Massachusetts Department of Public Health

DPH

Crafting a message with impact: Public health messages with a heart

Storytelling strategies for local public health practitioners

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Disclaimer

Both speakers have no financial interests or relationships to disclose.

The communication challenge

We have the information. But are we creating understanding?

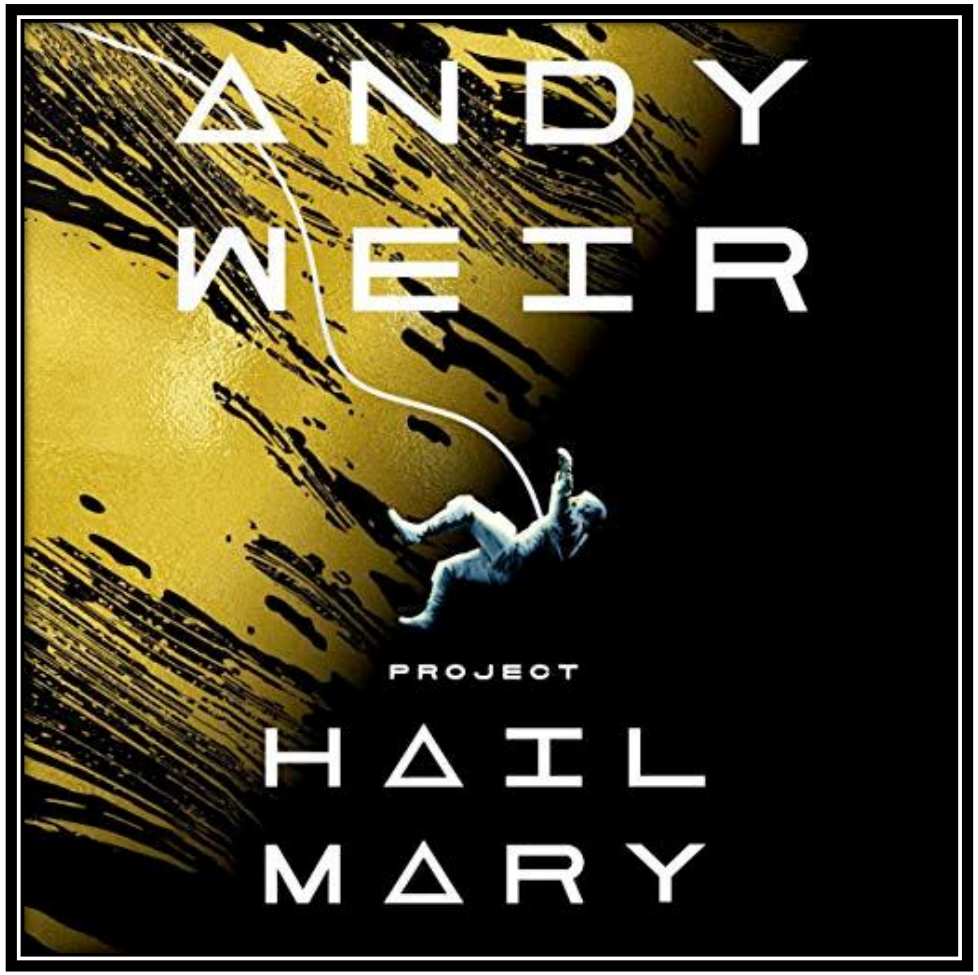
- Data
- Research
- Regulations
- Programs
- Risk
- Recommendations
- Community needs

- Why does this matter to me?
- Why should I care?
- What does this mean for my community?
- What can I do about it?

Information informs. Stories create meaning.

