THE POWER OF STORY TO GROW DEMOCRACY

DEMOCRACY 2076 x HARMONY LABS

WHERE CIVIC EDUCATION IS MISSING, ENTERTAINMENT FILLS THE GAP

While 70% of people in the U.S. fail basic civics tests and 42% sometimes or often avoid the news, on any given day audiences are routinely tuning into stories about government. Entertainment media, therefore, has an important role to play in developing people's understanding of democracy and what's possible in the future.

58%

daily average reach of government-relevant entertainment content

SOURCE: HOUSE OF CARDS, THE HANDMAID'S TALE, STAR WARS: THE RISE OF SKYWALKER, ABBOTT ELEMENTARY, THE WEST WING, REACHER, SCANDAL, AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR, THE WIRE, TOP GUN MAVERICK

EVEN NON-GOVERNMENT STORIES CAN AFFECT PEOPLE'S BELIEFS ABOUT DEMOCRACY

Democracy 2076 and Harmony Labs teamed up to understand how entertainment media might be shaping people's understanding of democracy. In part 1, we studied the government-relevant media audiences engaged with. Here, in part 2, we explore the story arcs and heroes that audiences engage with—inside *and outside* of government—to identify which ones are most likely to affect people's beliefs about potential problems, build agency, and help people imagine a better future— steps that ultimately strengthen a democracy.

HOW WE DEFINE DEMOCRACY

DEMOCRATIC

- Respecting the independence of institutions
- Accurate information
- Checks and balances
- Freedom of speech/ acceptance of dissent
- Inclusion and respect across differences
- Free and fair elections
- Peaceful conflict resolution

AUTHORITARIAN

- Politicizing independent institutions
- Spreading disinformation
- Aggrandizing executive power
- Quashing dissent
- Scapegoating vulnerable communities
- Corrupting elections
- Political violence

WE USE DEFINITIONS OF DEMOCRACY AND AUTHORITARIANISM FROM THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND THE AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK FROM PROTECT DEMOCRACY
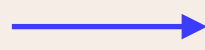
SOURCE: SPIDERMAN ACROSS THE SPIDERVERSE, THE MOTHER, CONCLAVE, EQUALIZER 3, THE BOYS, THE SIX TRIPLE EIGHT, SILO, SPACE FORCE, TED LASSO, BREAKING BAD

RESEARCH METHODS AND APPROACH

WHAT DO PEOPLE CHOOSE TO WATCH?

→

WHAT MOVES AUDIENCES TO DEMAND AND WORK TOWARD THE SYSTEM OF SELF-GOVERNANCE THEY WANT?
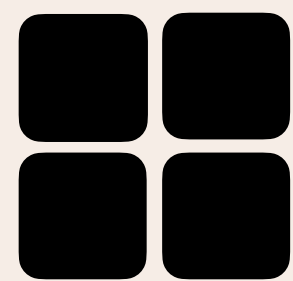
116,000+ PEOPLE STREAMING MEDIA BEHAVIOR

We retrieved 2024 streaming viewing behavior for adults 18+, excluding content aimed specifically and exclusively at children (we kept family co-watch animation, like *Moana*). We asked: Which stories do people choose to watch, and feel like entertainment, not instruction?
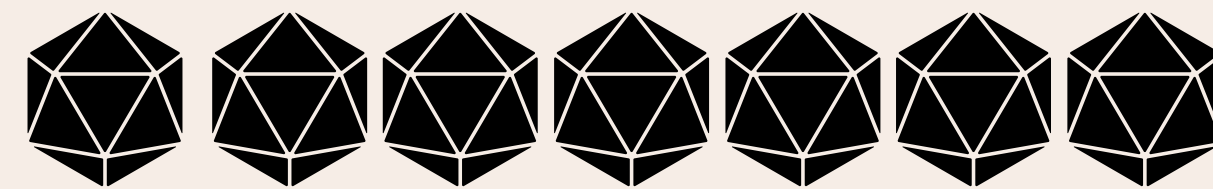
800 SPECIFIC STORY ARCS FOR 4 AUDIENCE ZONES

From these programs, we selected 800 pieces of media based on popularity and distinctiveness to the four Narrative Observatory audience zones.

Across these 800 pieces, we coded over 400 stories where individuals tried to change systems —annotating the media for who is affected, who is the hero, which rules are broken or unfair, and what turning point drives change. We asked: What moves audiences to demand and work toward the system of self-governance they want?

30+ RCT-STYLE TESTS WITH 10,000 PEOPLE

In Phase 1, we used the government-relevant story features that our annotation surfaced to test specific story arcs and measure audience-specific impacts, running 20+ experiments with 10,000 people. In Phase 2, we developed new story arcs, running 30+ additional experiments, especially seeking to understand segments that were hardest to move in Phase 1. These tests helped identify which characters, worlds, and arcs most effectively create movement on democracy.

ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

- Stories about democracy are prevalent, popular, and profitable.

- Different hero types can help you find new audiences.

- Whether a character is a hero or a villain is in the eye of the beholder.

- Small story shifts can fuel demand for a healthier democracy and unlock greater individual agency and imagination.

- Starting with a broken system that needs fixing can move audiences to demand more.

- Watching ordinary people exercising power improves audiences' sense of agency.

- A positive vision of the future helps audiences imagine a better democracy.

WHO CAN USE THESE INSIGHTS?

- Producers and executives who decide what stories to source and green light
- Artists who create the stories
- Democracy advocates

WHAT CAN THESE INSIGHTS TELL US?

- How to attract new or different audiences
- How to adjust storylines to move audiences to demand and work toward democracy

HOW WERE THESE INSIGHTS GENERATED?

Final insights were generated by reviewing the research with a group of screenwriters, producers, and executives in a series of workshops; the creatives have worked on shows such as *Handmaid's Tale*, *FBI: Most Wanted*, *High Potential*, *All Rise*, *Mrs. America*, and more.
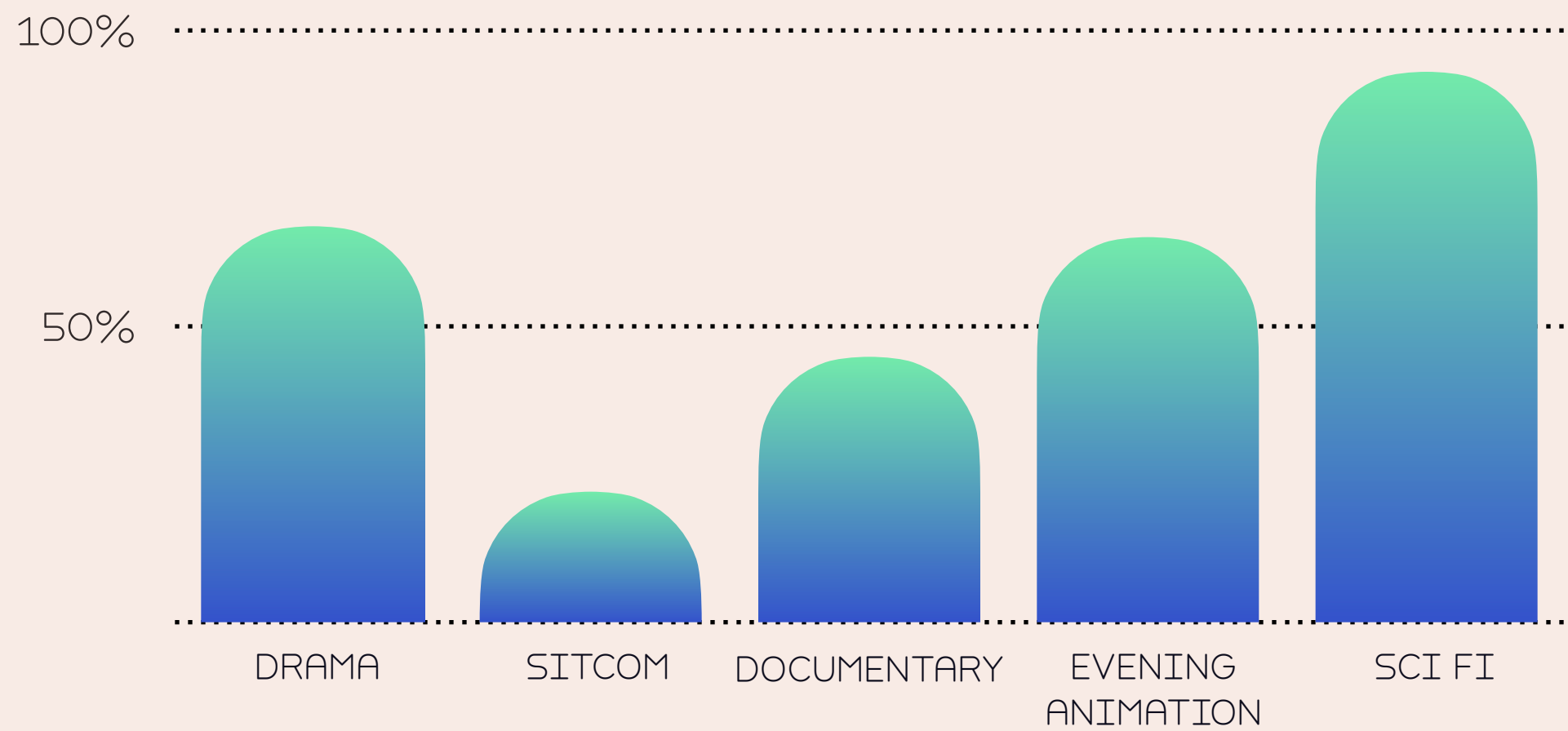
STORIES ABOUT DEMOCRACY ARE PREVALENT, POPULAR, AND PROFITABLE

The opportunity is to go beyond what's most popular and engaging by reaching new audiences *and* moving them in their beliefs about democracy.

DEMOCRACY CONFLICTS MAKE FOR GOOD STORIES

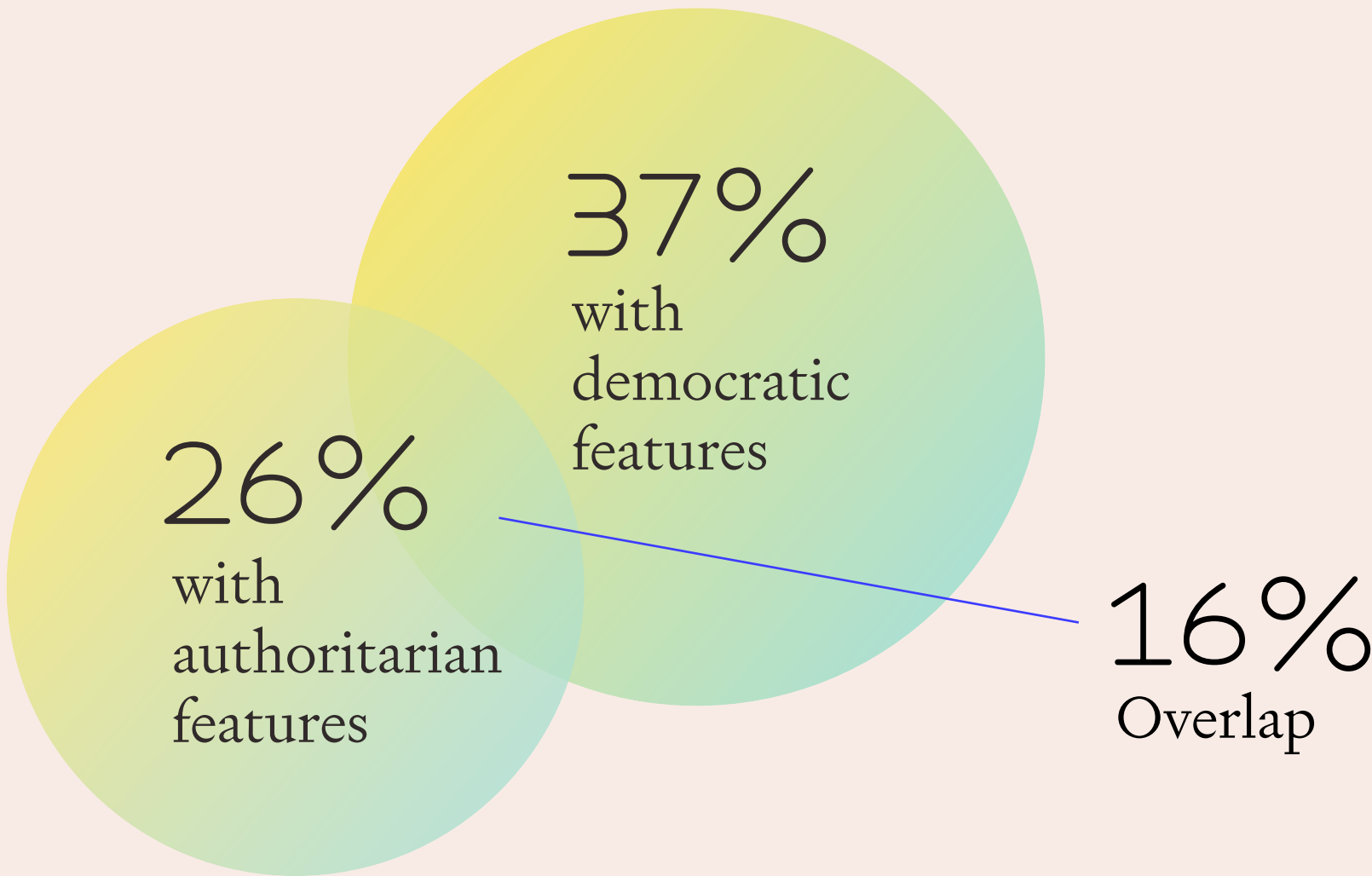## GOVERNMENT-RELEVANT STORIES WITH NUANCED CHARACTERS AND RICH STORYLINES ARE ALREADY PREVALENT

The content take the form of dramas, comedies, thrillers, and epics that revolve around power, rules, corruption, and reform.

AND THEY APPEAL TO WIDE AUDIENCES

Programs with democratic or authoritarian features (or both) enjoy a high reach, with a 37% daily average reach for programs with democratic features in government, 26% for authoritarian features and a 16% overlap.

% of stories in our media sample relevant to government

37%
with democratic features

26%
with authoritarian features

16%
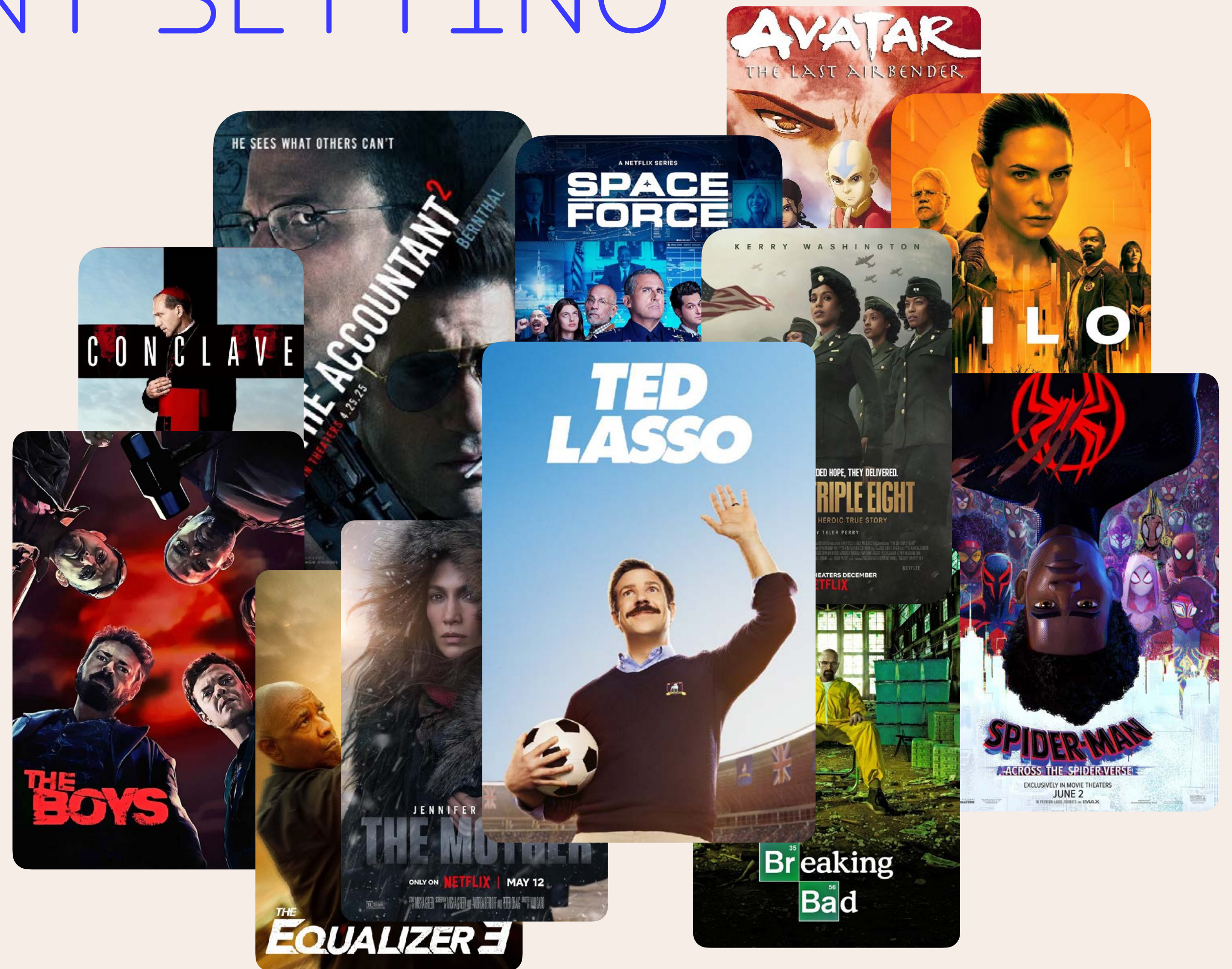Overlap

Daily average reach of programs

STORIES ABOUT DEMOCRACY DON'T NEED A GOVERNMENT SETTING

TO "SHOW" DEMOCRACY, STORIES JUST NEED SYSTEMS

A story can shape people's beliefs about democracy any time it shows a system where people collectively shape the rules they live by —whether that system is a school, a newsroom, a sports team, a community organization, among others.

