

# Telling Stories Safely



Moving from narrative extraction to systemic community insight.

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Based on the provocations of Darren McGarvey and the Safe Storytelling Framework.

“I’m not moved by facts, I’m moved by strategic manipulation of my emotions.”

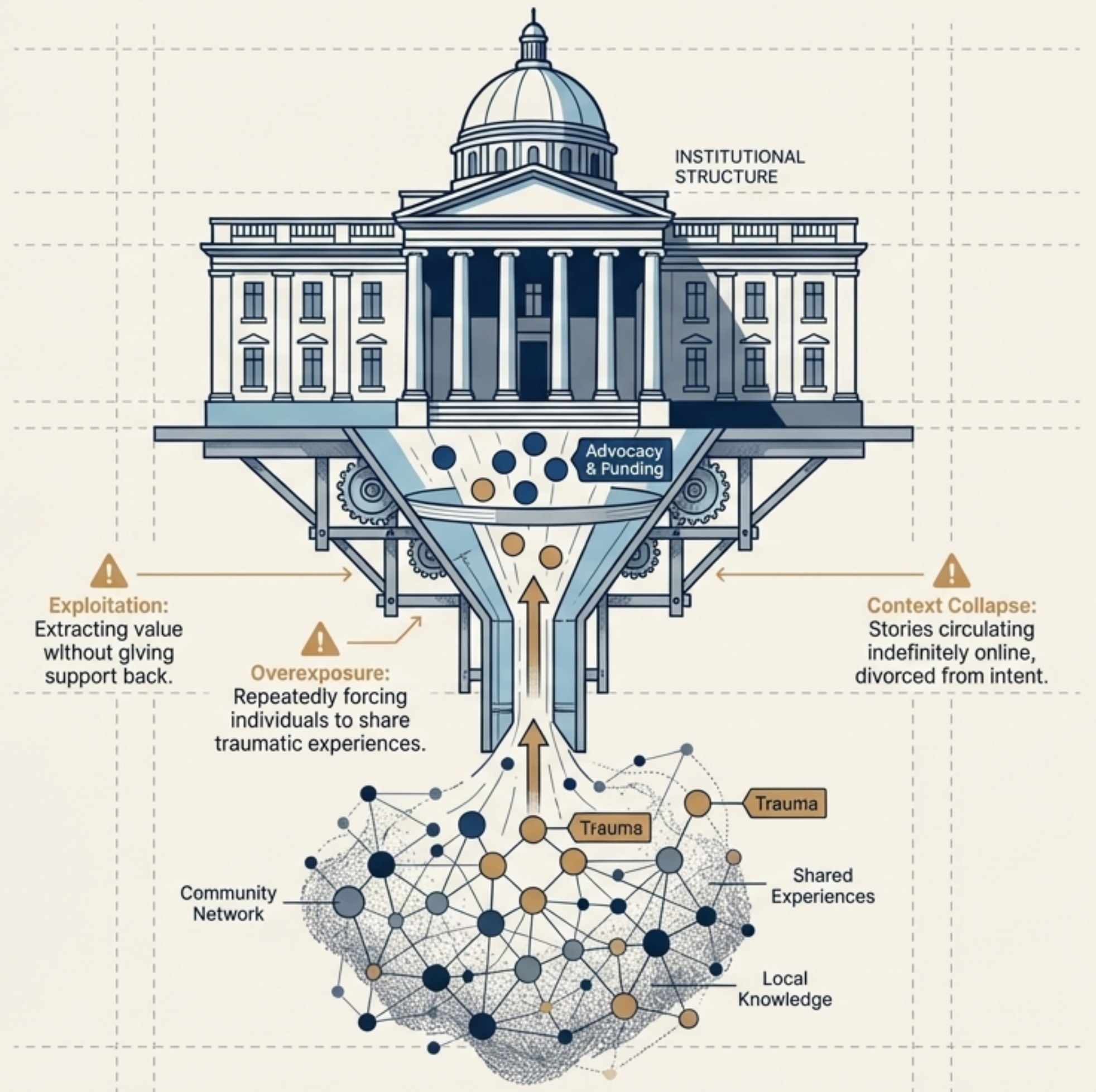
— Darren McGarvey, author and lived experience personality