A story about science

What can public health learn from a science fiction story? 🚀



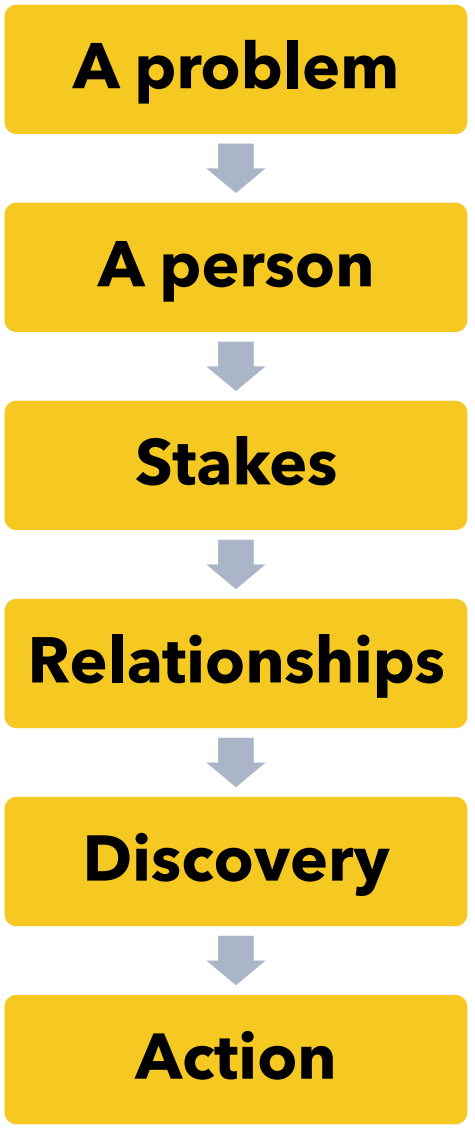
** Warning: spoilers ahead!*

Why the story works

***Project Hail Mary* doesn't make the science less important.**

It makes the science **matter to us**.

Public health can do the same thing.



Frame your story

Start with:

Who?	Who is experiencing this?
What?	What is happening?
Why?	Why does it matter?
Now what?	What can we do?

The data will come after…

Humanize the issue

Technical

"Heat-related illness disproportionately affects older adults and people with chronic conditions."

Data tells us what is happening.

Human

"For some residents, a heat advisory isn't simply an uncomfortable day. It can determine whether they can safely remain in their home."

Stories help us understand what it means.

The character is the bridge - Rocky

Rocky becomes understandable even though he is radically different from the audience.