Ted Lasso, for example, never mentions government yet models democracy: a struggling English football club that is run as a rigid hierarchy becomes a more inclusive and successful organization as Ted's unconventional coaching shifts power, builds trust, and reforms the system from within.

Note: all media featured in this report is clickable.

AUDIENCES CHOOSE STORIES BASED ON THEIR VALUES

VALUES CAN GUIDE STORYTELLERS TO REACH PEOPLE DIFFERENT FROM THEMSELVES

Our four audiences hold distinct attitudes, distinct cultural affinities, and participate in distinct media cultures.

Each audience centers a values cluster that drives how audience members reason about themselves and the world. These values clusters derive from Shalom Schwartz's theory of basic human values. You can think of values as basic psychological goals that inform how people engage with social issues.

STRIVE & CREATE

AUDIENCE
PEOPLE POWER

AUDIENCE
IF YOU SAY SO

VALUE
COMMUNITY

VALUE
AUTONOMY

WE

ME

AUDIENCE
TOUGH COOKIES

AUDIENCE
DON'T TREAD ON ME

VALUE
ORDER

VALUE
AUTHORITY

PROTECT & PRESERVE

DIFFERENT VALUES SHAPE VIEWS ON DEMOCRACY
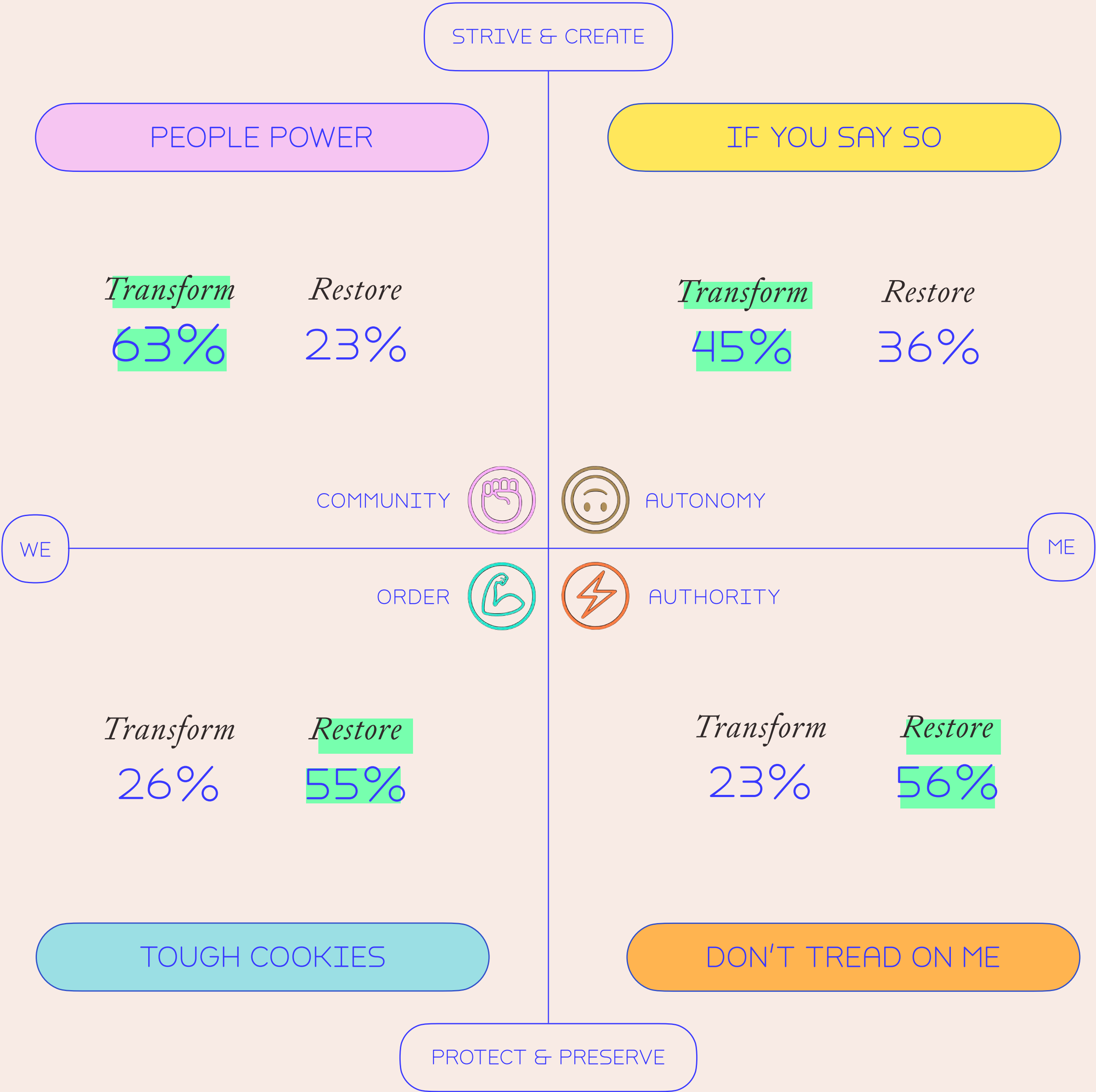
DESPITE DIFFERING VIEWS, THERE'S SURPRISING ALIGNMENT ON HOW GOVERNMENT SHOULD WORK

In a recent survey we asked people in the U.S. whether the country should "restore or transform democracy." As seen in the chart here, audiences in the "Strive & Create" zone, like PEOPLE POWER and IF YOU SAY SO, tend to want to transform democracy, while audiences in the "Preserve & Protect" zone, like TOUGH COOKIES and DON'T TREAD ON ME, tend to want to restore it.

But when asked to describe their ideal democracy, audiences across values want the same thing: a representative, responsive, and effective government that protects individual rights.

Source: Harmony Labs' Deep Story Survey System.

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER

IF YOU SAY SO

Transform
63%

Restore
23%

Transform
45%

Restore
36%

COMMUNITY

AUTONOMY

WE

ME

ORDER

AUTHORITY

Transform
26%

Restore
55%

Transform
23%

Restore
56%

TOUGH COOKIES

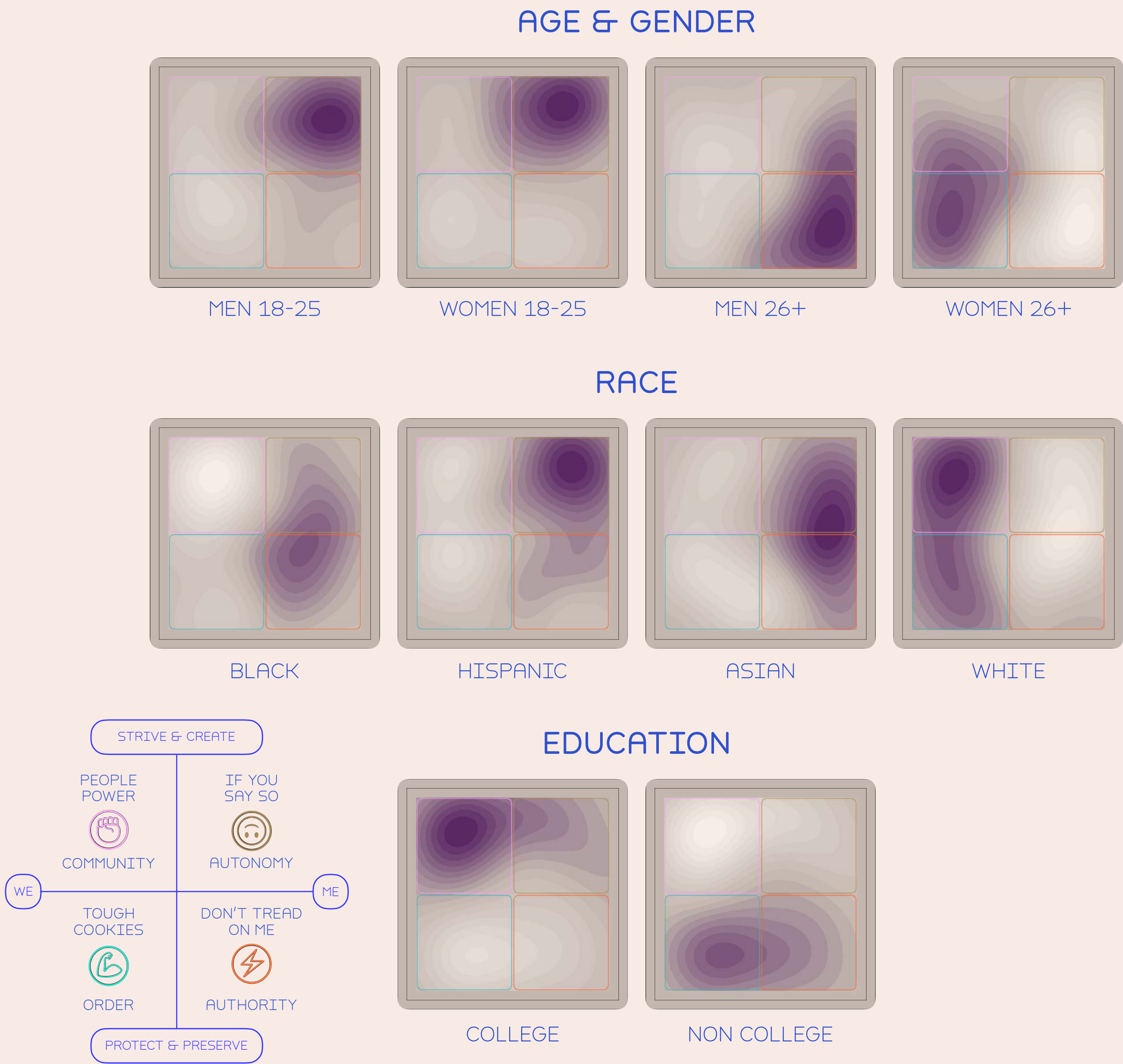DON'T TREAD ON ME

PROTECT & PRESERVE

VALUES GIVE CULTURAL CONTEXT TO DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

While true audiences are defined by their values and shared media behaviors, they can also be "located," with some level of demographic accuracy, for things like gender, age, and race, which can be helpful in identifying audiences not currently being reached.

These heat maps show where people in the U.S. over-index with respect to the 4 values quadrants.

AGE & GENDER

MEN 18-25 · WOMEN 18-25 · MEN 26+ · WOMEN 26+

RACE

BLACK · HISPANIC · ASIAN · WHITE

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER — IF YOU SAY SO

COMMUNITY — AUTONOMY

WE — ME

TOUGH COOKIES — DON'T TREAD ON ME

ORDER — AUTHORITY

PROTECT & PRESERVE

EDUCATION

COLLEGE · NON COLLEGE

THEY ALSO DESCRIBE POLITICAL ORIENTATION

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER — COMMUNITY

IF YOU SAY SO — AUTONOMY

WE — ME

TOUGH COOKIES — ORDER

DON'T TREAD ON ME — AUTHORITY

PROTECT & PRESERVE

REPUBLICANS

DEMOCRATS

INDEPENDENTS

LOW VOTE PROPENSITY

...AND PROPENSITY TO VOTE

+GEOGRAPHY

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER

IF YOU SAY SO

COMMUNITY

AUTONOMY

WE

ME

TOUGH COOKIES

DON'T TREAD ON ME

ORDER

AUTHORITY

PROTECT & PRESERVE

While all audiences exist everywhere, this map describes the areas where a particular audience has the highest density.

OPPORTUNITY EXISTS IN THE STORIES AUDIENCES PREFER

FROM THE HEROES TO THE TRANSFORMATIONAL ARCS, LINKING VALUES TO MEDIA CONSUMPTION HELPS US REACH AUDIENCES MOST EFFECTIVELY

If there's a democracy story for every audience, what is left to do? Popularity is one thing; transporting audiences is another. We need to know how these stories actually move people to demand and work toward the system of self-governance they want—and we can use the entertainment they're choosing for themselves as clues to guide which stories we choose to tell next.

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER

IF YOU SAY SO

COMMUNITY

AUTONOMY

WE

ME

ORDER

AUTHORITY

TOUGH COOKIES

DON'T TREAD ON ME

PROTECT & PRESERVE

HEROES CAN HELP YOU FIND NEW AUDIENCES

Audience values shape how people see the world, the stories they choose, and the characters that inspire them. By understanding your audience's particular type of hero, you can identify gaps and maximize your reach.

THE STORIES AUDIENCES CHOOSE CONTAIN UNIQUE TYPES OF HEROES

DIFFERENT HERO TYPES REVEAL HOW EACH AUDIENCE WANTS SYSTEMS TO CHANGE

The story patterns we observed for each audience fall into four broad types of transformation: revolutionary, evolutionary, restorative, and reformative. Each hero type mirrors the kind of systemic change that audience prefers, offering clues for how to reliably connect them with a vision of democracy that they want.

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER

IF YOU SAY SO

Insider Transformer who pushes systems forward from within

Outsider Transformer who evolves systems to include previously marginalized people or ideas

COMMUNITY

AUTONOMY

WE

ME

ORDER

AUTHORITY

Insider Restorer who confronts corruption from within

Outsider Restorer who holds the system accountable

TOUGH COOKIES

DON'T TREAD ON ME

PROTECT & PRESERVE

PEOPLE POWER: THE INSIDER-TRANSFORMER WHO PUSHES SYSTEMS FORWARD FROM WITHIN

The shows community-valuing PEOPLE POWER engage with—*The West Wing*, *The Diplomat*, *Madame Secretary*, and others— are often described as "about government" but are really about government insiders. This audience wants heroes who work from within the system to achieve revolutionary transformations that fundamentally alter or replace it.

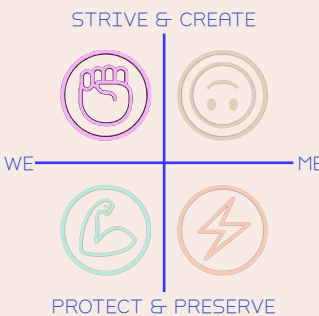Cardinal Lomeli reshapes the papal conclave from within by modeling moral courage and transparency, transforming a secretive, corrupted process into one of truth and renewed purpose.

CONCLAVE (2024)

Juliette Nichols uses her position as an engineer within the silo to uncover hidden truths and push her society toward freedom from authoritarian control.

SILO (2023)

STRIVE & CREATE

WE ——— ME

PROTECT & PRESERVE

TOUGH COOKIES: THE INSIDER-RESTORER WHO CONFRONTS CORRUPTION FROM WITHIN

The stories order-valuing TOUGH COOKIES engage with can be progressive, focused on transformation, or conservative, focused on preserving and conserving what we have. What matters is heroes who improve systems while preserving their core structures, like the reformative transformations we see in *Space Force*, *Deep Space Nine*, and *It's A Wonderful Life*.

Major Charity Adams leads the only all-Black, all-female battalion in WWII to overhaul the Army's chaotic mail system, restoring communication while upholding military values.

SIX TRIPLE EIGHT (2024)

Medical resident Conrad Hawkins fights to save patients amid corporate threats, challenging corruption and saving lives while defending patients with grit and integrity.

THE RESIDENT (2023)

STRIVE & CREATE
WE — ME
PROTECT & PRESERVE

DON'T TREAD ON ME: OUTSIDER-RESTORER WHO HOLDS THE SYSTEM ACCOUNTABLE

The stories authority-oriented DON'T TREAD ON ME engage with feature fiercely independent outsiders holding systems accountable rather than insiders or collective action. They want the kind of restoration transformations that expose corruption and return systems to their original principles, like those featured in *The Accountant 2*, *Reacher*, and *Rebel Moon: Part One*.

Operating outside official channels, Robert McCall dismantles a mafia stronghold to restore safety and justice for an abandoned Italian town.

EQUALIZER 3 (2023)

A former assassin comes out of hiding to protect her daughter, taking justice into her own hands where institutions have failed.

THE MOTHER (2023)

IF YOU SAY SO : THE OUTSIDER-TRANSFORMER WHO EVOLVES SYSTEMS TOWARD INCLUSIVITY

The stories autonomy-oriented IF YOU SAY SO engage with feature individual and underdog heroes interested in lifting up their in-group of family or friends. These heroes' goal is to help systems adapt to include previously marginalized people or ideas, like the kind of evolutionary transformations we see in *The Boys*, *13 Reasons Why*, and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

Aang, reluctant to lead but loyal to his friends, challenges the Fire Nation's rigid order, nudging the world toward balance and inclusion through his outsider perspective.

LAST AIRBENDER (2005)

Miles Morales rejects Spider-Society's exclusionary rules to protect his own family and friends, forcing the multiverse to expand and make space for those once pushed aside.

SPIDER-VERSE (2023)

STRIVE & CREATE

WE — ME

PROTECT & PRESERVE

HEROES AND VILLAINS ARE IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Importantly, the characters audiences engage with don't have to be perfect heroes—they can grapple with their inner demons. You can show the fall but you must catch democracy.