## **Storytelling is never neutral.**

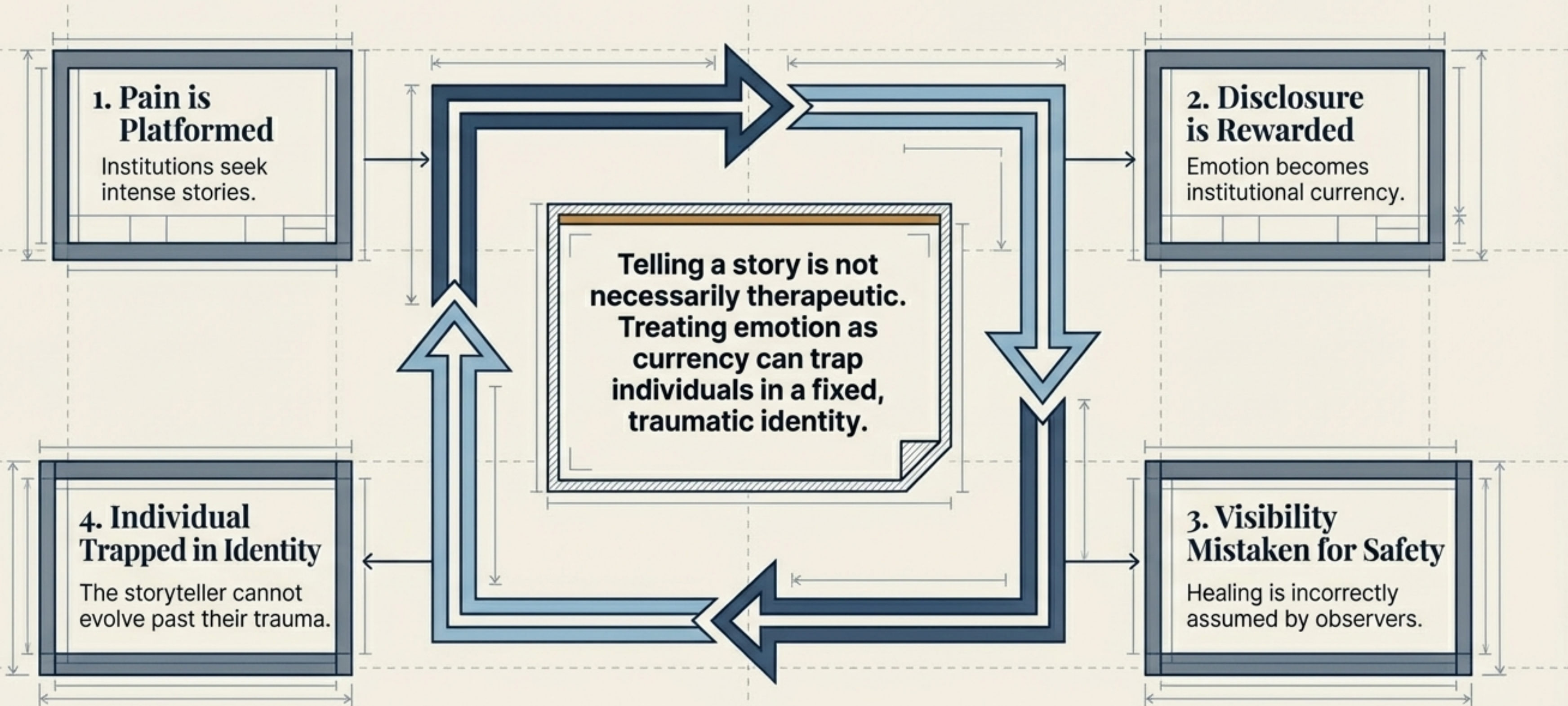
Storytelling is an editorial practice. Institutions make deliberate choices about what to include, who is centered, and how the narrative is framed for their own audiences.

# The Threat of Narrative Extraction

When institutions repeatedly draw stories from individuals for campaigns or funding bids, often **without adequate support or shared control.**



# The Illusion of Catharsis Culture



# Are We Experts in Our Own Lives?

## Formal Expertise

### Strengths

Subject to peer review, methodological scrutiny, and rigorous evidence testing.

### ● Blindspots

Often lacks empathy and a genuine understanding of lived, grounded reality.

## Lived Experience

### Strengths

Deeply authentic, emotionally resonant, and grounded in daily reality.

### ● Blindspots

Highly subjective, shaped by memory and trauma, and rarely representative of systemic scale.

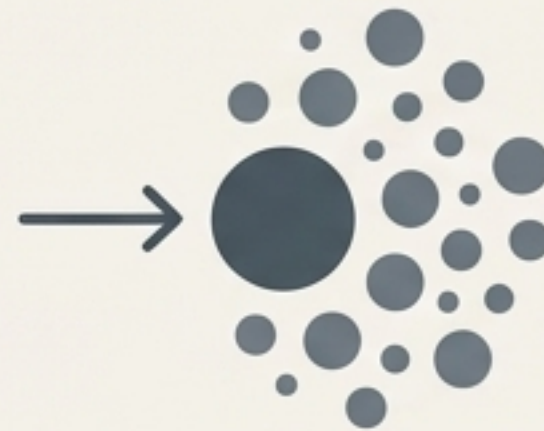
**Insight:** Having lived experience does not automatically confer systemic expertise. The institutional goal is combination, not substitution.

