Culture Hack Method:
Recode

How to break apart and reconstruct a message.

This process is directed towards deconstructing the elements of a discourse, and de-coding the deep meaning of the messages with the intention of analyzing the frames being used in dominant narratives and then changing them for frames that are politically in sync with the group' struggle.

Who

Activists, journalists, students, organizers, land defenders, etc. groups of people organizing who need to change the story being told about their struggle.

CHM - Ask Index

How to engage with this step

In this process it's key to have both experienced participants on discourse analysis as well as voices that represent the political intentions of the group. This process requires a clear message to decode as well as a clear political intention to recode the message with. It's an analogue process and it's preferred for the people participating to be physically in the group. The time frame for this exercise depends on the amount of people participating; we recommend at least a full hour for small groups and at least two hours for large groups.

RECODE

In the step of Re-coding we articulate an emblematic message of the dominant narrative we are tackling. We arrive at what this message is through the processes of analyzing networks and the language available, and through finding the frames that allow the narrative to make sense. This is done through an exercise that places the emblematic message as the 'tip of the iceberg' and goes through the metaphors, actions, subjects and suppositions that sustain it, decoding the logic that sustains the narrative. We then apply the inverse process, building up a message from the ground up that contains our desired counter-narrative.

RECODE

/ Theory

Frames are mental models, sometimes called schemas, that we use to interpret the world. They are made up of a complex mix of facts, experience, emotions, memories and assumptions. We have a frame for almost every word, but we also have frames for concepts, people and objects. We know we have them because we can look, for example, at a cup and see not only the physical entity called a 'cup' (a piece of factual knowledge) but we also understand its purpose and how to use it (process knowledge). We may also have lots of assumptions or emotions about them too, depending on our history with cups.

Changing frames, especially around significant social or political ideas or concepts, can be hugely influential. If we take the example of the concept of 'gay', we all have a set of facts, assumptions and emotions that immediately arise in our minds. In many Western countries, as little as 30 years ago, most people in society held frames that contained a good deal of negative 'facts', assumptions or emotions around the idea. This was an era where LGBTQ people suffered a lot of social and political oppression.

In the last 30 years, the dominant frames in many countries has shifted to become much more positive. It is almost as if common sense has changed. Where the majority of people used to instinctively feel a dominance of negative associations with the concept, now, very crudely speaking, those negative associations have, at the societal level, been replaced with neutral or more positive associations.

As these frames have shifted, the lived experience of being gay has also shifted profoundly. The LGBTQ liberation movement affected a change in the dominant frames around the idea of being LGBTQ.
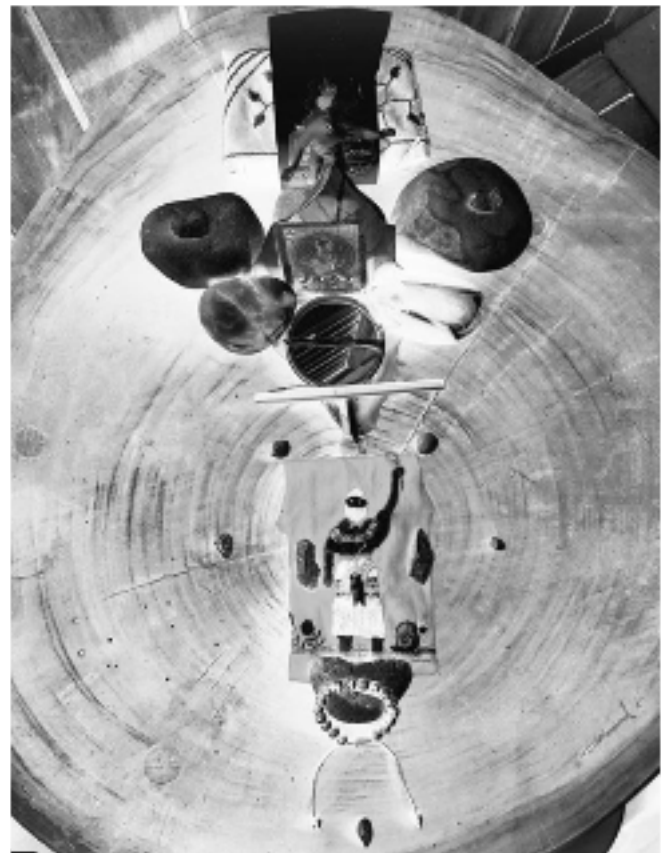
To understand a frame, it is useful to ask two questions of it:

1. **What's inside, and therefore what's also outside it? It** can be helpful to think of a cognitive frame like a picture frame: some things are captured and some things are left out. In a cognitive frame, this tells you what is important to the communicator (be it a person, a company, a government or even a whole society) and thus how they conceives of this 'thing'. This conception is the determining factor in what they do about it. So if, for example, their frame contains a lot of negative information and leaves out a lot of positives, they will be more likely to react against it in some form. Similarly, if the contents of the frame are focus on the positive and leave out any negatives, the reaction to it will also be more likely to be positive.

2. **How is what is inside constructed?** What facts and assumptions does it contain, both on the surface and in the construction of the language? By breaking down the language of a frame, we can tell a lot about what is really going on there, and then, in theory, address those things that we may agree or disagree with, or want to change. This can be a question of grammar - where, for example, are active vs passive verbs used; word or phrase choice - climate change vs global warming; or even imagery used - is a person shown as active in the situation or a passive recipient of someone else's action?

Please refer to the Iceberg exercise for help in how to practice asking and answering these questions.

/ Further Reading

An example of a frame shift: **The Accessible Icon Project** has championed a revision to the depiction of wheelchair users in public space since 2009. Several US states have formally adopted the new icon. Seeing the old and new icons side by side, can you identify the two different frames at play? What facts, emotions, experiences and assumptions are at play in each?

"Framing The Economy" is a comprehensive framing report from the New Economy Organisers' Network and collaborators in the UK

/ Stories

SDG Hack

Is a case study on how we hacked the UN Sustainable Development Goals and show how the economic model they promote accelerates ecological collapse.

Troy Library Campaign

The Troy Library Campaign became international news as outcry over the idea of burning one library's books drowned out the opposition and galvanized support for this library.

/ The Iceberg

The purpose of this worksheet is to outline a process for understanding what is coded into narratives we care about, and how to re-code them in ways that align with our values and agendas.

The basic way we do this is to 'decode' the existing framing piece by piece, and then 're-code' for our purposes.

We use the metaphor of an iceberg, as this focuses our minds on the fact that there are things that are on the surface of language, AND that beneath the surface there is a whole lot of vital information and choices being made which determine the core meaning. We decode using one iceberg, and re-code using a new one.

This is the way it flows:

DE-CODING

REPRESENTATIVE FRAMING

RE-CODED FRAMING

RE-CODING
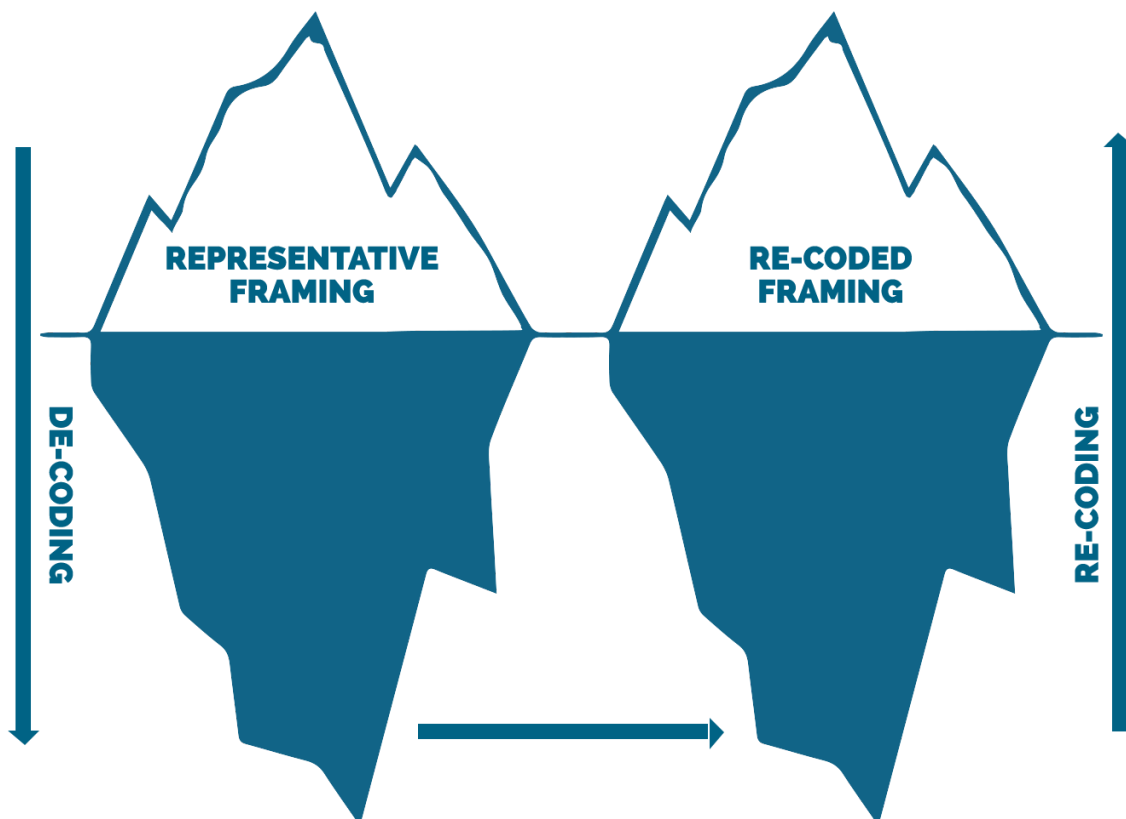
1. Select a short (max 2 sentences) statement that you think reflects the essential or representative logic of the narrative you want to engage.

The airport is for everyone. There will be more domestic and foreign visitors which will benefit the whole tourism industry and generate more and better jobs, helping Mexico's economy take-off.

Hidden assumptions

Imagery and metaphor

Subjects and objects

Verbs

2. Place that statement on the top of your first iceberg, like this:

3. To break the language down, we can start to look for some basic things in the content of the message:

Verbs – what action is being represented? Is it static, dynamic, fast, slow, "serious", "playful", etc?

"Hidden" assumptions – what is represented as positive, and what is negative? How can we tell? (Hint: think about the role of adjectives)

Imagery and metaphor – what figurative language, artful comparisons, and very basic metaphors are present? What images does the language conjure in the mind?