HEROES CAN ALSO FALL FROM GRACE

HEROES DON'T HAVE TO BE PERFECT BUT HOW THEY ACT IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY MIGHT AFFECT HOW AUDIENCES SEE THEM

The characters audiences care about often grapple with their own flaws and inner demons. Sometimes they reach a "fork in the road" where they are corrupted by their journeys. When this happens, audiences may stop rooting for them and the story as a whole may fail to satisfy. In our testing, arcs where the hero becomes corrupted and stays corrupted were especially demotivating for some audiences, reducing their willingness to work across differences.

Here, we outline what the fallen hero arc looks like for each audience, from the paternalistic insider to the vengeful vigilante.

STRIVE & CREATE

Insider Transformer

Paternalistic Insider

FORK → FAILURE

System too corrupt for reform

Controls others for their own good

Outsider Transformer

Cynical Manipulator

FORK → FAILURE

Everyone is ultimately selfish

Exploits others before being exploited

COMMUNITY

AUTONOMY

WE — ME

ORDER

AUTHORITY

Insider Restorer

Rigid Enforcer

FORK → FAILURE

Maintaining order is more important

Order over justice, silences dissent

Outsider Restorer

Vengeful Vigilante

FORK → FAILURE

Vendetta replaces justice

Violence for power, not protection

PROTECT & PRESERVE

WHEN HEROES FALL RESOLUTION IS STILL REQUIRED

FOR STORYTELLERS, THIS MEANS FOCUSING ON WHETHER THE FALLEN HERO CHANGES OR OTHER CHARACTERS STEP UP

Not everyone is a perfect hero all the time. Audiences choose stories with complex, imperfect characters, but it matters what the hero does at the fork in the road, and whether there is a resolution. This resolution is where characters can course-correct and signal the values that matter to the audience, or other characters can be cast to take up the good work.

STRIVE & CREATE

Paternalistic Insider

Oppenheimer struggles between believing scientists must share knowledge openly and fearing political leaders can't be trusted with nuclear technology.

OPPENHEIMER (2023)

Cynical Manipulator

Gi-hun is torn between his natural compassion and the lesson that "everyone will betray you for money," struggling with trusting his friend.

SQUID GAME (2023)

COMMUNITY   AUTONOMY

WE   ME

ORDER   AUTHORITY

Rigid Enforcer

Frank Reagan is constantly torn between supporting his officers and maintaining loyalty, versus holding them accountable when they cross the line.

BLUE BLOODS (2010)

Vengeful Vigilante

Jack Reacher wants to protect innocent people, but also enjoys using his lethal skills and has a violent streak that goes beyond what's necessary.

REACHER (2022)

PROTECT & PRESERVE

SMALL STORY SHIFTS CAN FUEL DEMAND FOR A HEALTHIER DEMOCRACY AND UNLOCK GREATER AGENCY AND IMAGINATION

To understand what truly moves audiences—not just what grabs their attention—we can identify and test popular story arcs that help people recognize problems and take action toward a better future.
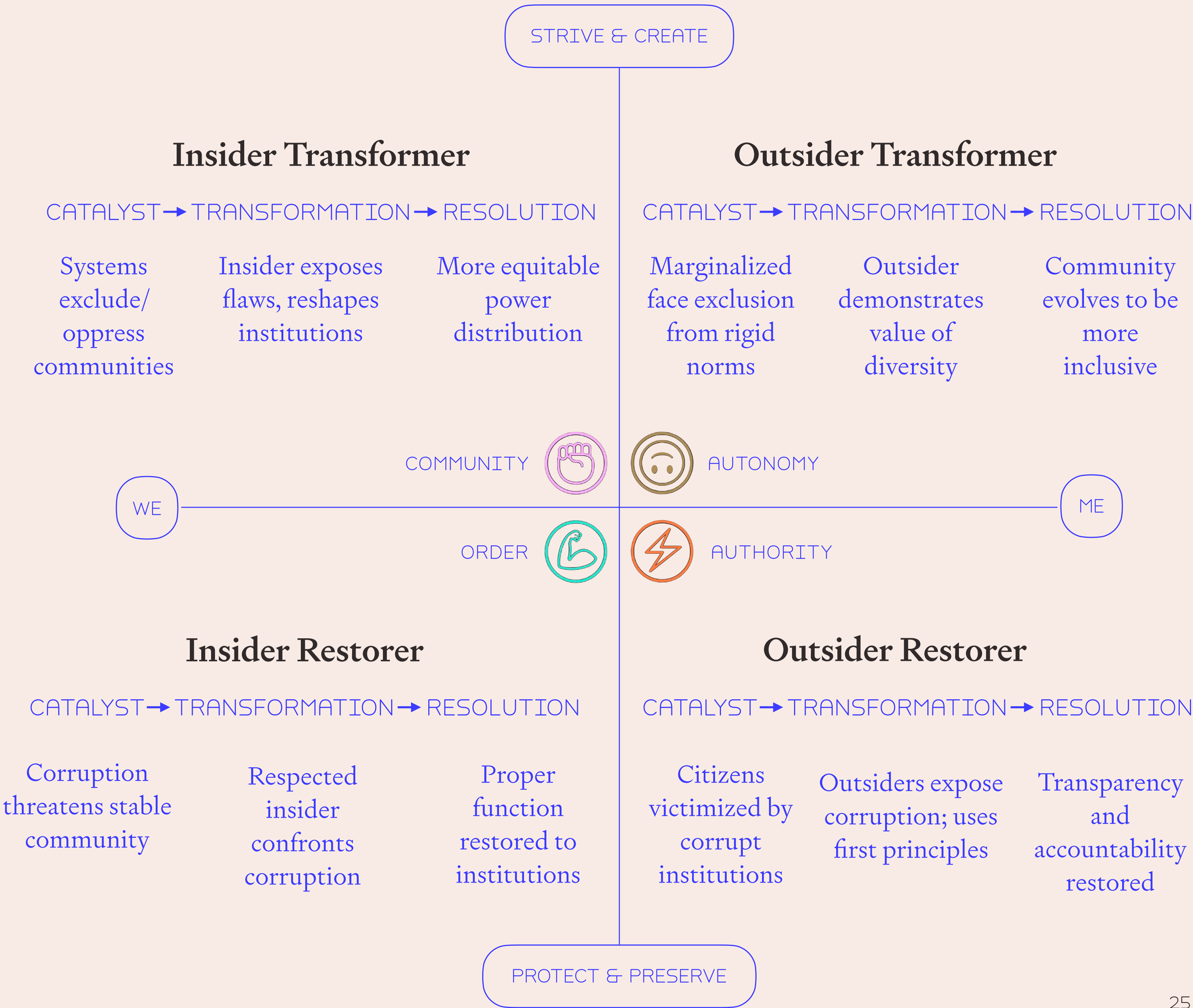
THE HERO'S JOURNEY THAT MOVES EACH AUDIENCE

EACH AUDIENCE RESPONDS TO A DIFFERENT CATALYST, TRANSFORMATION, AND RESOLUTION

Every story has a catalyst that sends the hero on their journey, a transformation (or several) where the action unfolds, and a resolution that reveals the final state of the world and the hero.

The heroes audiences choose to engage with in the stories they love reflect the kinds of transformation they want to see in real life.

STRIVE & CREATE

Insider Transformer

CATALYST → TRANSFORMATION → RESOLUTION

| Systems exclude/ oppress communities | Insider exposes flaws, reshapes institutions | More equitable power distribution |

Outsider Transformer

CATALYST → TRANSFORMATION → RESOLUTION

| Marginalized face exclusion from rigid norms | Outsider demonstrates value of diversity | Community evolves to be more inclusive |

COMMUNITY · AUTONOMY

WE · ME

ORDER · AUTHORITY

Insider Restorer

CATALYST → TRANSFORMATION → RESOLUTION

| Corruption threatens stable community | Respected insider confronts corruption | Proper function restored to institutions |

Outsider Restorer

CATALYST → TRANSFORMATION → RESOLUTION

| Citizens victimized by corrupt institutions | Outsiders expose corruption; uses first principles | Transparency and accountability restored |

PROTECT & PRESERVE

25

THESE ARCS ARE ENGAGING BUT ARE THEY EFFECTIVE?

A STORY'S "SUCCESS" CAN BE EVALUATED BY WHETHER IT MOVES PEOPLE TOWARDS OUR NARRATIVE GOAL

We created the narrative goal on the right to focus specifically on *democracy* (not *government* in general), and tested audience agreement using storyboards that represent key heroes and story arcs. After seeing these stories, we ask people if they feel more able to:

- Recognize that there's a problem with how things are
- Believe that they have agency to change things
- Be willing to work across differences
- Imagine a better future for democracy

CATALYST

Currently, democracy is not functioning well in the United States.

PROMISE

Democracy is predicated on the rule of law, majoritarian elections, and all people being equal.

TRANSFORMATION

We can make democracy better if I and everyone else knows how to improve democracy and does their part to help improve it.
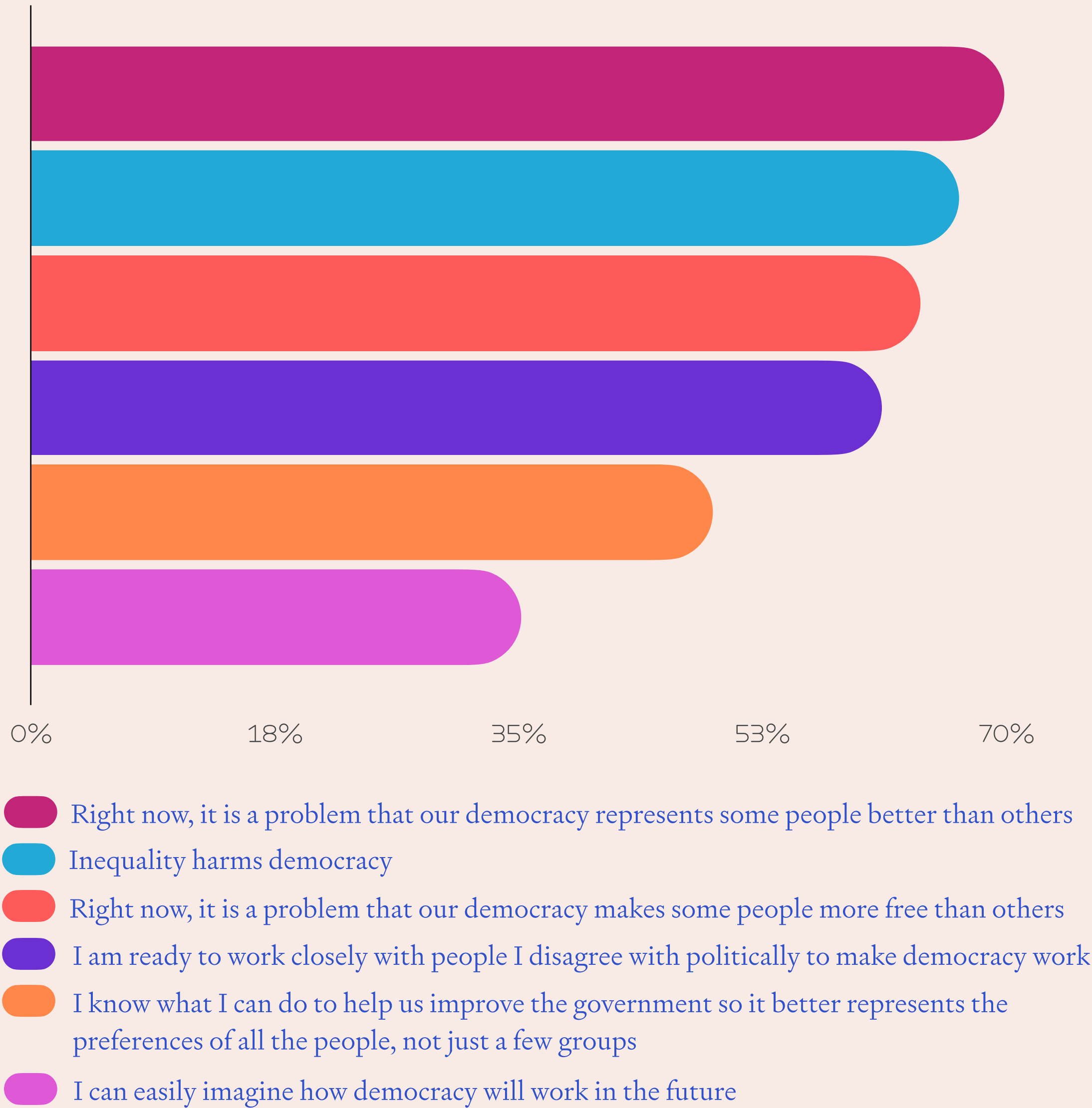
RESOLUTION

In the future, we will have a democracy made by everyone that works for everyone.

ROOM TO GROW ON AGENCY AND IMAGINATION

DEMOCRACY STORIES REACH EVERY AUDIENCE, BUT DON'T FULLY UNLOCK AGENCY AND IMAGINATION

This chart shows how the four values-distinct audiences respond to our narrative goal questions. Most audiences have high baseline agreement that there's a problem, but all audiences could use some help with feeling a stronger sense of agency and imagination about the future.

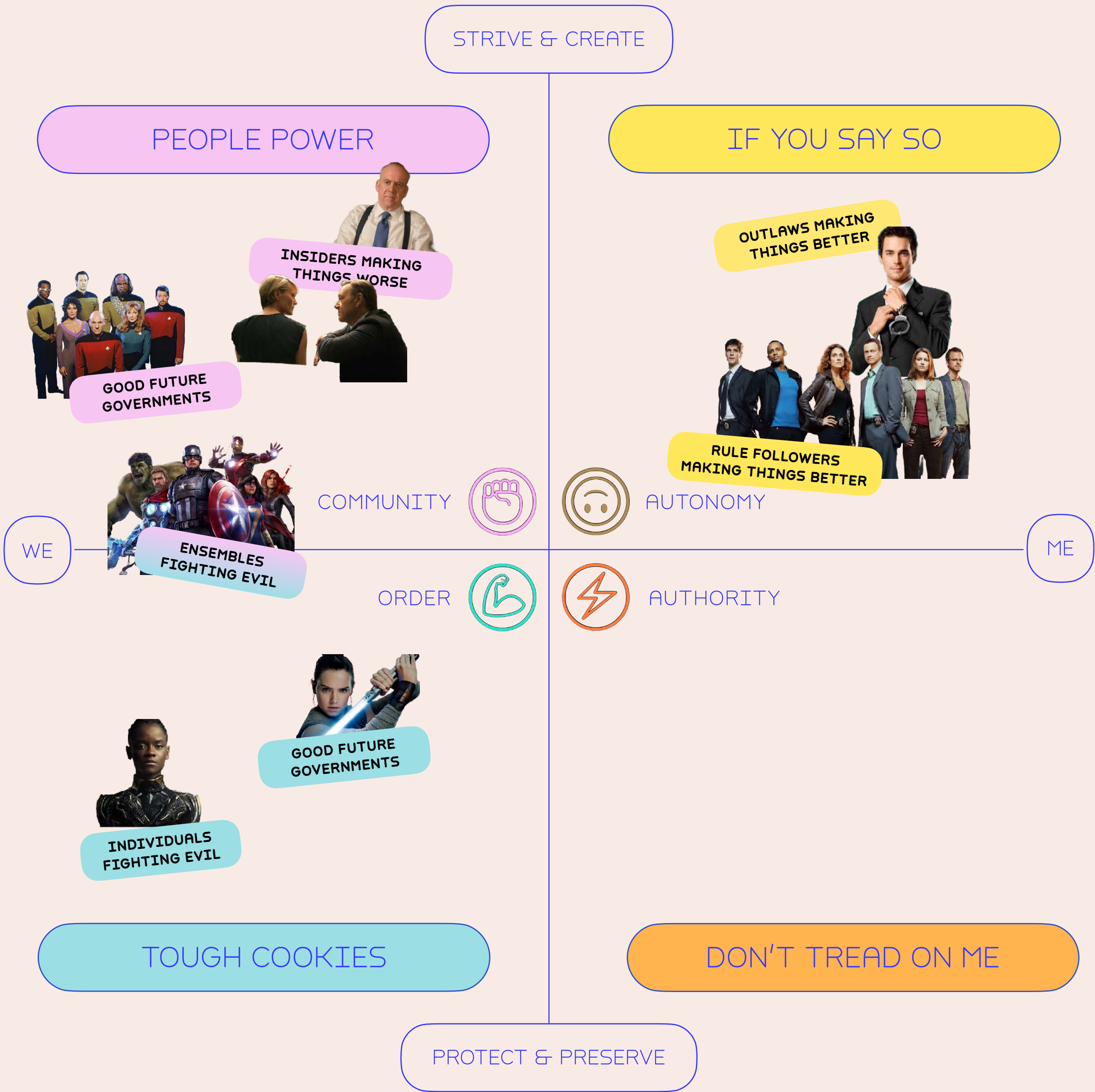Baseline Agreement for Narrative Goal Questions

0%   18%   35%   53%   70%

- Right now, it is a problem that our democracy represents some people better than others
- Inequality harms democracy
- Right now, it is a problem that our democracy makes some people more free than others
- I am ready to work closely with people I disagree with politically to make democracy work
- I know what I can do to help us improve the government so it better represents the preferences of all the people, not just a few groups
- I can easily imagine how democracy will work in the future

A BROKEN SYSTEM THAT NEEDS FIXING MOVES AUDIENCES TO DEMAND MORE FROM OUR DEMOCRACY

GOVERNMENT TRANSFORMATION MOTIVATES MOST AUDIENCES

IN PHASE 1, AUDIENCES WERE MORE LIKELY TO SEE A PROBLEM WHEN GOVERNMENTS CHANGED—FOR BETTER OR WORSE—OVER THE COURSE OF THE STORY

When democracy is dysfunctional, threatened, or deteriorates, audiences were moved to demand the government do better representing everyone. PEOPLE POWER was inspired by ensembles and insiders exposing flawed systems, TOUGH COOKIES by battles of good vs. evil, and IF YOU SAY SO by extraordinary individual action fixing broken systems.