# The Three Traps in Civic Work



## 1. The Illustrative Anecdote Trap

The personal story replaces the structural evidence.



## 2. The Representative Voice Trap

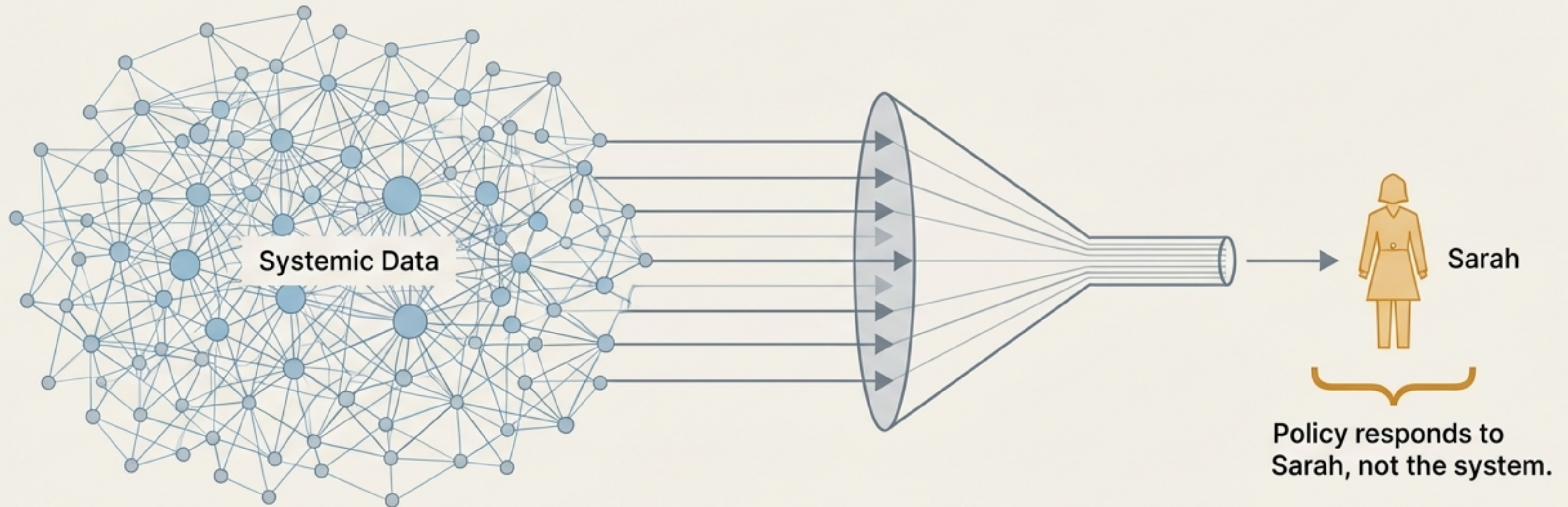
A single individual is made to stand in for a diverse community.



## 3. The Trauma Currency Trap

Pain becomes the primary source of persuasive capital.

# When Anecdote Becomes Proof



## ⚠ The Danger

Exceptional stories become typical examples. Structural problems are reduced to individual cases.