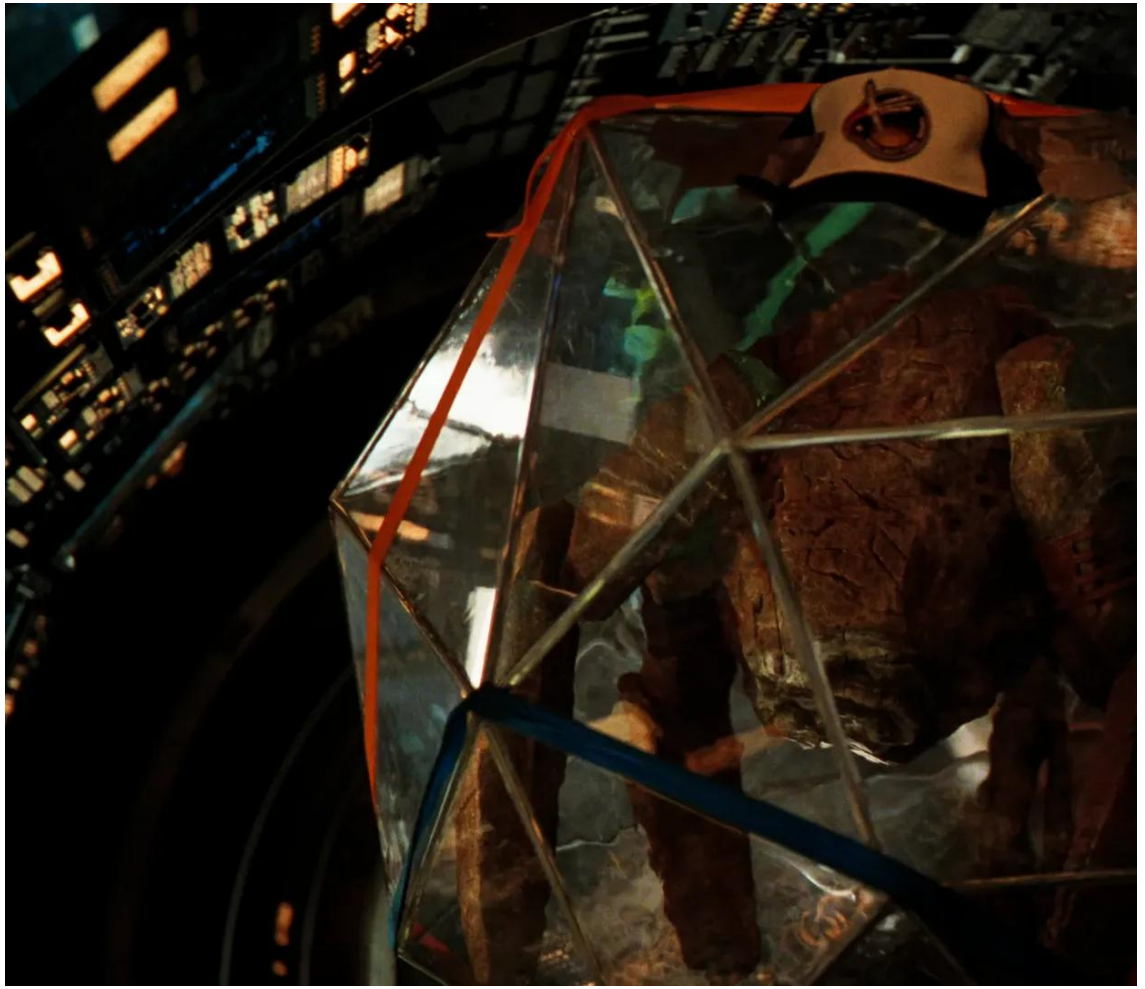
Public health translation:

Don't simply tell people:

"This community experiences a disparity."

Help them understand:

Who is experiencing it, what it looks like, and why it matters.



One issue - Multiple stories

Audience	Potential entry point
Residents	"What does this mean for me?"
Municipal leaders	"What does this mean for our community?"
Boards of Health	"What can we do?"
Legislators	"Why does this require action?"
Partners	"Where can we collaborate?"
Funders	"What impact can we create?"

Storytelling isn't one size fits all.

Data needs a story

STORY ➡ DATA ➡ MEANING ➡ ACTION

Rather than “here are 15 statistics”, try:

- Here’s what someone is experiencing
- Here’s what the data tells us about how widespread that is
- Here’s why it matters
- Here’s what we can do

Make the audience curious

Good stories don't give us every answer immediately. They create questions:

- What's happening?
- Why is this happening?
- Can they fix it?
- What's going to happen next?

Try leading with:

- A question
- A surprising statistic
- A contradiction
- A short anecdote
- A "before/after"
- A moment of tension