The one exception was DON'T TREAD ON ME—no stories of transformation moved them to demand more from democracy.
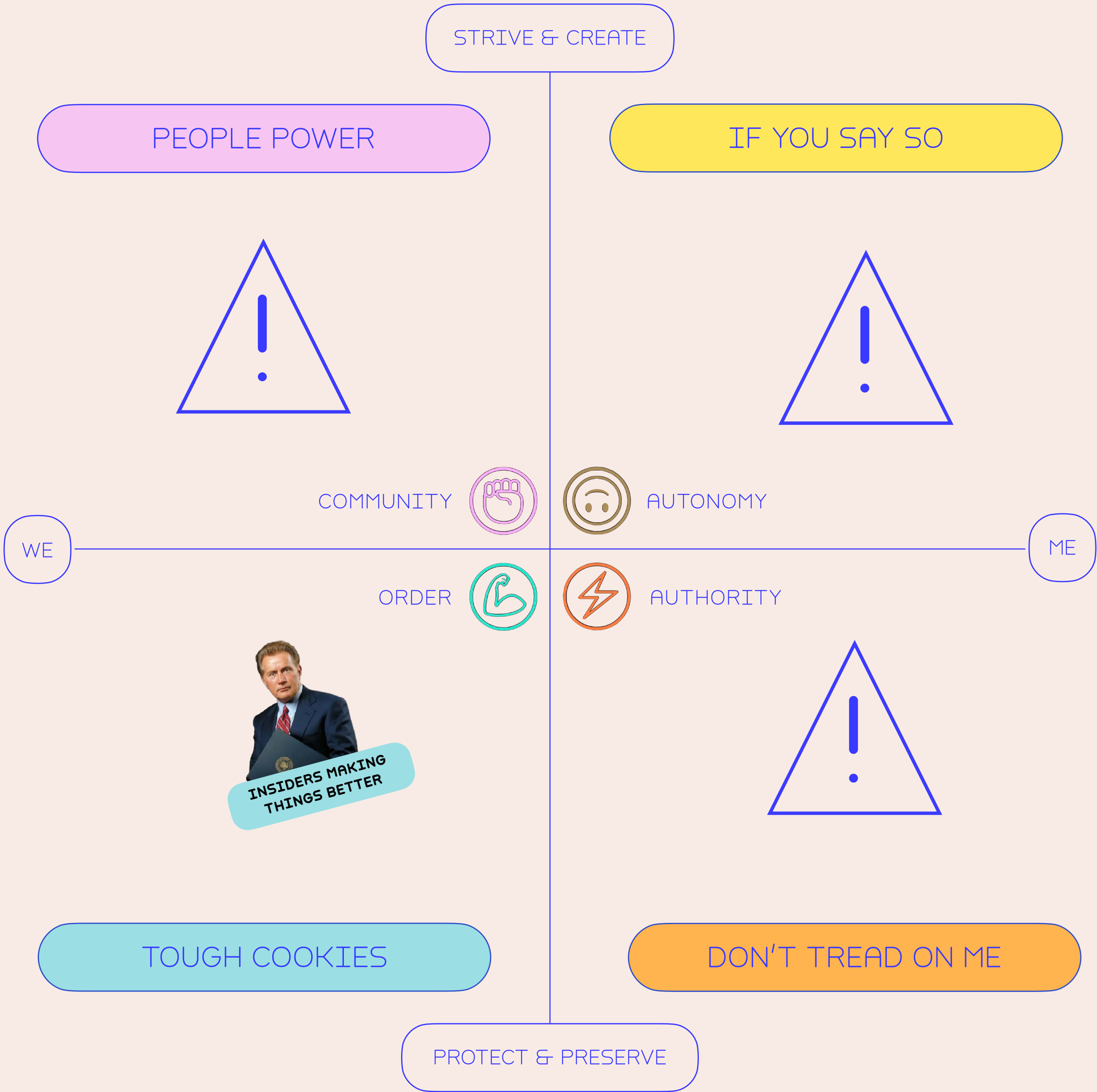

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER

IF YOU SAY SO

INSIDERS MAKING THINGS WORSE

OUTLAWS MAKING THINGS BETTER

GOOD FUTURE GOVERNMENTS

RULE FOLLOWERS MAKING THINGS BETTER

COMMUNITY   AUTONOMY

WE   ME

ENSEMBLES FIGHTING EVIL

ORDER   AUTHORITY

GOOD FUTURE GOVERNMENTS

INDIVIDUALS FIGHTING EVIL

TOUGH COOKIES

DON'T TREAD ON ME

PROTECT & PRESERVE

HEALTHY, UNCHANGING DEMOCRACIES DON'T MOTIVATE

IN PHASE 1, AUDIENCES NEEDED TO SEE SOMETHING BROKEN TO BELIEVE GOVERNMENT SHOULD DO MORE

With the exception of TOUGH COOKIES, stories of stable, well-functioning governments caused backlash in audiences. PEOPLE POWER, IF YOU SAY SO, and DON'T TREAD ON ME became less likely to believe that government should do more—perhaps because these stories reinforced the sense that the system is already working.

Because stories with governments staying the same, whether healthy or unhealthy, were common (almost 60% of the government-relevant stories we analyzed), Phase 2 focused on arcs where heroes had a clear problem to solve and the system itself had to change.
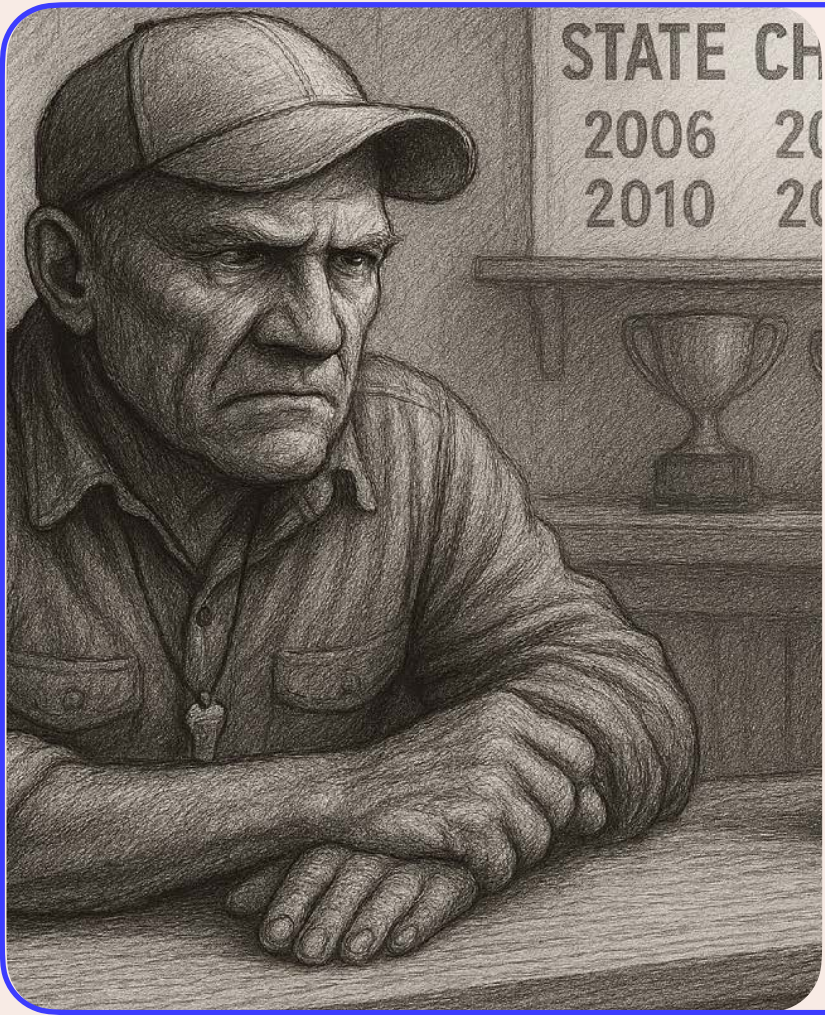
STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER

IF YOU SAY SO

COMMUNITY

AUTONOMY

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ME

ORDER

AUTHORITY

INSIDERS MAKING THINGS BETTER

TOUGH COOKIES

DON'T TREAD ON ME

PROTECT & PRESERVE

AUDIENCE SPOTLIGHT : DON'T TREAD ON ME

IN PHASE 2 WE TESTED AUDIENCE-SPECIFIC HEROES WHO TRIED TO TRANSFORM THE SYSTEM

In phase 1 we found that stories of stable, fully functioning governments moved DON'T TREAD ON ME away from thinking there was a problem. Here, in phase 2, they were moved by stories where their kind of hero had a problem to fix. The strongest performing stories were those in which the agent acted for someone other than themselves. In one such story that we tested, a father quits his successful coaching career to investigate his son's death, and finds justice in a corrupted system.

Even stories in which the hero falls from grace—like in stories where the hero becomes a vengeful vigilante—DON'T TREAD ON ME was more likely to recognize there were problems with the system and demand more.

"Ted was grief-stricken but fueled by purpose. He resigned from coaching to find justice for Turner. While the mayor and sheriff stonewalled him, Ted went door-to-door interviewing witnesses and following ignored leads. He used his pension for a private investigator and showed up at every city council meeting with Turner's photo, demanding answers. The town watched their beloved coach transform into something harder, and more determined."

Excerpt from a fictional story that we created and tested in Phase 2, featuring an outsider-restorer hero.

POPULAR STORIES WHERE OUTSIDER RESTORERS TRANSFORM THE SYSTEM

Note: These films and shows were not tested; they simply illustrate comparable story arcs.

STORYTELLING INSPIRATION

To move the needle on democracy, people may need to see a problem within a system where people collectively shape the rules they live by.

In our testing, all audiences were persuaded to demand more, whether our protagonist won or lost against the system. The strongest stories arcs we tested were those in which the agent acted for someone other than themselves.
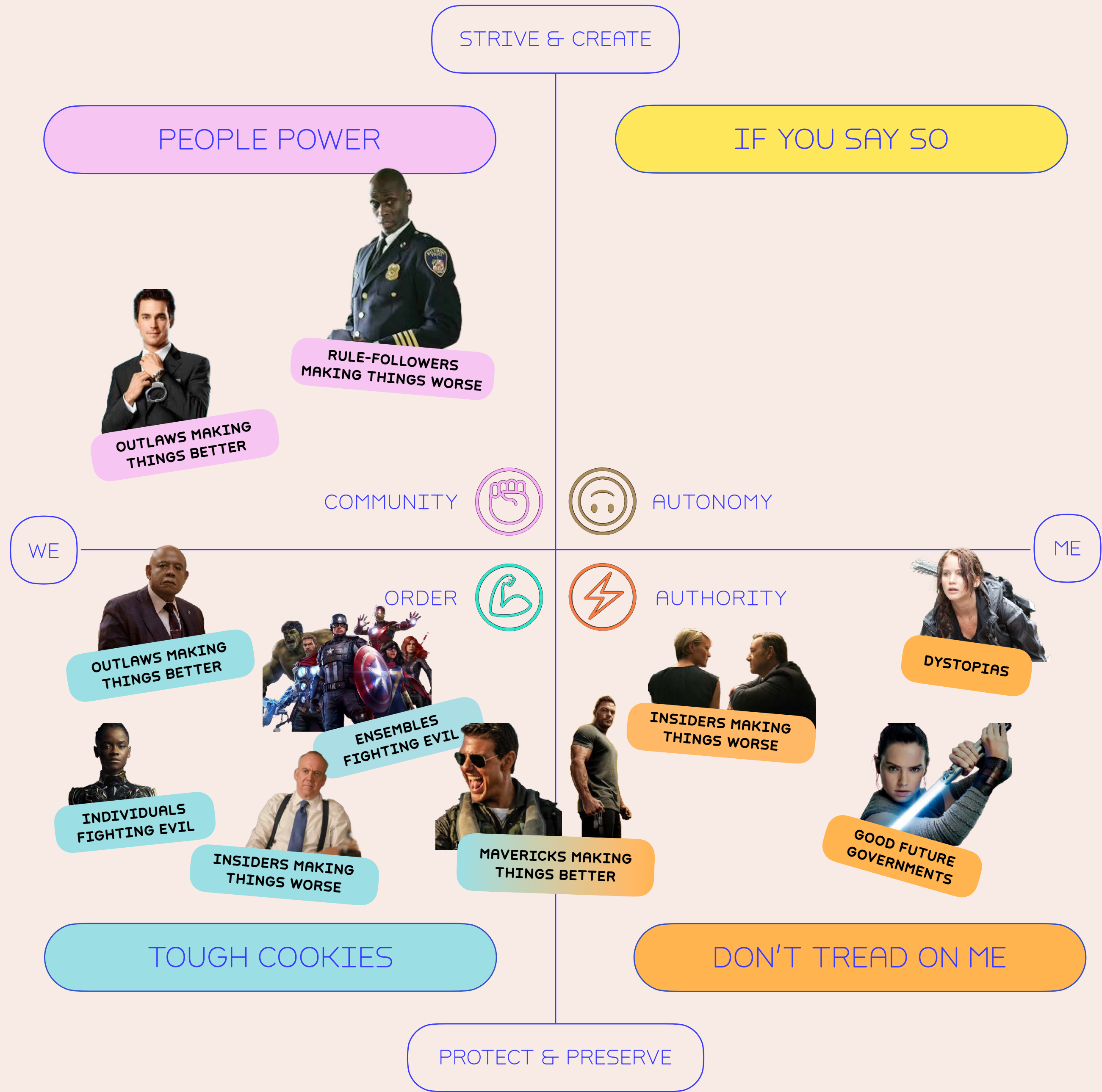
SOURCE THE MOTHER (2023)

WATCHING ORDINARY PEOPLE EXERCISING POWER IMPROVES AUDIENCES' SENSE OF AGENCY

MOTIVES MATTER LESS THAN BEING INVOLVED IN ACTION

IN PHASE 1 WE FOUND THAT PEOPLE ACTING IN STORIES INSPIRED AGENCY IN AUDIENCES

Stories of regular people, mavericks fighting corruption, and public servants all helped audiences see their own role in improving government. Stories like *White Collar* and *Top Gun: Maverick* where an outlaw make things better, or even stories where the action only makes things worse like in *The Wire* or *Billions*, made audiences feel more agency. The one exception was IF YOU SAY SO who sometimes doubt their own agency. Even so, in the stories we analyzed only 50% of the heroes were motivated by truth and justice.

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER

IF YOU SAY SO

RULE-FOLLOWERS MAKING THINGS WORSE

OUTLAWS MAKING THINGS BETTER

COMMUNITY   AUTONOMY

WE   ME

ORDER   AUTHORITY

OUTLAWS MAKING THINGS BETTER

ENSEMBLES FIGHTING EVIL

DYSTOPIAS

INSIDERS MAKING THINGS WORSE

INDIVIDUALS FIGHTING EVIL

INSIDERS MAKING THINGS WORSE

MAVERICKS MAKING THINGS BETTER

GOOD FUTURE GOVERNMENTS

TOUGH COOKIES

DON'T TREAD ON ME

PROTECT & PRESERVE

HEROES GIVING UP CAN CAUSE BACKLASH

IN PHASE 2, WE FOUND WHEN HEROES GAVE UP, OR HAD NO AGENCY AT ALL, THEY WERE LESS LIKELY TO WORK ACROSS DIFFERENCES TO MAKE DEMOCRACY WORK

Audiences were more likely to recognize a problem, collaborate with others, and imagine the future if the hero of the story tried. While success sparked the strongest movement, even heroes who try but fail still moved audiences positively.
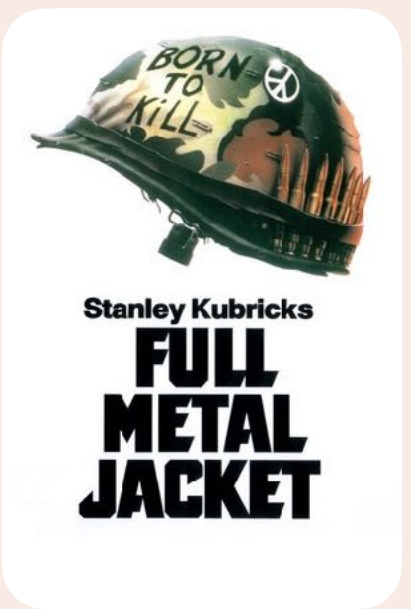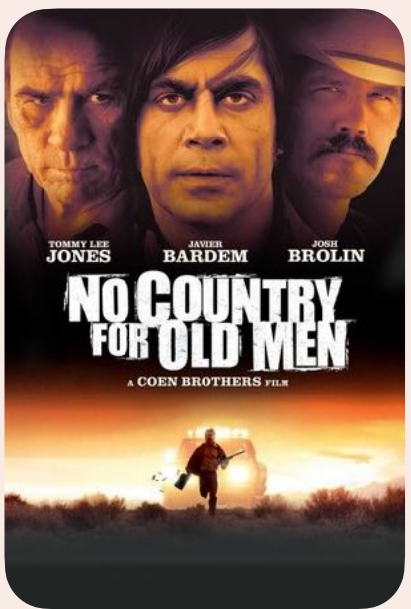
Stories where heroes have no agency (and only the system acts) helped people recognize systemic problems, but also caused backlash in PEOPLE POWER on wanting to work across differences. This means "system is rigged" storytelling, where no one even gets to try, risks reinforcing the belief that people can't work across differences to solve problems, and actively might move audiences away from pursuing a healthy democracy.