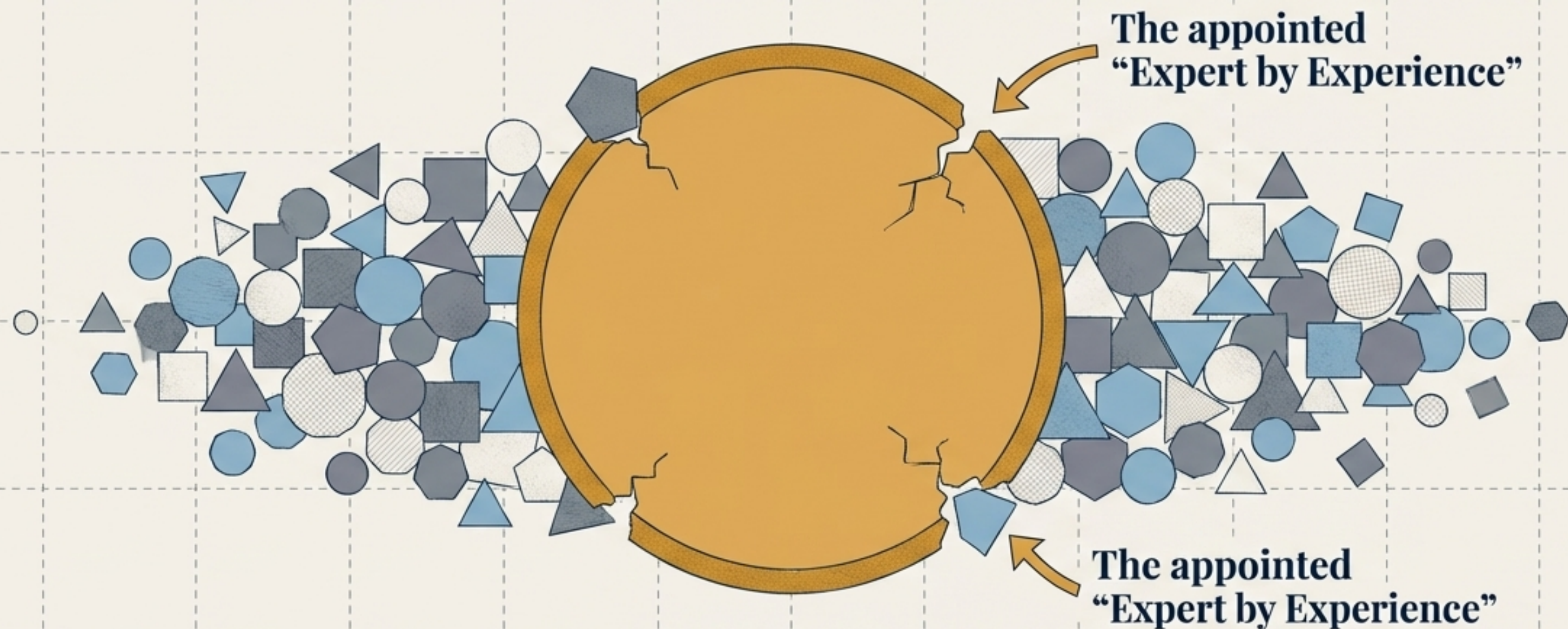
“What you hear: **“Let me tell you about Sarah...”**”

## 🔄 The Fix

Use stories to illustrate patterns, not replace them.

Shift the framing to: “Across dozens of conversations, we heard this pattern. One example is...”

# The Burden of Representation



## The Danger

Appointing a single spokesperson erases internal community disagreements and causes severe narrative fatigue for the individual.

“What you hear: ‘We need the community voice in the room.’”

