela Coel built popularity through her show *Chewing Gum,* inspired by her play *Chewing Gum Dreams*. Her later work, *I May Destroy You,* was a hit BBC TV show exploring key themes of sexual and gender-based violence, bringing to public discourse the importance of believing survivors and the role of public authorities in offering support.

OF INFLUENCING THIS FLOW:

Counterpoint Arts works to support and produce art by and about migrants and refugees, seeking to ensure that their contributions are recognized and welcomed within British culture. Key to their work is their belief that art can provide a space for people to meet and learn about others, resulting in new perspectives.

USING THE FLOW FROM MAINSTREAM CULTURE INTO POP CULTURE TO FOSTER SOCIAL JUSTICE

IF the entertainment, media, and social media actors are made up of diverse creatives **THEN** we are more likely to see more humanising and nuanced stories, offering new perspectives for audiences.

IF entertainment, media, social media, and tech actors share decision-making power with members of subcultures who may be currently marginalised or underrepresented **THEN** ideas from those subcultures are more likely to make it into pop culture.

IF entertainment, media, social media, and tech actors invest more into reaching audiences comprised of subcultures **THEN** pop culture is more likely to include ideas and diverse perspectives, increasing both social impact and revenue for creators.
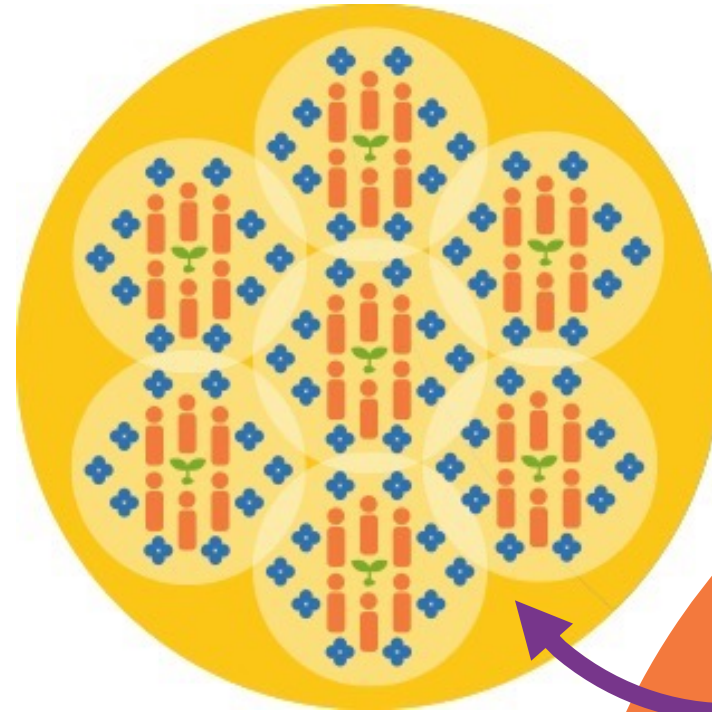
Mainstream Culture to Pop Culture

EXAMPLES

OF THE FLOW FOSTERING SOCIAL JUSTICE:

Funded and produced by Disney, *Black Panther* was the second highest grossing film of 2018. This blockbuster demonstrated that centering a film in a fictional majority Black country still drew in record breaking crowds and prompted conversations about racial justice and thriving Black communities.

OF INFLUENCING THIS FLOW:

Heard is an organization working with mainstream media and news outlets to connect these outlets with people who have directly experienced different issues addressed in the media, leading to more nuanced and informed stories.

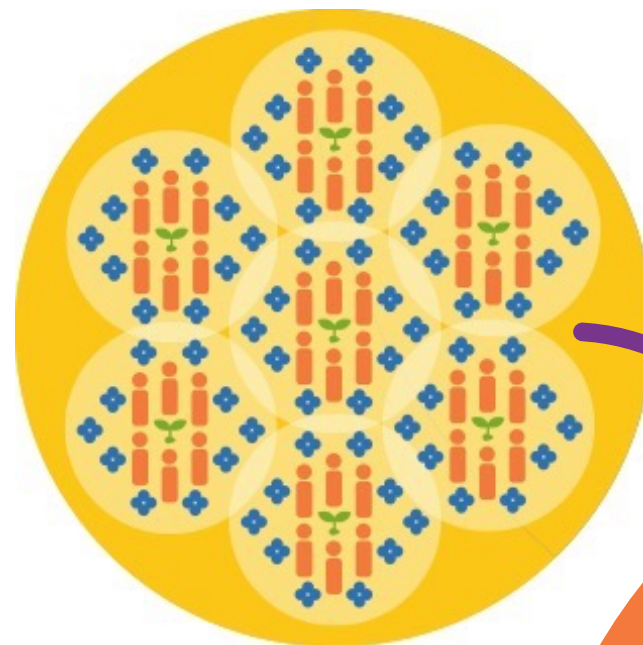# USING THE FLOW FROM POP CULTURE INTO MAINSTREAM CULTURE TO FOSTER SOCIAL JUSTICE

IF people are already consuming pop culture creations and these creations are compelling **THEN** people are likely to think and act in alignment with what they are consuming.

IF there are more connections between organisations seeking to influence pop culture **THEN** there is greater chance for becoming mainstream through coordination, amplification of each other, and efficiency.

IF pop culture has fewer stereotypes and more humanising narratives about complex groups of people **THEN** the populace will hold fewer prejudices and will have more inclusive attitudes.

IF pop culture leads to more positive public attitudes about certain populations or issues **THEN** subsequent legislation may be less hostile and more supportive of social change.

IF pop culture is more representative of our diverse societies **THEN** public discourse is more likely to be pluralistic and inclusive, supporting a well-functioning democracy.

Pop Culture to Mainstream Culture

EXAMPLES

OF THE FLOW FOSTERING SOCIAL JUSTICE:

Mr Bates vs. The Post Office was a landmark show broadcast by ITV in 2024 highlighting the injustice of sub postmasters at the hands of the Post Office. The programme grabbed the nation's attention and renewed public inquiry on the matter, ultimately leading to Paula Vennels (former CEO) handing back her Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) ranking and new national legislation.

OF INFLUENCING THIS FLOW:

OKRE works to ensure pop culture creatives are informed by lived experience, research, and entertainment expertise so their messages of social justice are more likely to engage audiences, challenge misperceptions, and inspire change.

REFLECTIONS ON THIS FRAMEWORK

Although dominant structures of current mainstream culture are powerful, collective community action and ideas can overcome these structures. By providing inspiration and imagination, pop culture can empower mass audiences to challenge existing social norms and powerholders.

Using pop culture as a tool for social justice is a fundamentally collective endeavour which needs to be reflected in a range of activities and interventions. It is the collective undertaking that builds power over time.

QUESTIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS USING THIS FRAMEWORK

- In which spaces and flows are you involved?

- How might your existing or intended work feed into this broader field?

- What infrastructure is needed to support a range of interventions within the framework?

- Where are there gaps in the field as defined by this framework?

- Where is there untapped potential or opportunity to influence flows?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ENDNOTES   Organisations and resources informing this work:

- Pop culture for social change (US-based)
  - Pop Culture Collaborative
  - The Norman Lear Center
  - Center for Media and Social Impact
- Narrative change and cultural strategy
  - Storyline Partners
- Cultural democratisation
  - 64 Million Artists
  - A Restless Art
  - Transforming Society
- Representation in media
  - _Representology: The Journal of Media and Diversity_

- Movement building
  - Civic Power Fund
- Social marketing and behavioural change
  - Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard
- The role of philanthropy in creating social justice
  - Ten Years Time