"Sarah saw a troubling pattern: district leaders praised her work in public but blocked proposals to replace vending machine junk food with fresh produce. Corporate food vendors had multi-year contracts the district wouldn't touch. Sarah knew going public could risk retaliation against her students, many of whom were relying on chips from the corner store as their only meal. So she stopped pushing for reform and let the garden program fade."

Excerpt from a fictional story that we created and tested in Phase 2, where the hero gives up.

POPULAR STORIES WHERE HERO GIVES UP

Note: These films and shows were not tested; they simply illustrate comparable story arcs.

SEEING OTHER PEOPLE'S HEROES INSPIRED WILLINGNESS TO WORK ACROSS DIFFERENCE

Audiences were more willing to work across differences not only when *their* preferred heroes acted, but also when *other* hero types succeeded. For example, *House of Cards'* Insider Transformer hero who fights for power at all costs also inspired Authority-oriented viewers. Given this, the question becomes how do you get audiences to see content with heroes other than the ones they choose to watch?

Authority-oriented DON'T TREAD ON ME was moved by Insider Transformers, typically the heroes for the community crowd.

Veteran psychiatrist Doctor Maya hits a breaking point when an insurer denies a teen critical mental health care. Risking her career, she joins a class-action suit and builds a coalition of patients, families, advocates, and even a Senator, to win. They convert the legal victory into a Mental Health Care Access Act that spreads beyond their state.

TOUGH COOKIES, who value order, was moved by everyone's heroes—especially when all sides pursued a shared goal!

Eduardo arrives in Los Angeles from rural Mexico with talent but no credentials. Fine dining shuts him out, so he builds a following with a food truck inspired by his grandmother. When the city impounds it, he keeps cooking through community networks until a blogger's spotlight forces change in licensing rules.

Community-minded PEOPLE POWER was moved by the Insider Restorer, usually the hero for the order-oriented audience.

As a struggling student watches his school grow rigid, Dr. Kahn becomes the steady teacher who won't look away. He rebuilds trust through consistent care, then organizes parents and teachers. Programs return, leaders are reassigned, and mentorship takes root. The student graduates with a model of someone who stays to rebuild.

Excerpts from fictional stories that we created and tested in Phase 2, featuring various hero types.

STORYTELLING INSPIRATION

Tell stories of ordinary people trying to exercise power, not just cops and radioactive spiders, even if they don't win. For example, stories like *The Accountant 2*, *Ted Lasso*, and *Silo*.
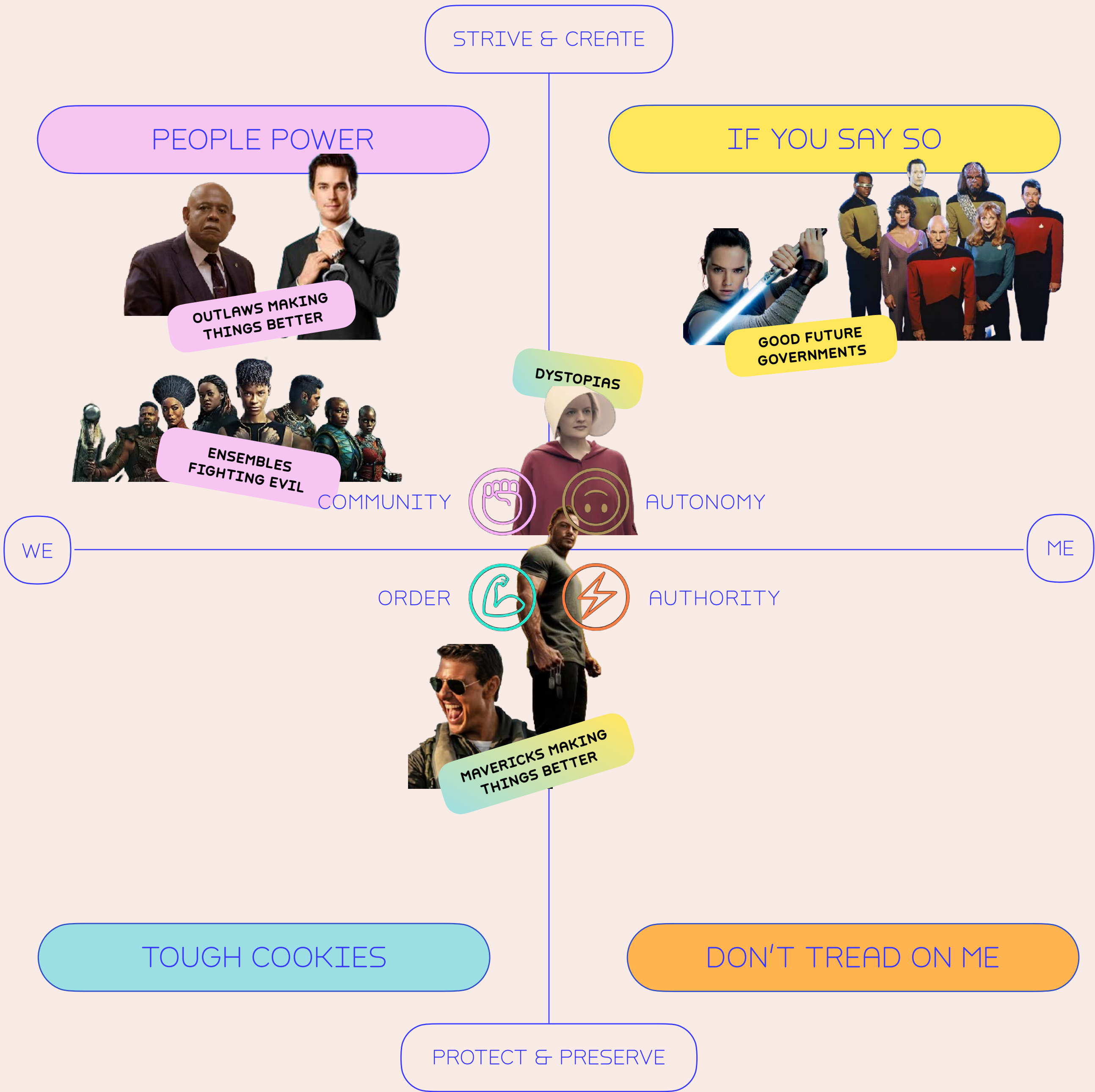
SOURCE SILO (2023)

A POSITIVE VISION OF THE FUTURE HELPS AUDIENCES IMAGINE A BETTER DEMOCRACY

SEEING THE FUTURE INSPIRES IMAGINATION

IN PHASE 1 WE DISCOVERED STORIES OF HEROES EXPERIENCING FUTURE GOVERNMENTS SPARKED AUDIENCE IMAGINATION

For most audiences seeing the future is what matter most—it doesn't even matter if that future is good or bad. Future set stories like *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Star Wars: Episode IX* moved PEOPLE POWER, TOUGH COOKIES, and IF YOU SAY SO to imagine more. DON'T TREAD ON ME, however, remained harder to move—for this audience, stories that emphasize personal liberty and agency may help this audience envision positive change. Overall, given how few stories are set in the future or imagined worlds (only 8% of the government-relevant stories we analyzed in phase 1), this would appear to be rich terrain to explore.

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER

IF YOU SAY SO

OUTLAWS MAKING THINGS BETTER

GOOD FUTURE GOVERNMENTS

DYSTOPIAS

ENSEMBLES FIGHTING EVIL

COMMUNITY

AUTONOMY

WE

ME

ORDER

AUTHORITY

MAVERICKS MAKING THINGS BETTER

TOUGH COOKIES

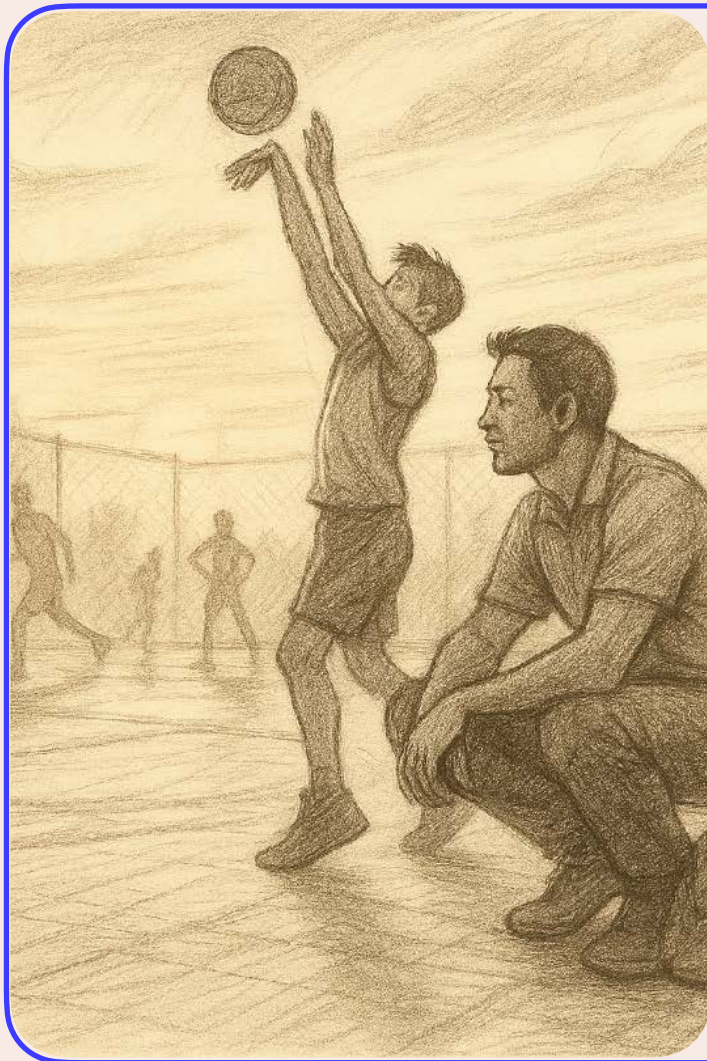DON'T TREAD ON ME

PROTECT & PRESERVE

AUDIENCE SPOTLIGHT: IF YOU SAY SO

IN PHASE 2, IF YOU SAY SO STOOD OUT FOR THEIR ABILITY TO IMAGINE A BETTER FUTURE

For IF YOU SAY SO, there were no stories that increased their sense of agency or desire to work together across differences. However, they were the most likely to imagine a democracy that works for everyone, but only when endings were reframed to improve the future for everyone, not just one person's win. For example, the story of an underdog basketball player moving from benchwarmer to star only sparked imagination when the ending was tweaked so that his example changed the game for generations to come.

Small shifts, from personal success to shared future, may unlock their imaginative superpower. Given that protagonists often act as individuals and in a majority of tested stories about government the system doesn't transform, IF YOU SAY SO may need a more collective story with systems change as an outcome. Important to keep in mind when we consider how to engage these low propensity voters (see slide 12).

"After high school, I went to a local college for my associates degree, and after classes I'd come back to my high school court, do drills alone, and watch the next generation chase their basketball dreams. Years later, coaches noticed my eye for shooters. Players came to me for advice. I became a coach players respected because we all loved the game. Recognition took time, but I'd like to think I changed the game for future generations. I just never stopped showing up."

Excerpt from a fictional story that we created and tested in Phase 2, that helped If You Say So imagine the future.

POPULAR STORIES WITH "BIGGER THAN ME" ENDINGS

Note: These films and shows were not tested; they simply illustrate comparable story arcs.

STORYTELLING INSPIRATION

Audiences need entertainment media to help them imagine something different—stories can do this by showing the future, like *Deep Space 9*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, or *The Boys*.

Consider more future-based stories or endings that jump ahead. Even a 1-2 sentence coda card or a flash forward scene can help spark imagination about the future.

SOURCE: AVATAR THE LAST AIRBENDER (2005)

FROM STORY TO STRATEGY

IF YOU'RE SOURCING AND GREENLIGHTING STORIES

- Evaluate your overall slate against the heroes different audiences are drawn to

- Consider whether there's more than one hero in a story—this can be an opportunity to attract multiple audiences

- Look for stories that we can use more of:
  - Outsider restorers saving the government
  - Ordinary people exercising agency
  - Stories that help us imagine better futures

- Consider testing individual stories (even if you can't change content, the insights can help with marketing materials and strategy)

IF YOU'RE DEVELOPING A STORY:

- Recognize that your hero is going to attract a certain audience

- Consider adding other heroes to expand your reach

- Be aware that your cautionary tale may help someone else imagine what they think is a better future. Consider making stories about the future you'd want instead.

- Consider:
  - Ordinary people exercising their power
  - Showing a hero trying to change the system
  - A different, more expansive, future

APPENDIX

INSIGHT DETAILS

The following sections of this appendix are intended to be a set of actionable insights tailored for three specific audiences: creatives, executives and investors, and democracy advocates.

These insights were developed in partnership with eleven screenwriters and producers working on television series and films, such as *Handmaid's Tale*, *FBI: Most Wanted*, *High Potential*, *All Rise*, *Mrs. America*, and more, as well as leading studios.

These recommendations are brought to you by Democracy 2076, Bridge Entertainment Labs, HARNESS, and PopShift by pathos labs.
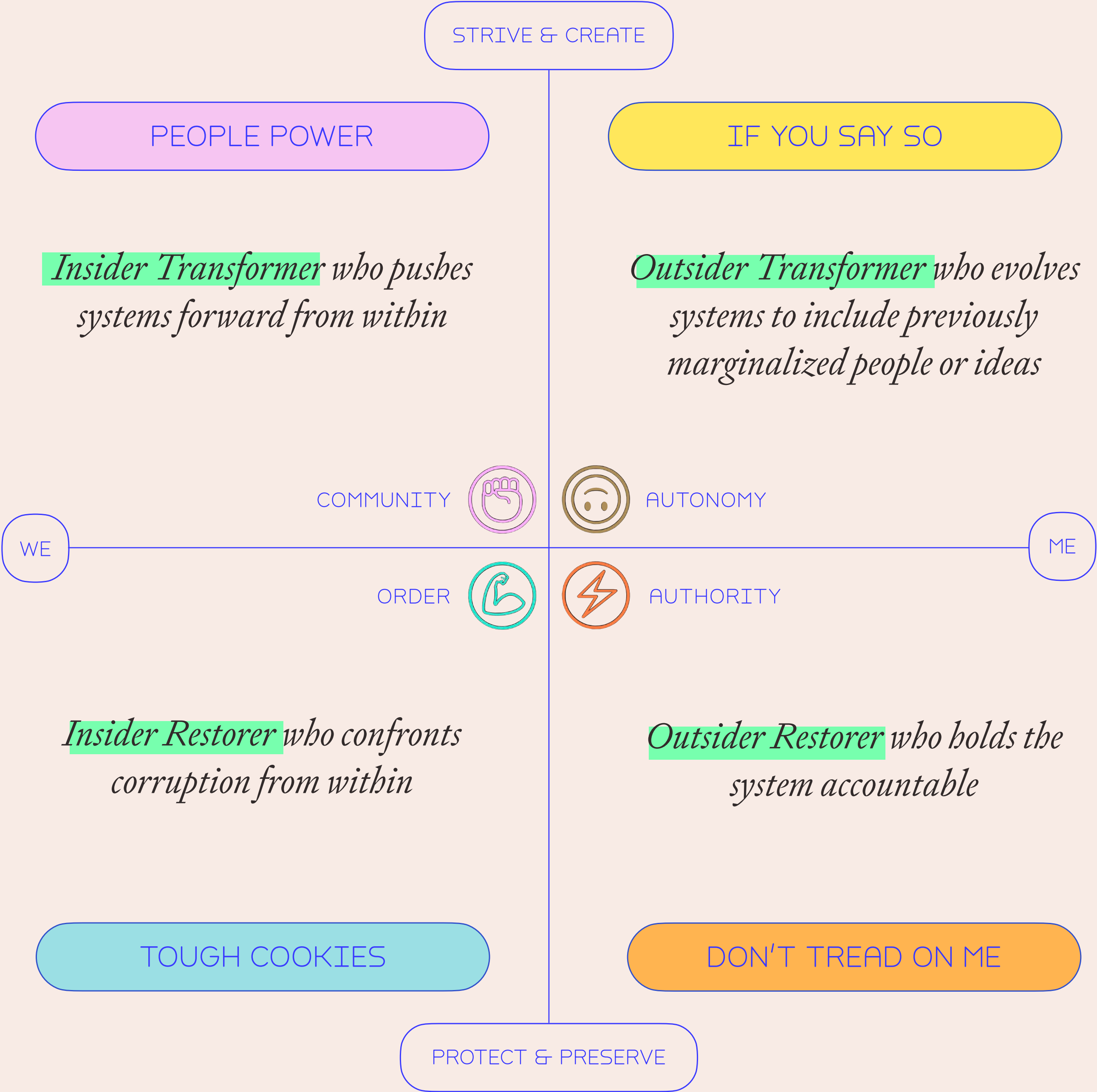
QUESTIONS FOR CREATIVES

The set of questions in the following slides can be used alongside your creative practice as you're developing a feature film or series. For a series, you can consider them for both individual episodes as well as full seasons.

These questions aren't meant to be a prescriptive set of "how to's." Rather, they are intended to help develop a stronger understanding of your audience and how the stories you tell can further engage and inspire them, particularly when it comes to imagining a better future for democracy.

WHAT TYPE OF HEROES ARE IN YOUR STORY?

Different hero types reveal how each audience wants systems to change. The story patterns we observed for each audience fall into four broad types of transformation: revolutionary (PEOPLE POWER), evolutionary (IF YOU SAY SO), restorative (DON'T TREAD ON ME), and reformative (TOUGH COOKIES). Each hero type mirrors the kind of systemic change that audience prefers, offering clues for how to reliably connect them with a vision of democracy that they want.