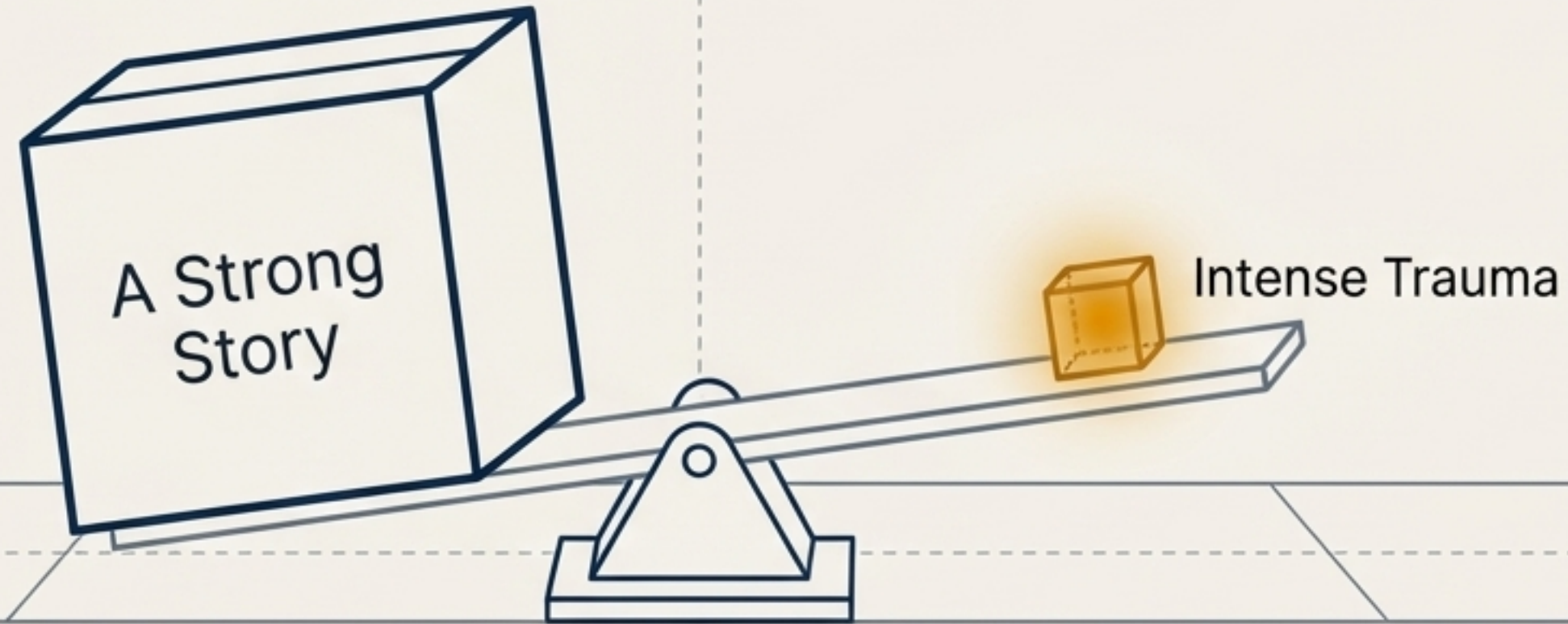


## The Fix

Shift from seeking “the community voice” to gathering patterns of “community insight” via insight logs, group conversations, and distributed ethnography.



# Pain as Persuasive Capital



## The Danger

Emotion influences policymakers more than data. Institutions unintentionally prioritize painful stories, defining people by their worst experiences.

**What you hear:** "We need a stronger, more powerful story for the report."



## The Fix

Ensure stories showcase agency, resilience, everyday experience, and community strength—not just crisis. Stop rewarding vulnerability with visibility.

**What you hear:** "Let's tell a story of overcoming, not just suffering."

# A New Mental Model for Civic Insight

'The Old Default'

~~Story~~ → ~~Insight~~

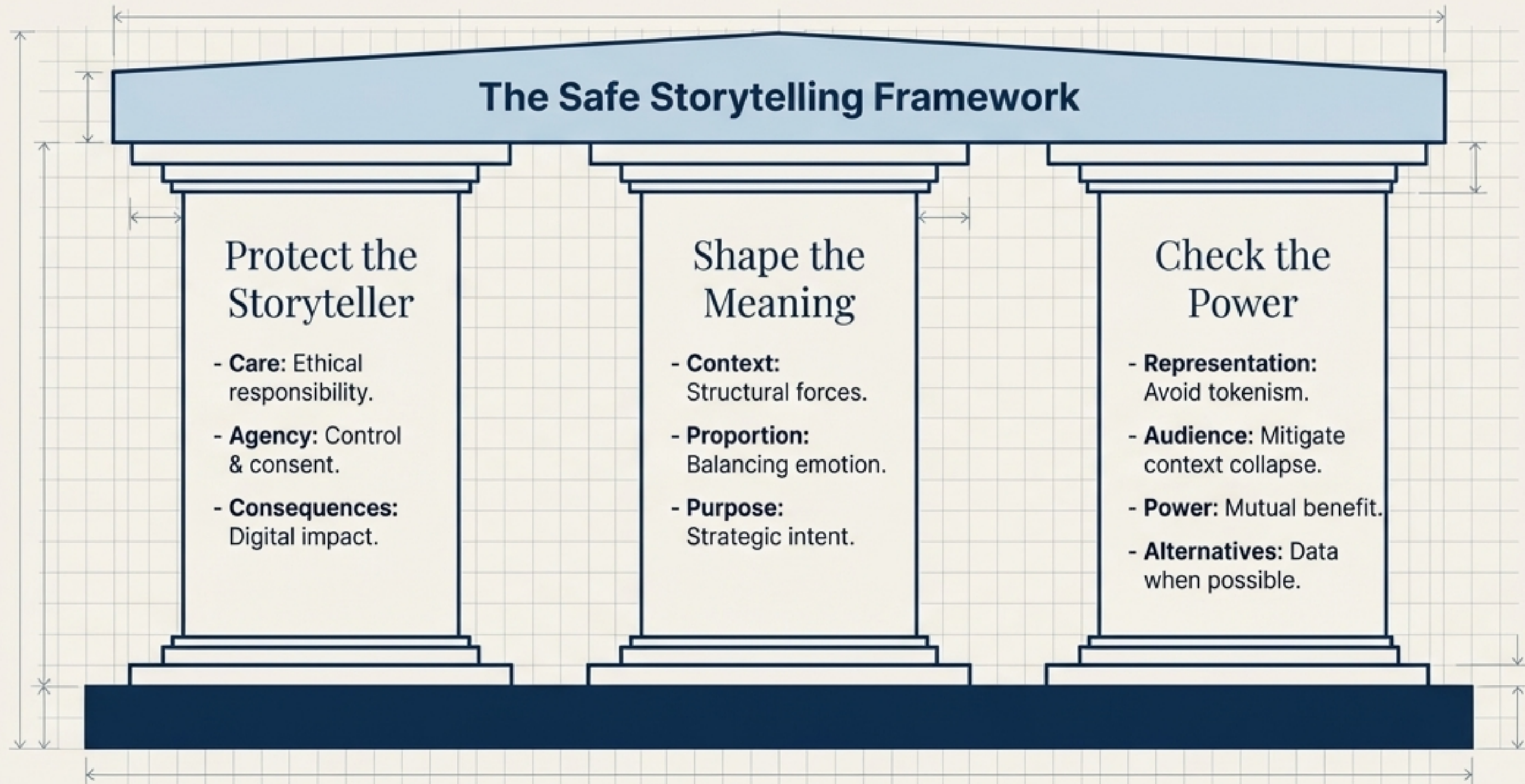
Extracting individual testimony to represent a whole. Stories act as conclusions.