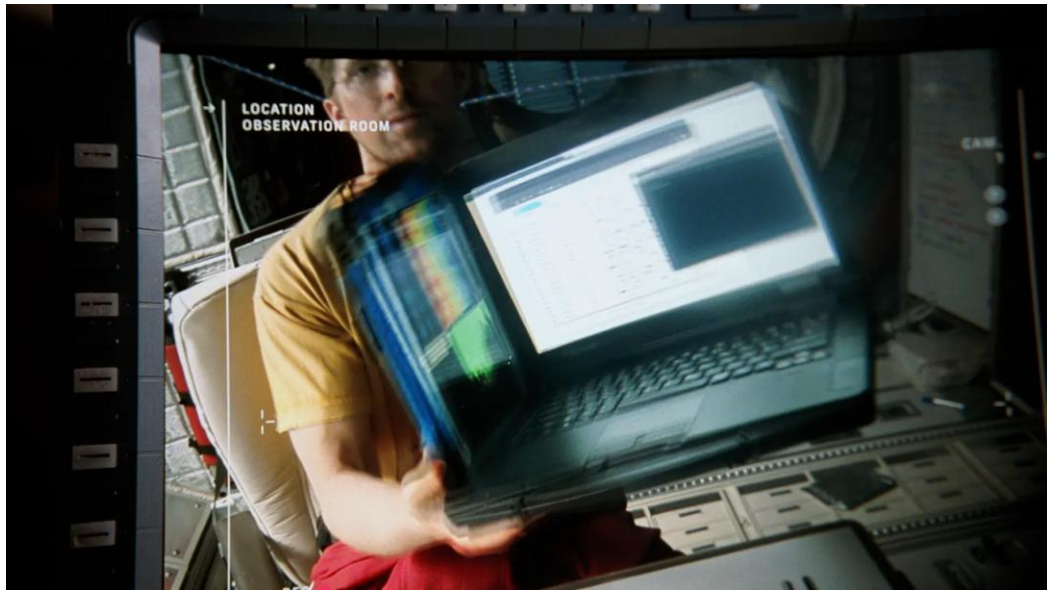
Curiosity is an invitation to pay attention.

The Rocky test 🚀

Rocky doesn't speak Grace's language. Grace has to figure out how to communicate.

Your audience may not understand:

- Epidemiology
- Public health systems
- Regulatory language
- Acronyms
- Program terminology
- Technical risk



We don't need to turn them into public health experts. We build the bridge.

Storytelling with responsibility

Personal narratives are powerful.
They are also someone's life.



Before using a personal story, consider:

- **Consent**
  Do I have permission?
- **Accuracy**
  Am I representing the experience fairly?
- **Dignity**
  Does the story preserve agency?
- **Equity**
  Am I reinforcing stereotypes? Am I inserting cultural or social biases into this narrative?
- **Purpose**
  Does the story help us understand the larger issue?

The story should serve the person, not the other way around.

Now let’s build your story

You’ve seen how storytelling works.

Now let's use the same principles to build a public health story of your own.

SCAN ME

Download the Project Hail Mary Storytelling Framework

The Project Hail Mary Storytelling Framework

Humanize the issue

Who is at the center?

Audience first

Who are you talking to?

Identify the insight

What does the evidence tell you?

Lead with meaning

Why does it matter?

Make it memorable

What will stick?

Avoid assumptions

What needs translating?

Respect the storyteller

Are you using narratives responsibly?

Yield an action

What should happen next?

Group activity: Your 60-second public health story

Instructions: With 3-4 people sitting around you, you'll have 5-6 minutes. Let's put it all together. Share with them:

1. HOOK
Lead by grabbing people's

2. HUMAN
Who is experiencing this?

3. PROBLEM
What is happening?

4. INSIGHT
What we're seeing is

5. MEANING
This matters because…

6. ACTION
What we can do is…

The storytelling stress test

Ask yourself, as you're telling your story, can the audience:

- **Understand it?** No jargon?
- **See themselves in it?** Relevant to this audience?
- **Remember it?** One clear idea?
- **Act on it?** Is there a clear next step?
- **Defend it?** Is the story evidence-based and ethically told?

Your story is a starting point

Grace doesn't solve the problem on the first attempt. The story is a process of discovering what he knows, what he doesn't know, and who he needs to work with.

Start with the person.
Find the insight.
Build the bridge.
Give people somewhere to go.

Your first draft doesn't have to be perfect.



Q & A



Questions – Challenges – Ideas

What story are you trying to tell?

The Project Hail Mary Storytelling Framework

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Are you using narratives responsibly?

Yield an action

What should happen next?

References

- Weir, Andy (2021). Project Hail Mary. Penguin Random House.
- Lord, P. and Miller, C. (Director). (2025). Project Hail Mary [Film]. Amazon MGM Studios.