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER

IF YOU SAY SO

Insider Transformer who pushes systems forward from within

Outsider Transformer who evolves systems to include previously marginalized people or ideas

COMMUNITY   AUTONOMY

WE   ME

ORDER   AUTHORITY

Insider Restorer who confronts corruption from within

Outsider Restorer who holds the system accountable

TOUGH COOKIES

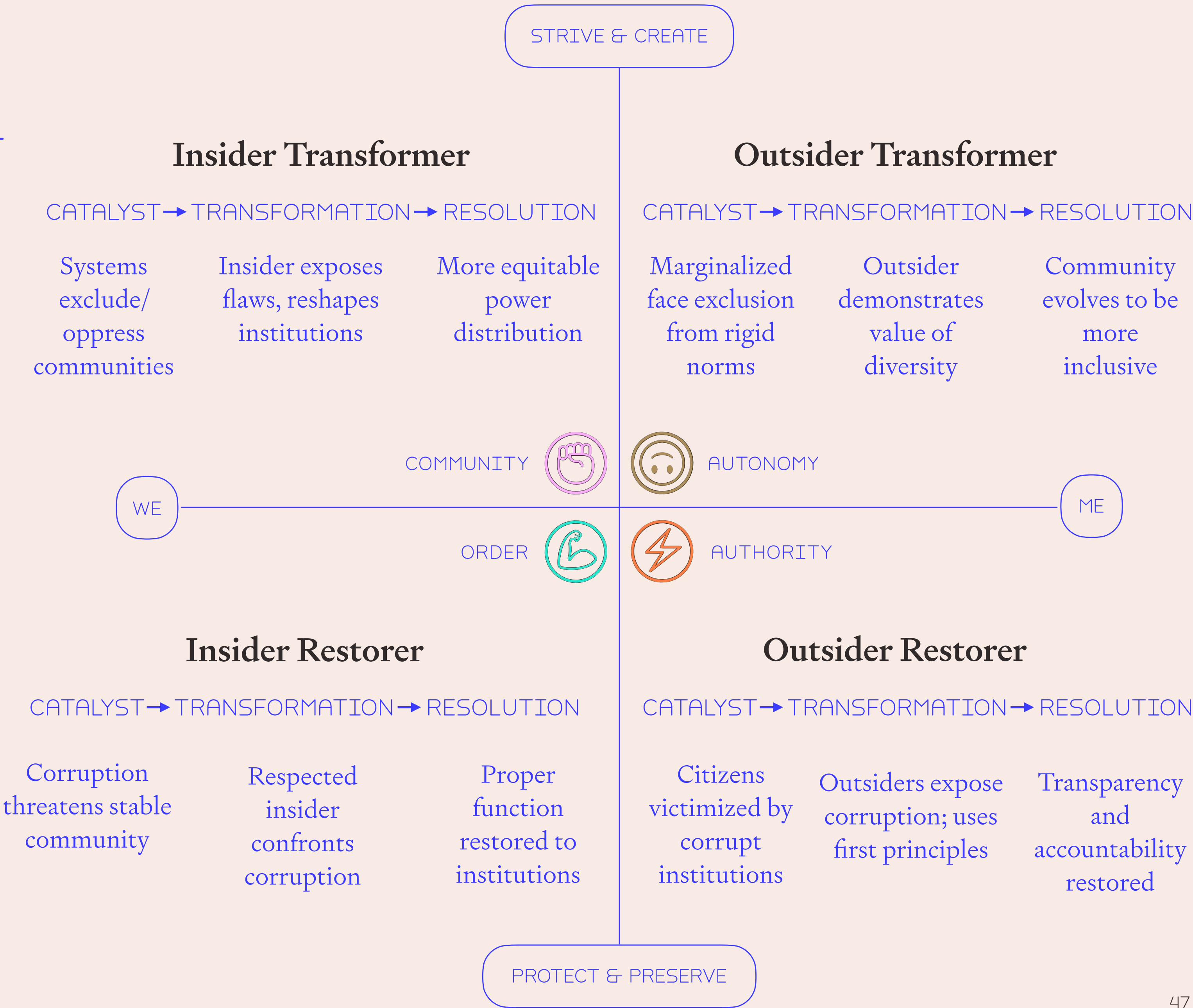DON'T TREAD ON ME

PROTECT & PRESERVE

46

DOES YOUR STORYLINE MAKE YOUR HERO MORE RESONANT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE?

Each audience responds to a different catalyst, transformation, and resolution. Every story has a catalyst that sends the hero on their journey, a transformation (or several) where the action unfolds, and a resolution that reveals the final state of the world and the hero.
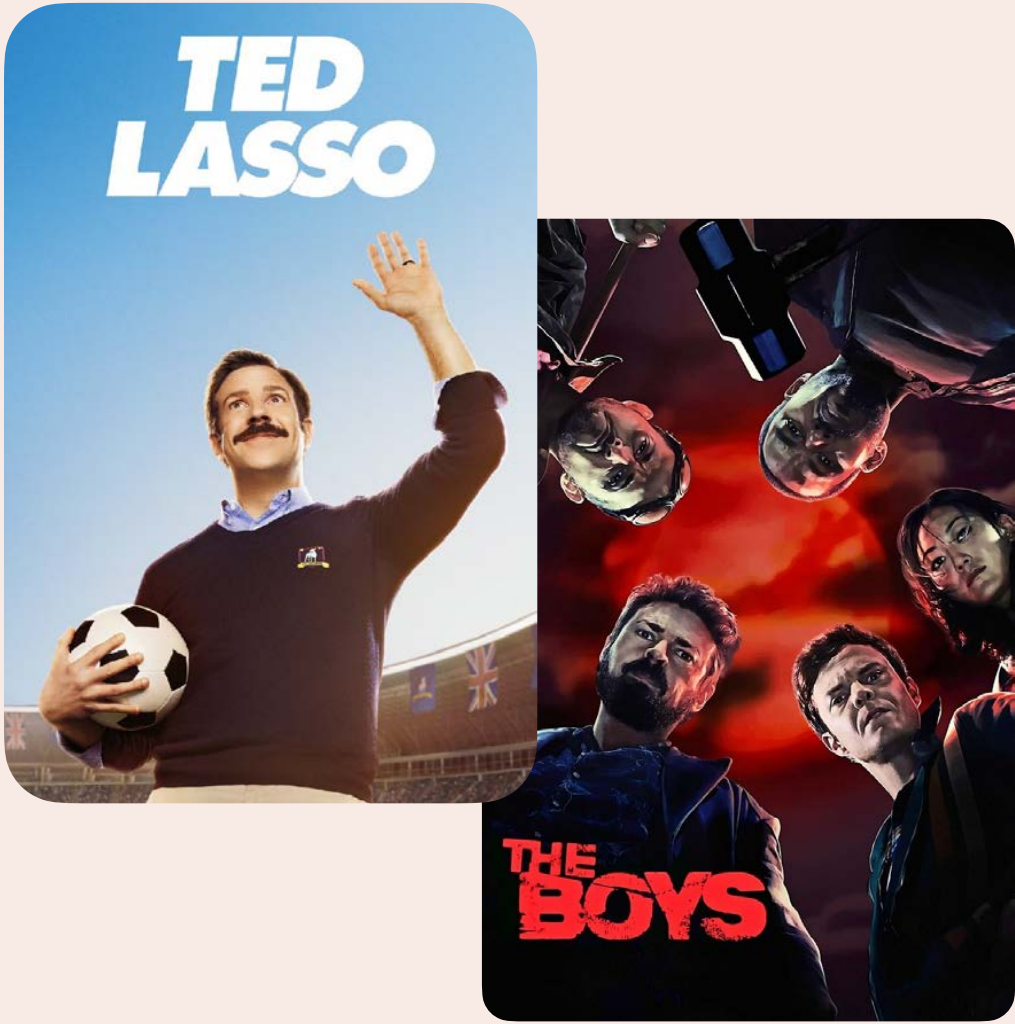
The heroes audiences choose to engage with in the stories they love reflect the kinds of transformation they want to see in real life.

STRIVE & CREATE

Insider Transformer

CATALYST → TRANSFORMATION → RESOLUTION

| Systems exclude/ oppress communities | Insider exposes flaws, reshapes institutions | More equitable power distribution |

Outsider Transformer

CATALYST → TRANSFORMATION → RESOLUTION

| Marginalized face exclusion from rigid norms | Outsider demonstrates value of diversity | Community evolves to be more inclusive |

COMMUNITY   AUTONOMY

WE   ME

ORDER   AUTHORITY

Insider Restorer

CATALYST → TRANSFORMATION → RESOLUTION

| Corruption threatens stable community | Respected insider confronts corruption | Proper function restored to institutions |

Outsider Restorer

CATALYST → TRANSFORMATION → RESOLUTION

| Citizens victimized by corrupt institutions | Outsiders expose corruption; uses first principles | Transparency and accountability restored |

PROTECT & PRESERVE

ARE THERE NATURAL OPPORTUNITIES TO BRING IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF HEROES IN YOUR STORIES?

Introducing different types of heroes may help you reach different audiences. Additionally, people are inspired to work across differences if they see heroes that they don't typically watch; introducing additional hero types in your content can help do this, especially if your main hero is an insider transformer or restorer.

In *The Boys*, the Outsider Transformers on Butcher's team clash with Starlight, who operates like an Insider Transformer. In *Ted Lasso*, Ted is an Insider Transformer, whereas Jamie Tartt acts like an Outsider Transformer. These shows widen audience reach by featuring contrasting hero types.

POPULAR STORY EXAMPLES WITH HEROES
THAT WORK ACROSS DIFFERENCES

ARE YOU SHOWING A CHALLENGE WITH THE SYSTEM IN WHICH CHARACTERS ARE OPERATING?

Showing healthy, working systems is less engaging to audiences because they aren't imagining what change is required. Stories engage audiences more when the system is broken or unfair, and characters must confront that reality. For example, Juliette in *Silo* battles an authoritarian governing structure that hides the truth. In *Reacher,* the protagonist uncovers a conspiracy within the military command.

ARE YOUR HEROES STRIVING TO CHANGE THE RULES OF THEIR WORLD?

Whether they win or lose, it's critical for audiences to see their heroes try. Seeing a hero give up or be overtaken by the system (e.g. the robots winning over humans) reduces people's belief that they have agency. There are many stories that feature heroes trying against the odds. In *The Six Triple Eight*, soldiers reform a broken wartime mail system from the inside. In *Oppenheimer*, the physicist strives to influence nuclear policy after the bomb and ultimately loses control, but still tries.

POPULAR STORY EXAMPLES WITH HEROES CONFRONTING BROKEN SYSTEMS

POPULAR STORY EXAMPLES WITH HEROES TRYING TO CHANGE THE RULES
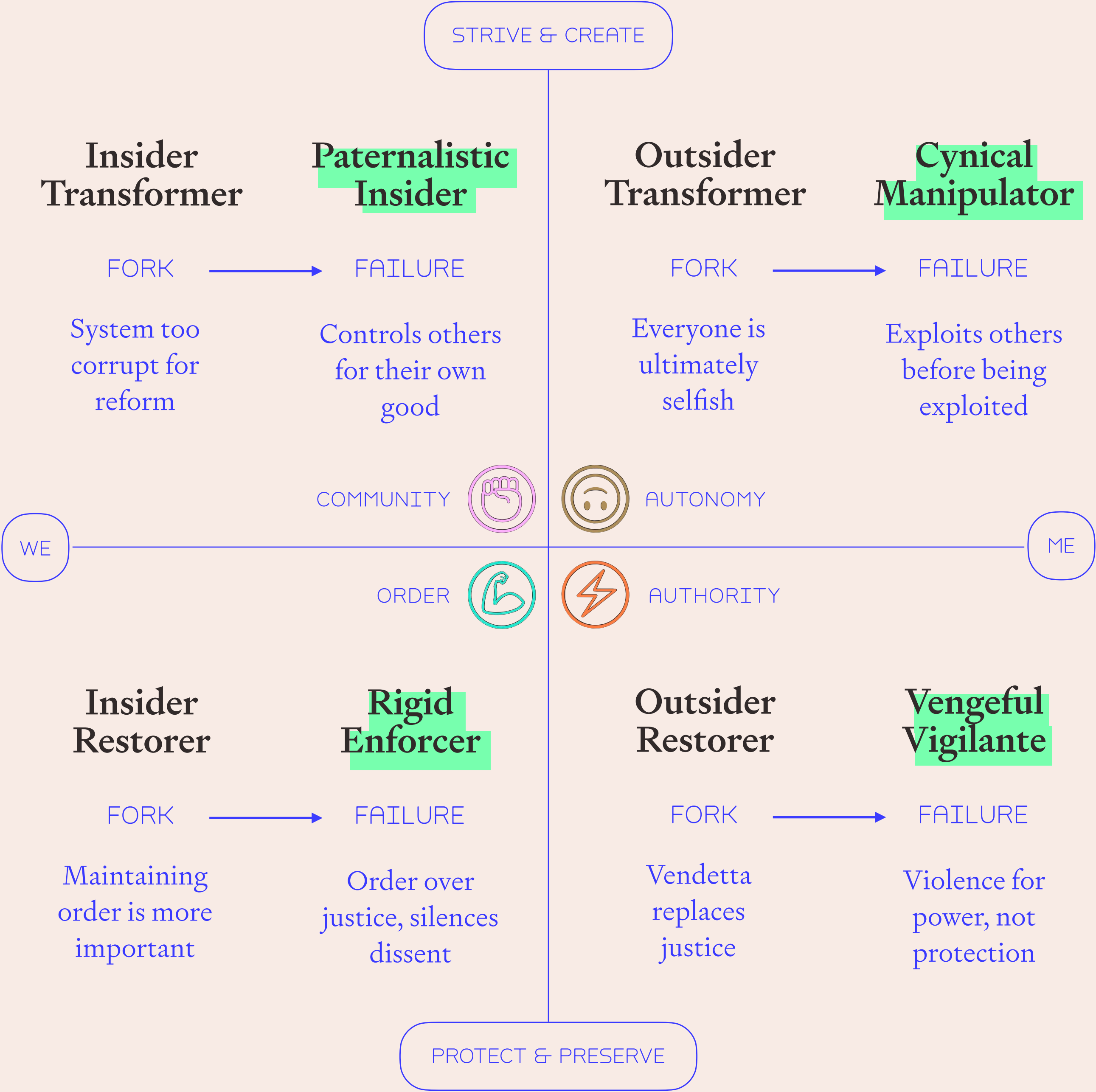
IS YOUR HERO TAKING A COURSE OF ACTION THAT WILL MAKE THEM FALL FROM GRACE WITH THEIR TYPICAL AUDIENCE? IS THAT INTENTIONAL?

Here's don't have to be perfect but how they act in the face of adversity might affect how audiences see them.

The characters audiences care about often grapple with their own flaws and inner demons. Sometimes they reach a "fork in the road" where they are corrupted by their journeys. When this happens, audiences may stop rooting for them and the story as a whole may fail to satisfy. In our testing, arcs where the hero becomes corrupted and stays corrupted were especially demotivating for some audiences, reducing their willingness to work across differences.

Here, we outline what the fallen hero arc looks like for each audience, from the paternalistic insider to the vengeful vigilante.