'The New Model'

Stories → Patterns → Insight → Action

Distributed ethnography and community sensemaking. Multiple individual stories aggregate into patterns before becoming insight. Stories act as inputs.

# A Practical Guide to Responsible Storytelling



# Pillar 1: Protect the Storyteller

*First, do no harm. Visibility is not always safety.*

## Agency

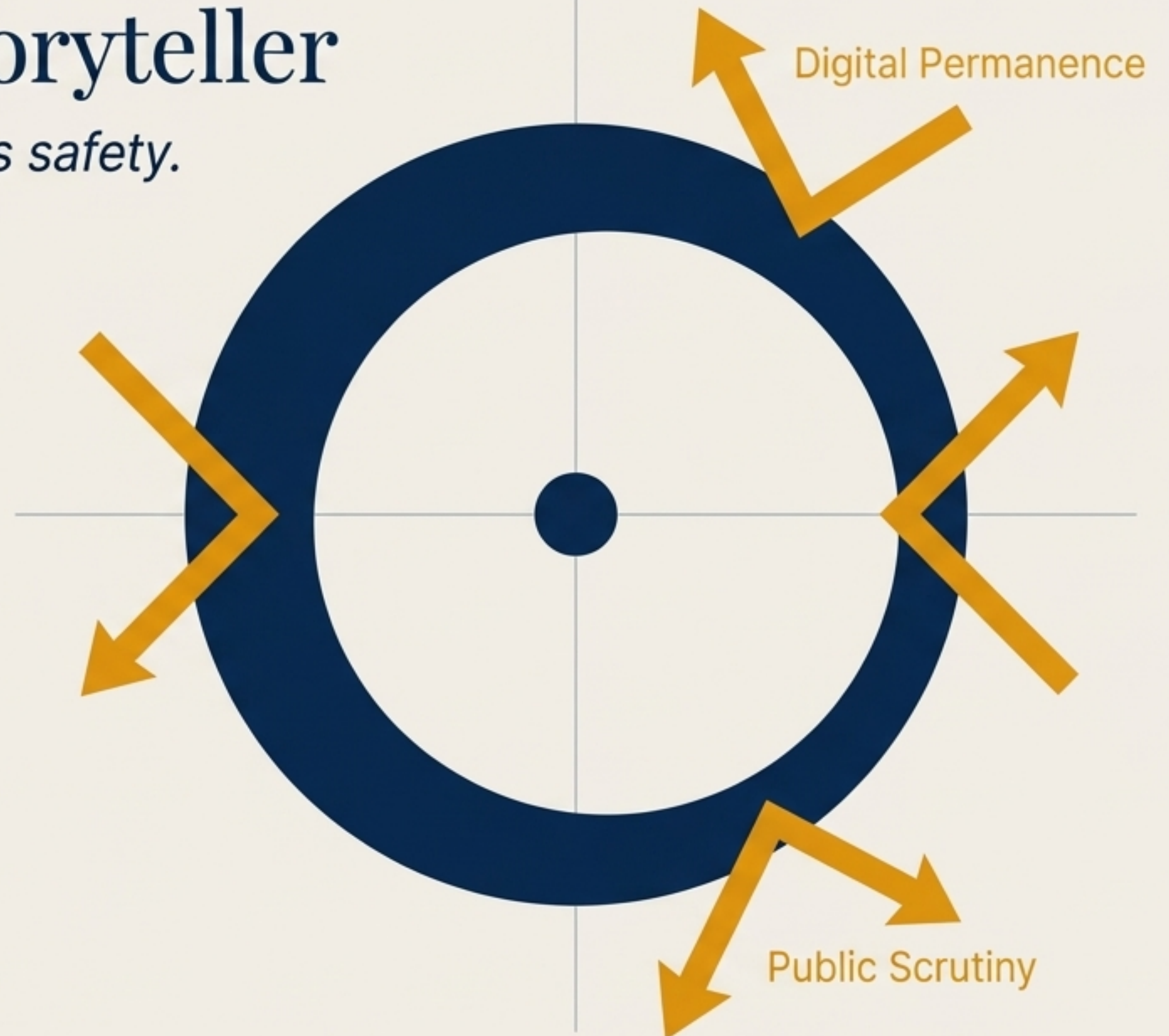
Who controls the story? Is the person an active participant, and can they withdraw consent later without penalty?