Subjects and objects – who is the active agent, and who is passive? Who is doing the work, and who is being done to? Who has the power? If there are no agents, why?
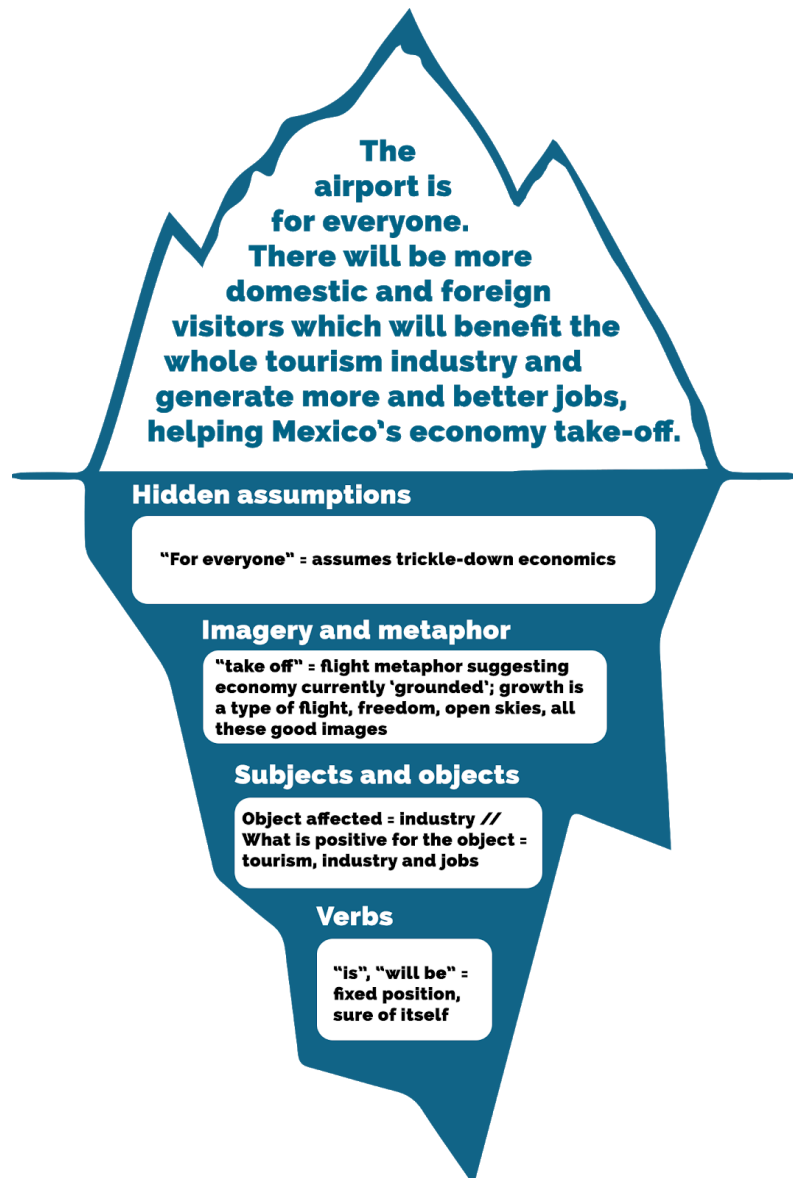
The airport is for everyone. There will be more domestic and foreign visitors which will benefit the whole tourism industry and generate more and better jobs, helping Mexico's economy take-off.

Hidden assumptions

"For everyone" = assumes trickle-down economics

Imagery and metaphor

"take off" = flight metaphor suggesting economy currently 'grounded'; growth is a type of flight, freedom, open skies, all these good images

Subjects and objects

Object affected = industry // What is positive for the object = tourism, industry and jobs

Verbs

"is", "will be" = fixed position, sure of itself

4. Decide which components of the language can and should be changed, and put your preferred logic -i.e. the new components - in the 2nd iceberg. This is what you will build your new statement from:

The airport is for everyone. There will be more domestic and foreign visitors which will benefit the whole tourism industry and generate more and better jobs, helping Mexico's economy take-off.