STRIVE & CREATE

Insider Transformer   **Paternalistic Insider**   **Outsider Transformer**   **Cynical Manipulator**

FORK → FAILURE

System too corrupt for reform

Controls others for their own good

FORK → FAILURE

Everyone is ultimately selfish

Exploits others before being exploited

COMMUNITY   AUTONOMY

WE   ME

ORDER   AUTHORITY

Insider Restorer   **Rigid Enforcer**   **Outsider Restorer**   **Vengeful Vigilante**

FORK → FAILURE

Maintaining order is more important

Order over justice, silences dissent

FORK → FAILURE

Vendetta replaces justice

Violence for power, not protection

PROTECT & PRESERVE

50

ARE YOU COMFORTABLE WITH THE STORY YOU ARE TELLING IF THE VILLAIN IN YOUR STORY IS CONSIDERED A HERO BY SOMEONE ELSE?
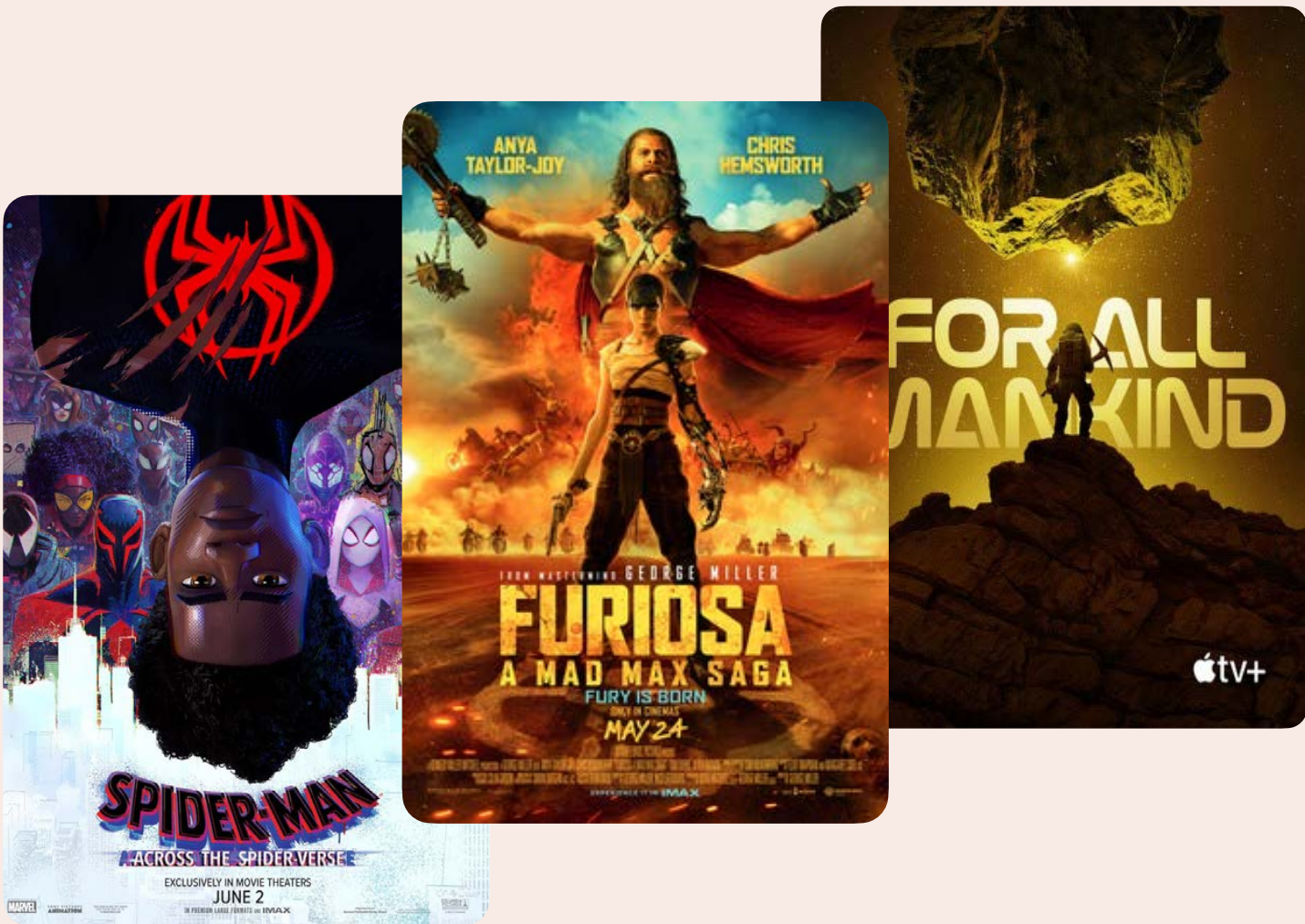
Caution: trying to turn a hero into a villain for a particular audience can diminish their sense of agency or imagining a better future. If doing so, consider who else you cast as a hero to take up the work. While audiences choose stories with complex, imperfect characters, it matters what the hero does at the fork in the road, and whether there is a resolution. This resolution is where characters can course-correct and signal the values that matter to the audience, or other characters can be cast to take up the good work.

POPULAR STORY EXAMPLES WITH FALLEN
HEROES FACING FORKS IN THE ROAD

DOES YOUR STORY ULTIMATELY OFFER AN EXPLICIT VISION FOR THE FUTURE?

There's opportunity to set stories in the future, as only 8% of government-relevant content people see every day are set in one. In addition, whether a story is set in the future or ends on a vision for the future, offering an explicit vision for a better future can move people to imagine a better democracy. Stories like *For All Mankind*, *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga*, and *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* offer a broader vision of the future, sometimes across multiple timelines, pushing the audience to imagine beyond the present.

POPULAR STORY EXAMPLES OFFERING
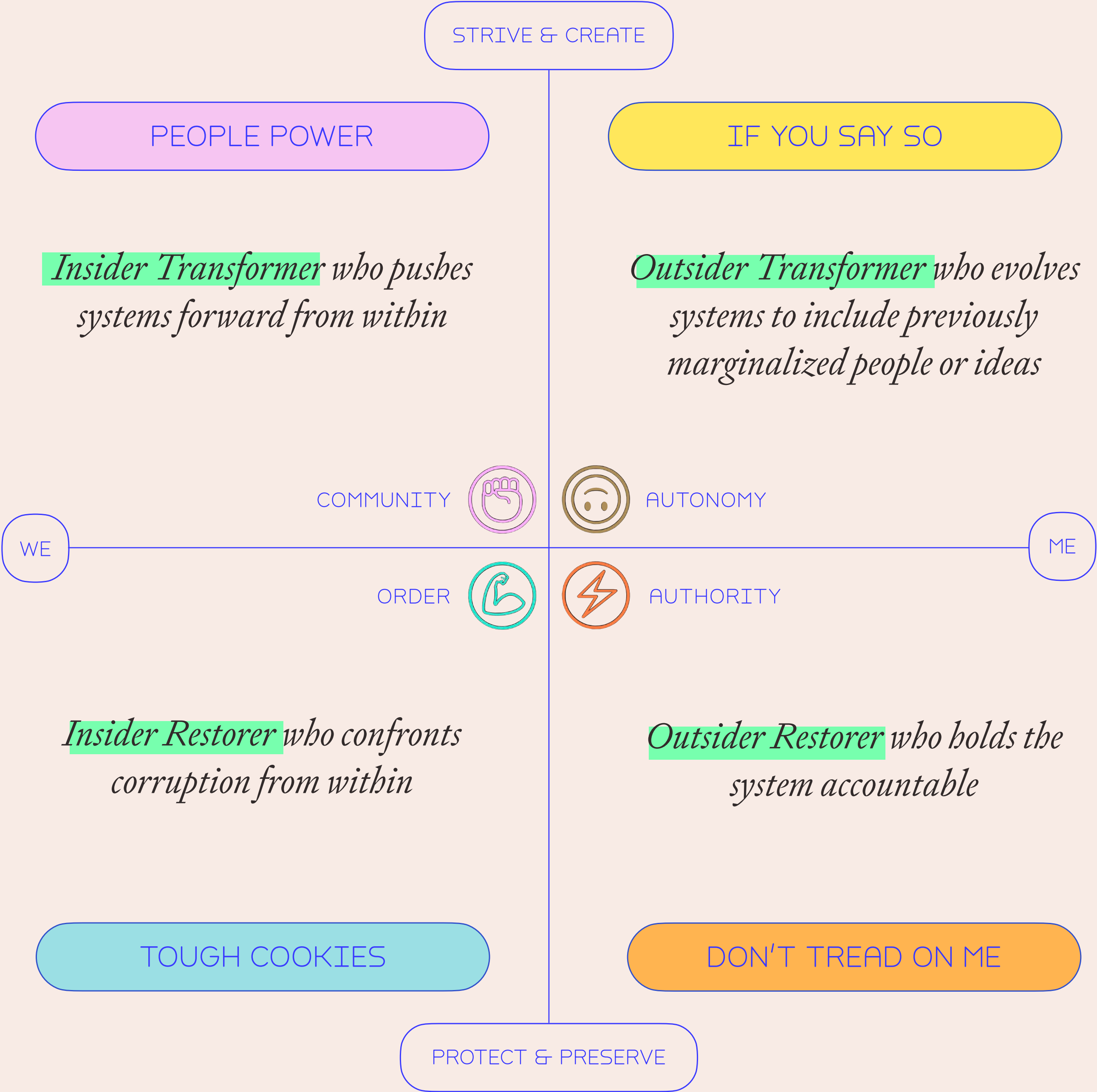VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

QUESTIONS FOR EXECUTIVES AND INVESTORS

This set of questions is for anyone who selects content for their slate. You can use it for individual pieces of content or as you consider the whole of your slate.

This isn't meant to be a prescriptive "how to" document. Rather, it offers a set of questions that can help you have a stronger grasp of your audience and how you may further engage and inspire them, particularly when it comes to imagining a better future for democracy.

WHO ARE THE AUDIENCES THAT YOUR SLATE ATTRACTS GIVEN THE TYPE OF HEROES YOU OFFER?
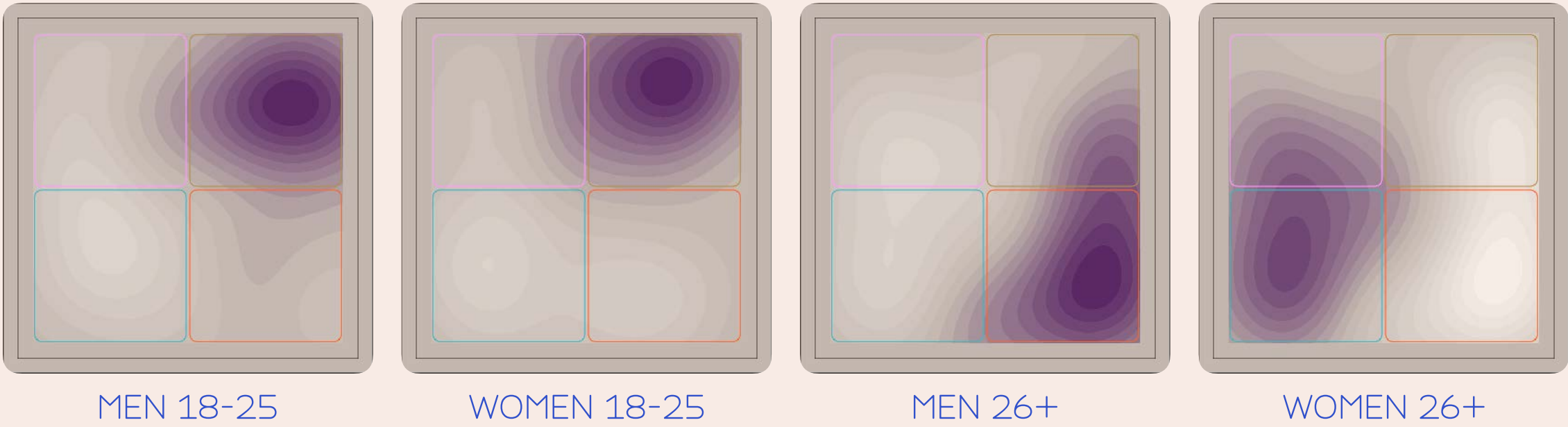
Different hero types reveal how each audience wants systems to change. The story patterns we observed for each audience fall into four broad types of transformation: revolutionary (PEOPLE POWER), evolutionary (IF YOU SAY SO), restorative (DON'T TREAD ON ME), and reformative (TOUGH COOKIES). Each hero type mirrors the kind of systemic change that audience prefers, offering clues for how to reliably connect them with a vision of democracy that they want.
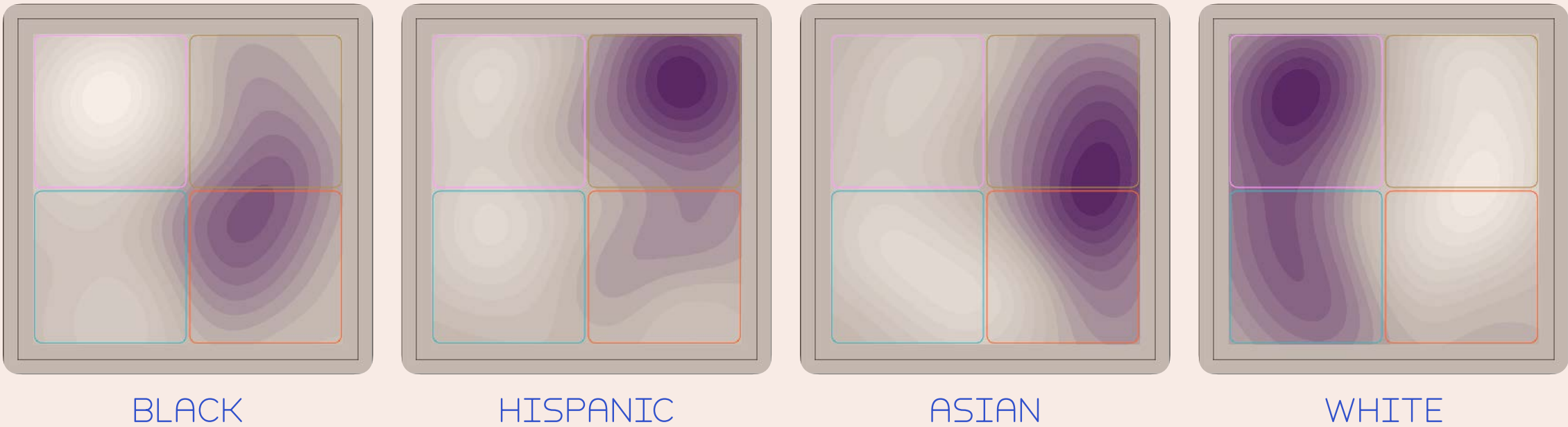
STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER

IF YOU SAY SO

Insider Transformer who pushes systems forward from within

Outsider Transformer who evolves systems to include previously marginalized people or ideas

COMMUNITY

AUTONOMY

WE

ME

ORDER

AUTHORITY

Insider Restorer who confronts corruption from within

Outsider Restorer who holds the system accountable

TOUGH COOKIES

DON'T TREAD ON ME

PROTECT & PRESERVE

53

IS YOUR SLATE OPTIMIZING FOR UNTAPPED AUDIENCES?