## Care

Are there hidden confidentiality risks or potential collateral damage to family members?

## Consequences

What happens after the story circulates? Is the individual supported when the public moves on?



# Pillar 2: Shape the Meaning

*Don't distort reality for engagement. Isolated stories reinforce harmful stereotypes.*

## Context

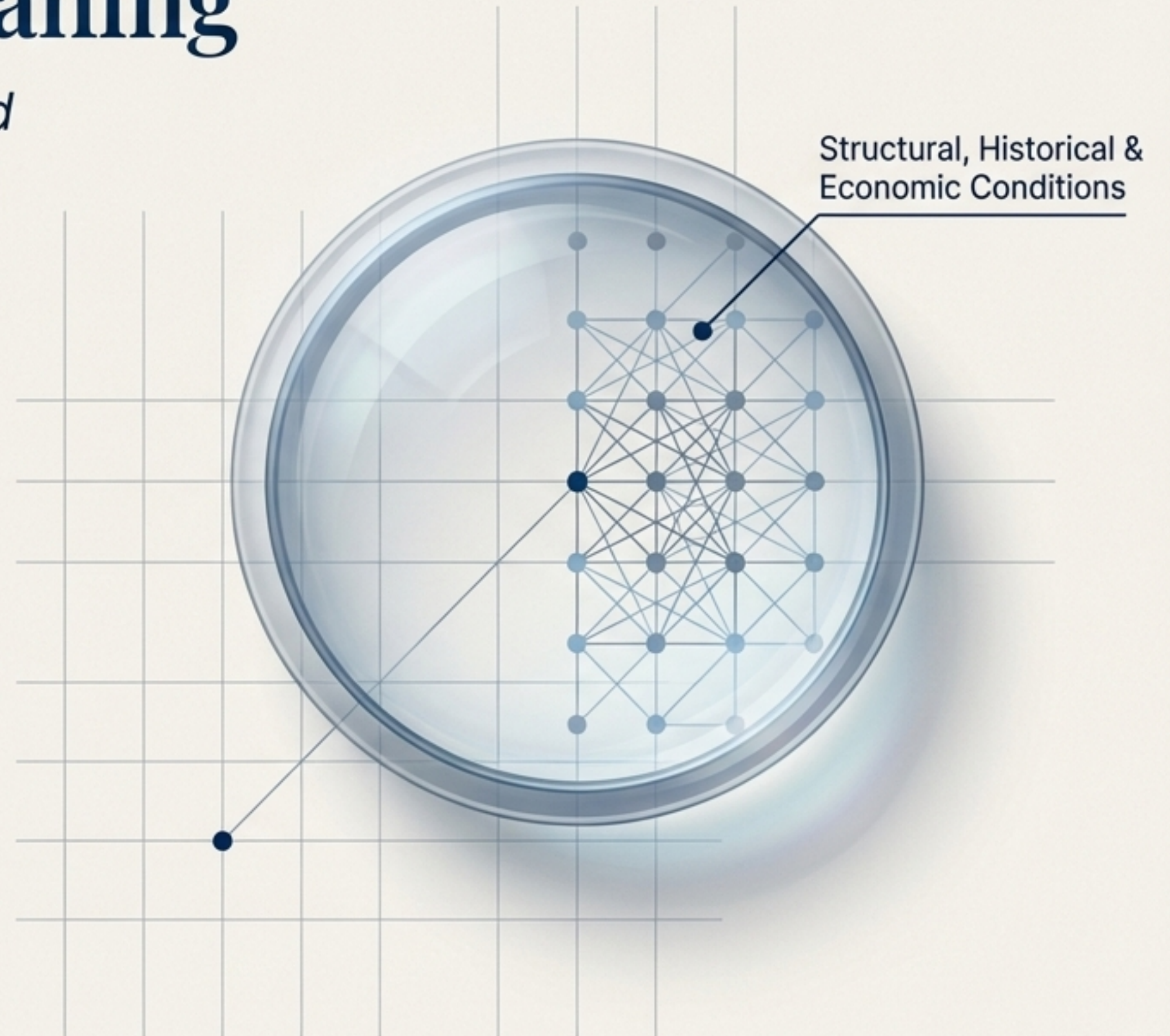
Place the story within its wider structural conditions (e.g., poor public space design, economic deprivation).