Hidden assumptions

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Imagery and metaphor

"take off" = flight metaphor suggesting economy currently 'grounded'; growth is a type of flight, freedom, open skies, all these good images
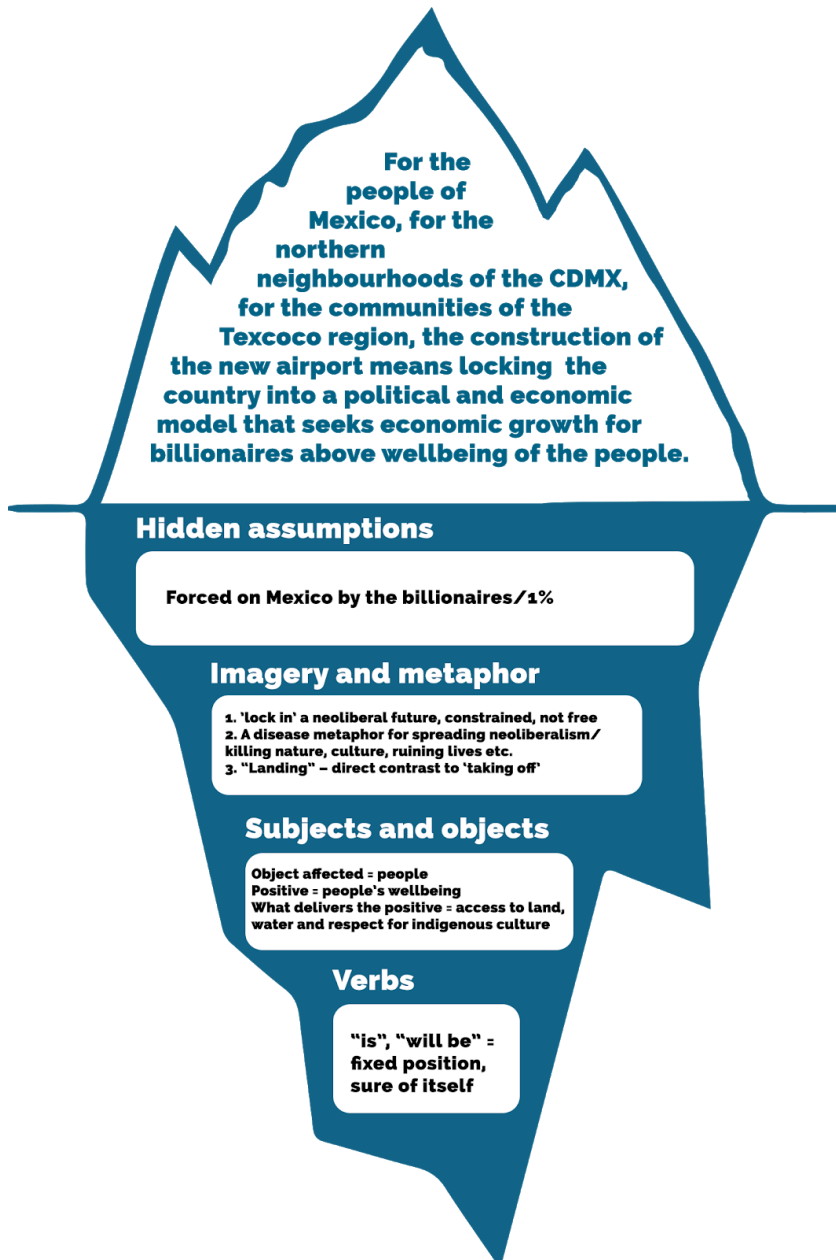
Subjects and objects

Object affected = industry // What is positive for the object = tourism, industry and jobs

Verbs

"is", "will be" = fixed position, sure of itself

For the people of Mexico, for the northern neighbourhoods of the CDMX, for the communities of the Texcoco region, the construction of the new airport means locking the country into a political and economic model that seeks economic growth for billionaires above wellbeing of the people.

Hidden assumptions

Forced on Mexico by the billionaires/1%

Imagery and metaphor

1. 'lock in' a neoliberal future, constrained, not free
2. A disease metaphor for spreading neoliberalism/killing nature, culture, ruining lives etc.
3. "Landing" – direct contrast to 'taking off'

Subjects and objects

Object affected = people
Positive = people's wellbeing
What delivers the positive = access to land, water and respect for indigenous culture

Verbs

"is", "will be" = fixed position, sure of itself

5. Write a new sentence from the component pieces. Remember, there is no such things as a single, perfect statement. Different people will write things differently. The same intervention can have several versions of the statement, tailored to different audiences' needs. What's important is that you reflect the logic you intend to convey from within the iceberg. At this stage we're dealing in logic, not poetry. That comes next, with creative expression.

Lock in metaphor - For the people of Mexico, for the northern neighbourhoods of the CDMX, for the communities of the Texcoco region, the construction of the new airport means locking the country into a political and economic model that seeks economic growth for billionaires above wellbeing of the people.

Disease metaphor – the new airport of Mexico city represents a disease for people living on the indigenous and common lands where it is being constructed, it will contaminate the water, cause floods and undermine people's wellbeing

Landing metaphor – People's water is under attack by the landing of the aerotropolis and the macro-project of NAICM. Billionaires like Carlos Slim and their political enablers like Pena are failing to respect the people's most basic rights to land, water and dignified life.

/ Teachings

This needs to be filled in, do we have a specific teaching that we can add here?

/ Glossary

Code A system of symbols or conventions that are used to convey meaning.

Deconstruct to break something down into its separate parts in order to understand its meaning, especially when this is different from how it was previously understood.

Narrative narratives provide society a foundational framework to understand history and current events. Transmit our basic concepts of identity and belonging.