## Proportion

Balance emotion with detail. Avoid over-amplifying the most traumatic elements just to secure a reaction.

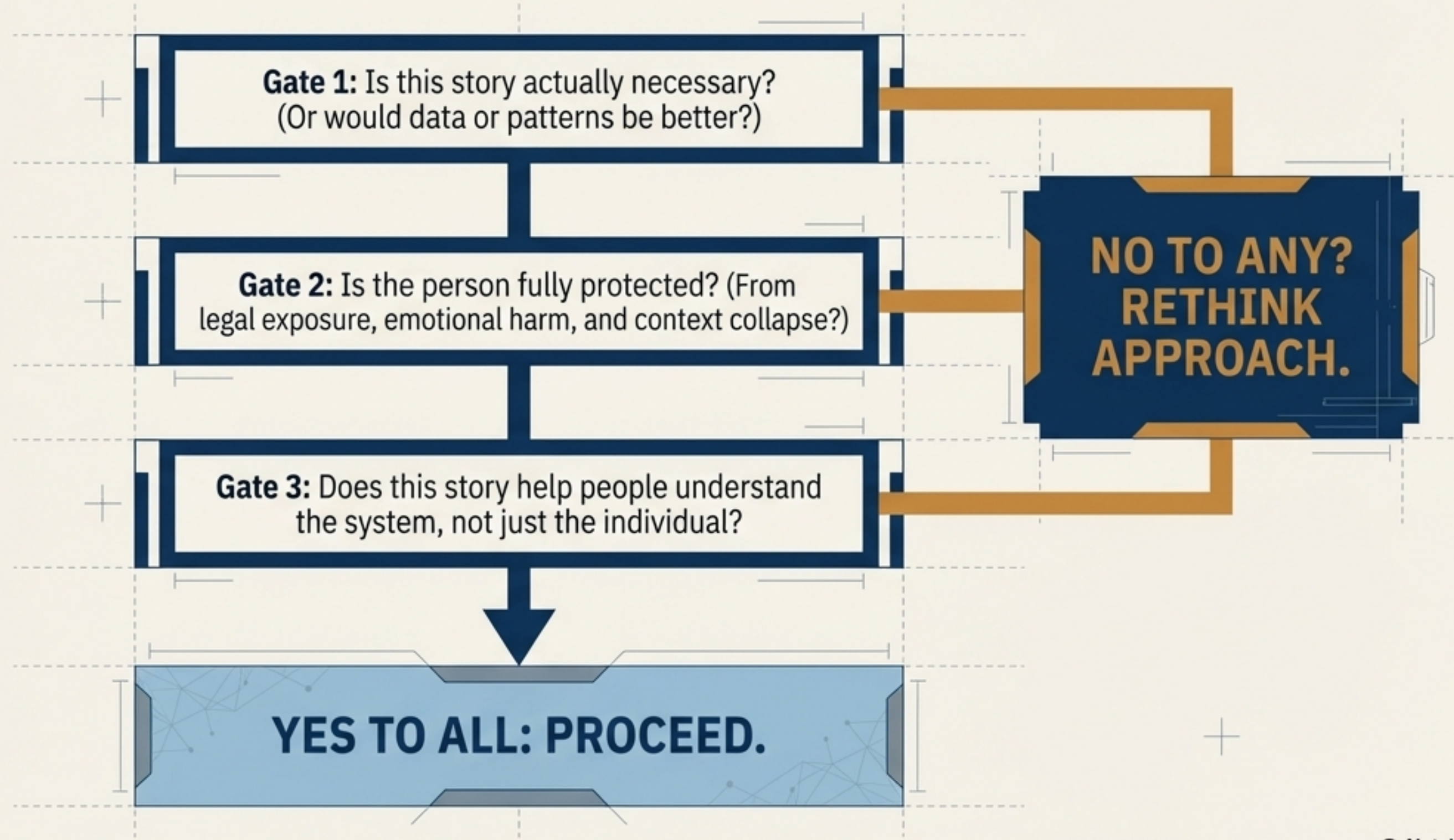
## Purpose

Are we genuinely informing policy, or just seeking a powerful, emotive anecdote to decorate a report?



# The 3-Question Test

Before using any community story, pass these three logic gates.





# Understanding Over Persuasion

*Are we using stories to understand people —  
or to persuade others?*

Good civic work prioritizes understanding first. Used responsibly, stories illuminate lived realities and strengthen community voice. Used poorly, they become the extraction of trauma for institutional gain. Focus on the pattern, protect the person, and change the system.