CONSIDER : OF THE FOUR VALUES-BASED AUDIENCES, WHO IS MOST OF YOUR CONTENT GEARED TOWARD? WHICH AUDIENCE TYPE WOULD YOU LIKE TO REACH THAT YOU AREN'T?
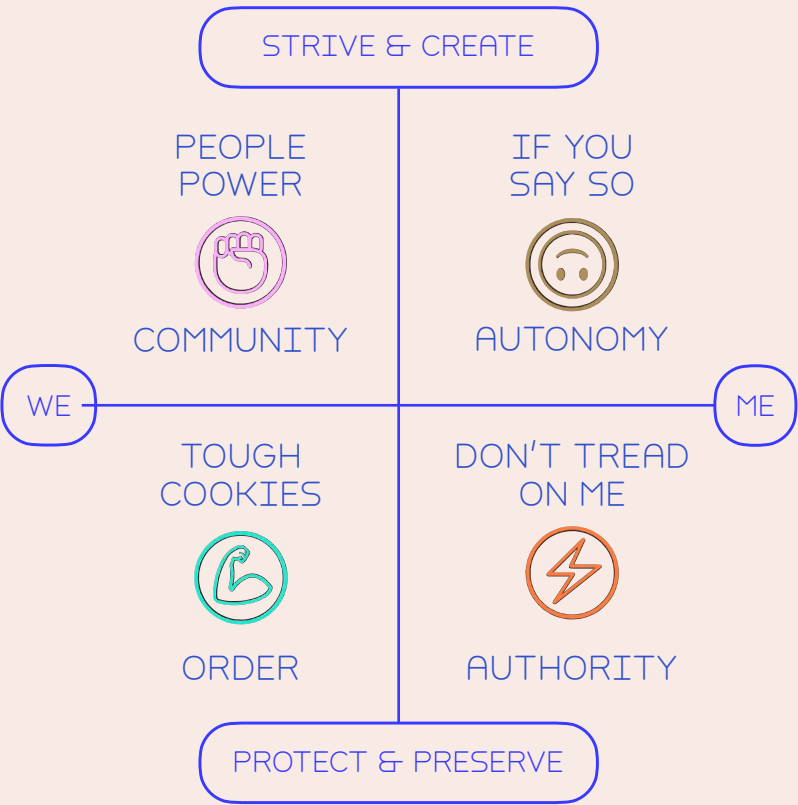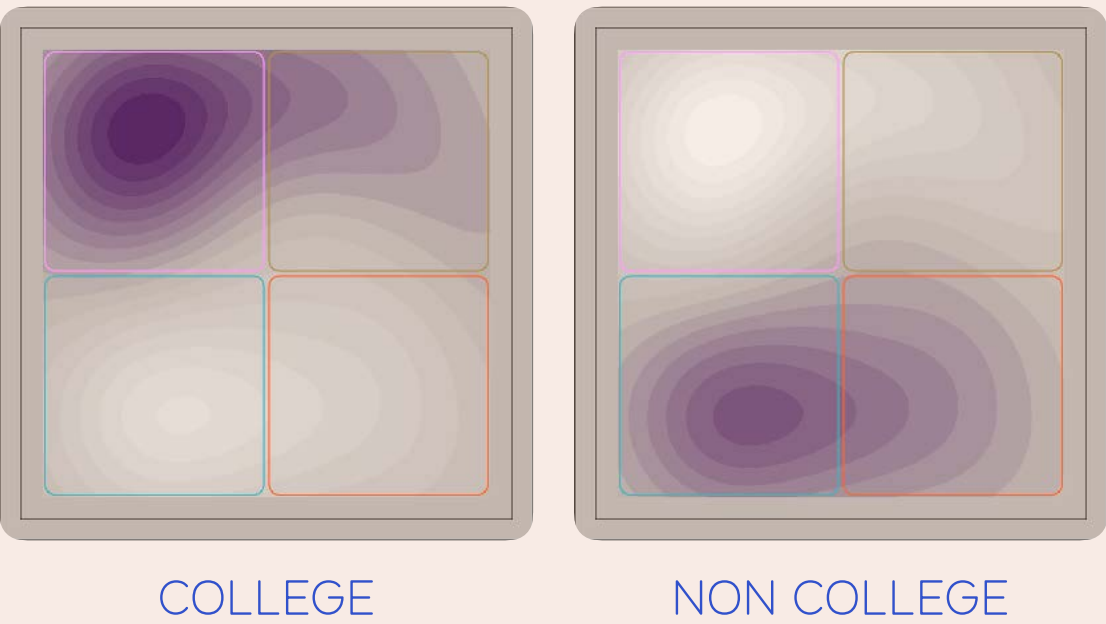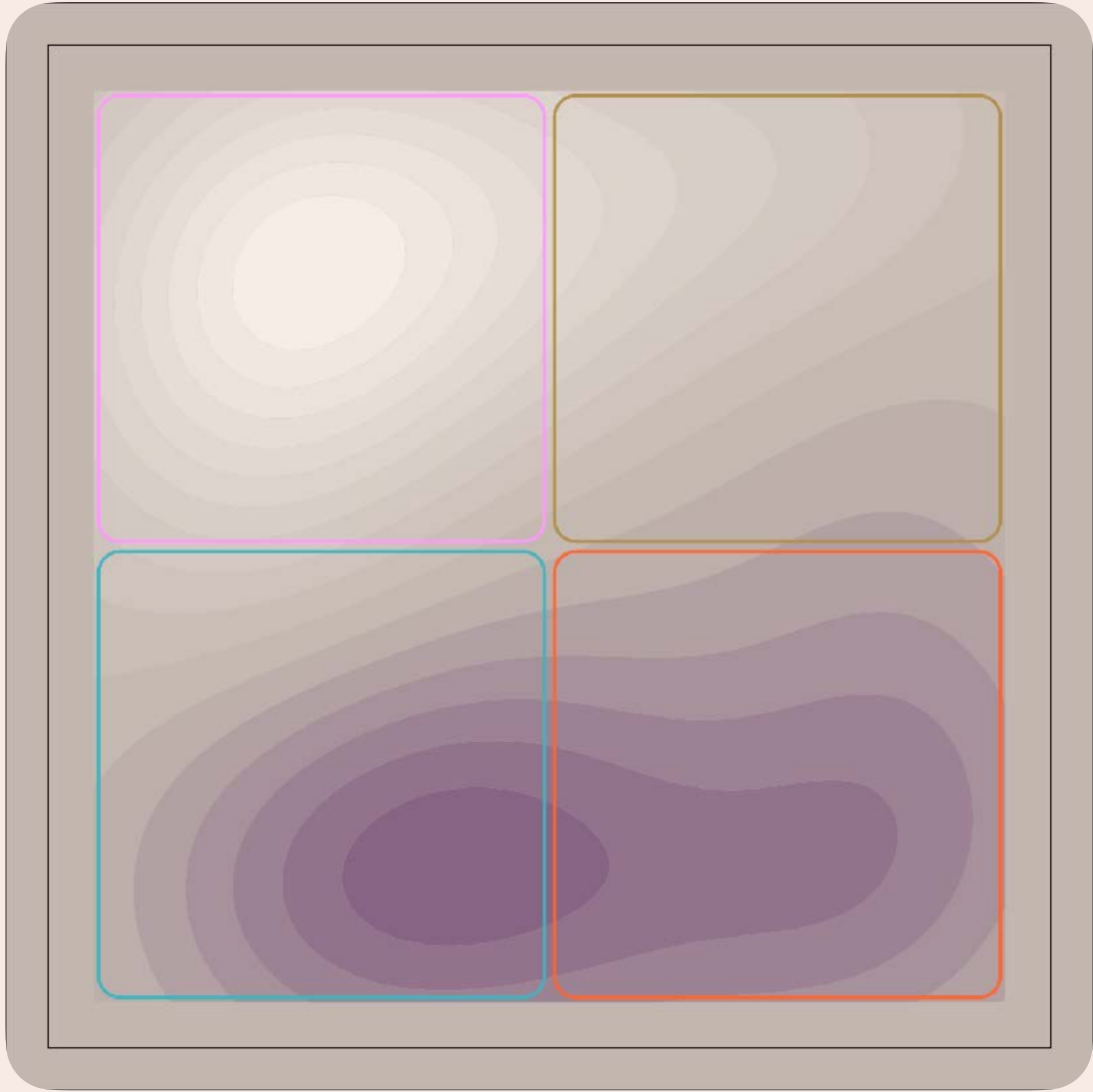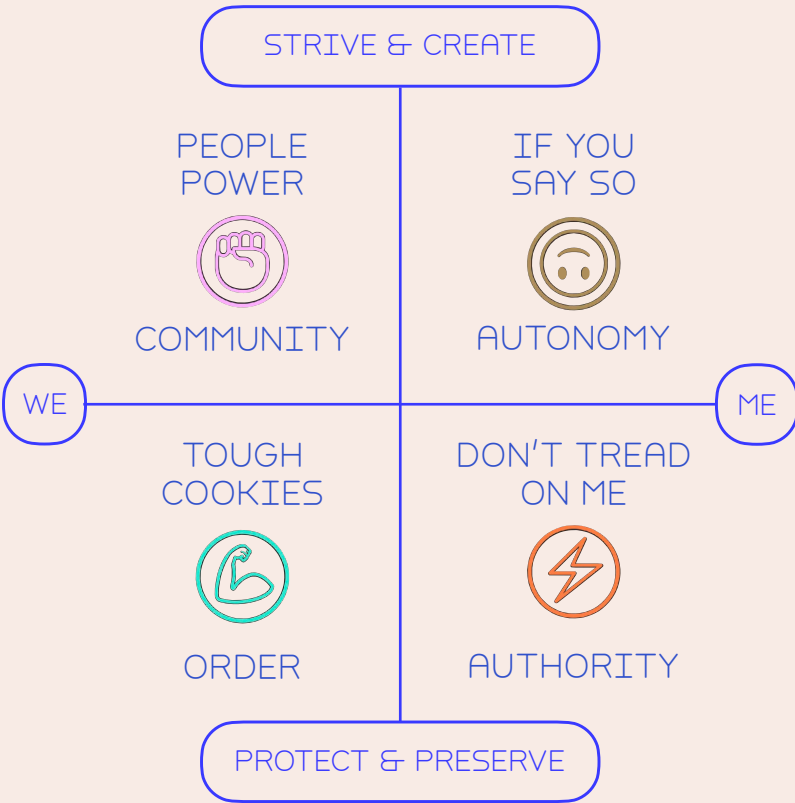
AGE & GENDER

MEN 18-25   WOMEN 18-25   MEN 26+   WOMEN 26+

RACE

BLACK   HISPANIC   ASIAN   WHITE

EDUCATION

COLLEGE   NON COLLEGE

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER
COMMUNITY

IF YOU SAY SO
AUTONOMY

WE — ME

TOUGH COOKIES
ORDER

DON'T TREAD ON ME
AUTHORITY

PROTECT & PRESERVE

...CONTINUED

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE
POWER

COMMUNITY

IF YOU
SAY SO

AUTONOMY

WE — ME

TOUGH
COOKIES
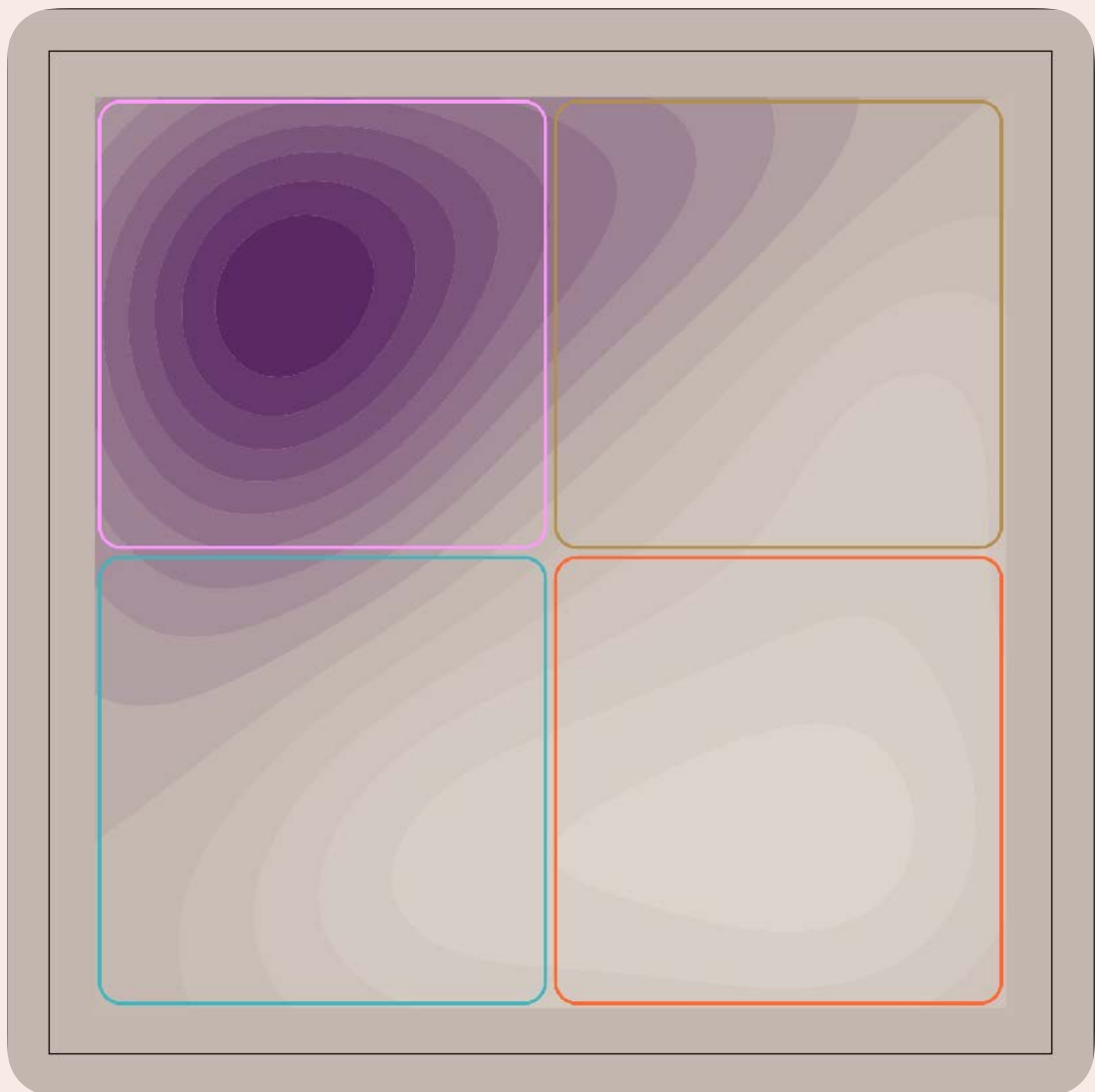
ORDER

DON'T TREAD
ON ME

AUTHORITY

PROTECT & PRESERVE
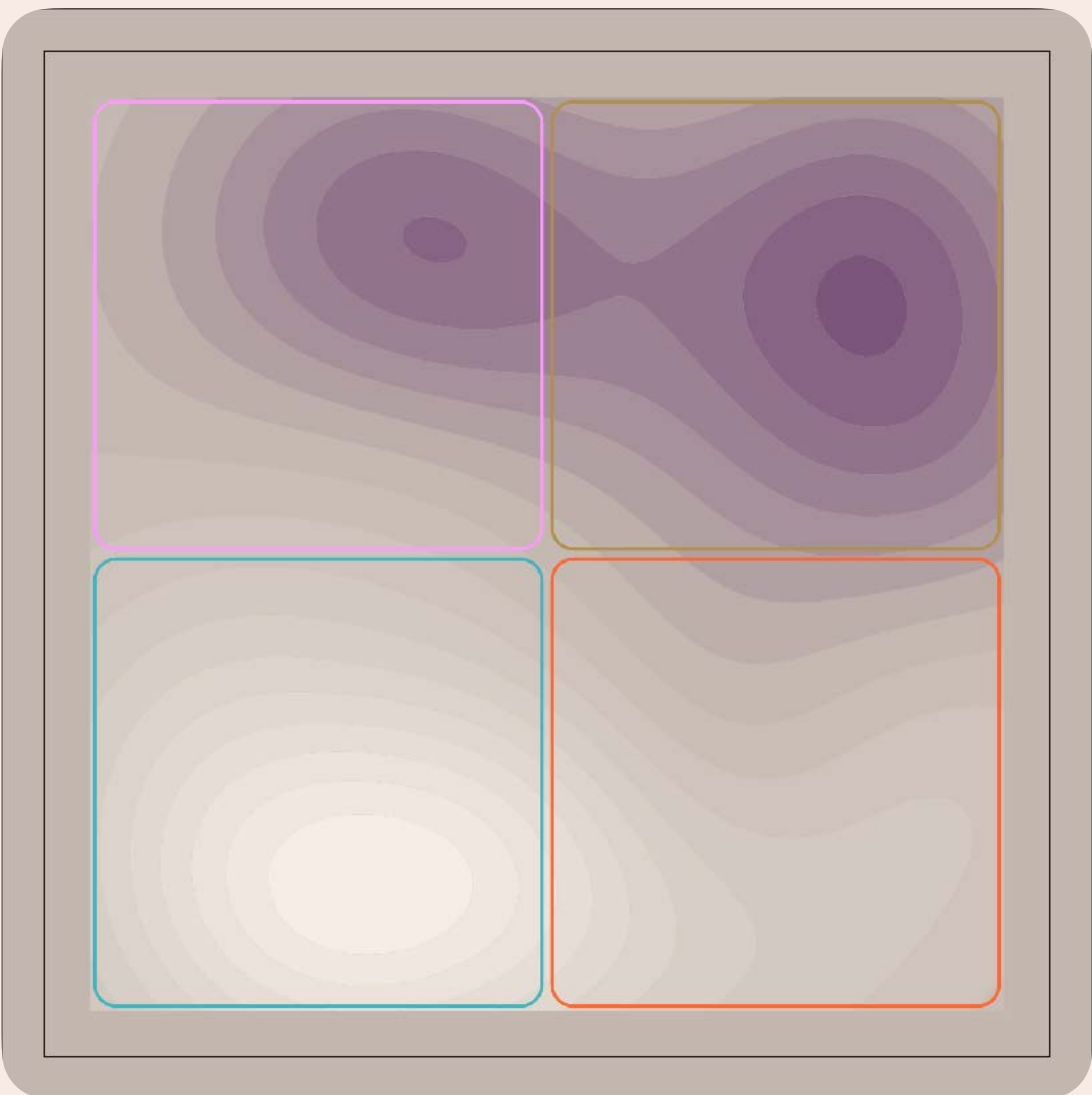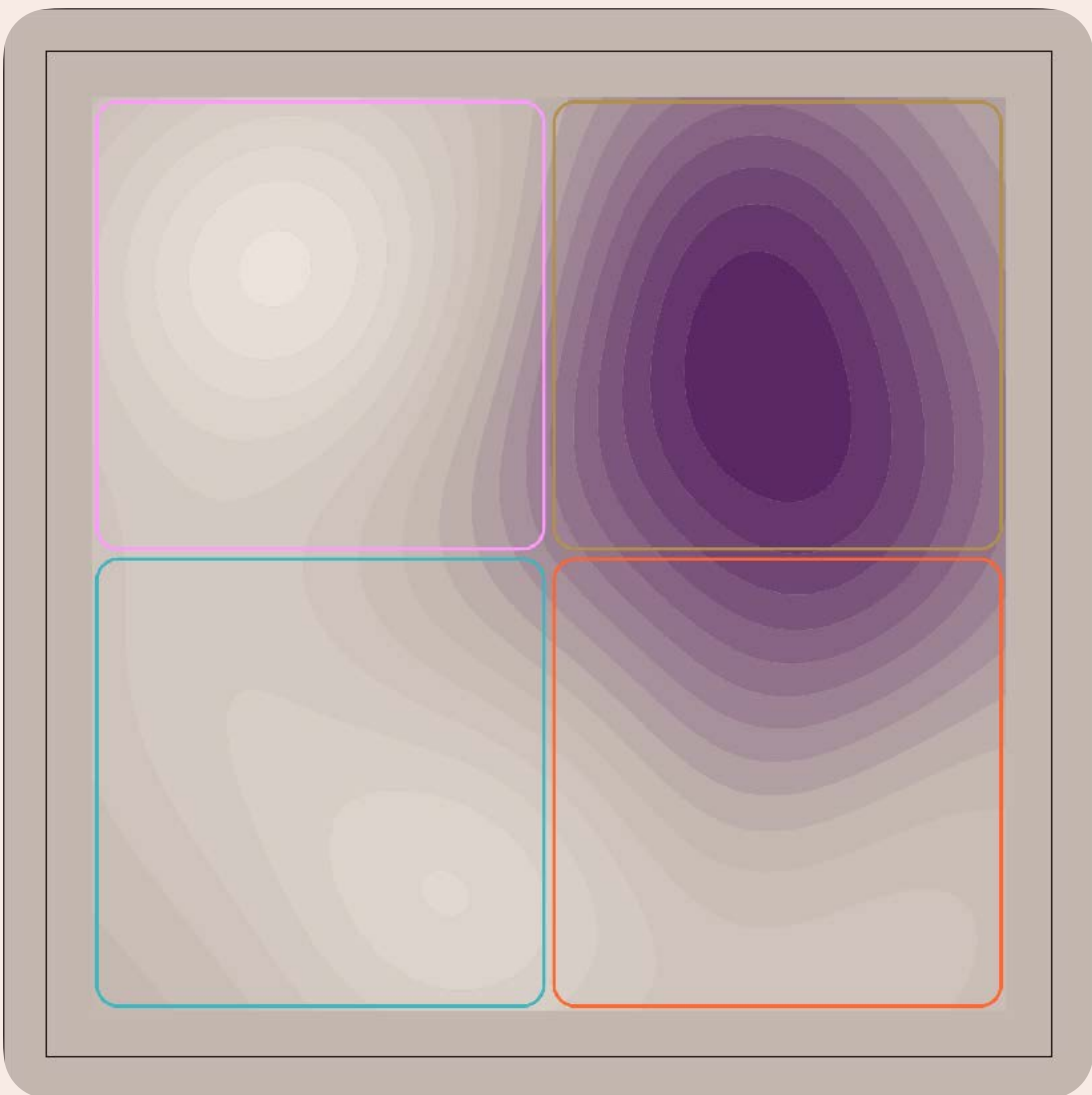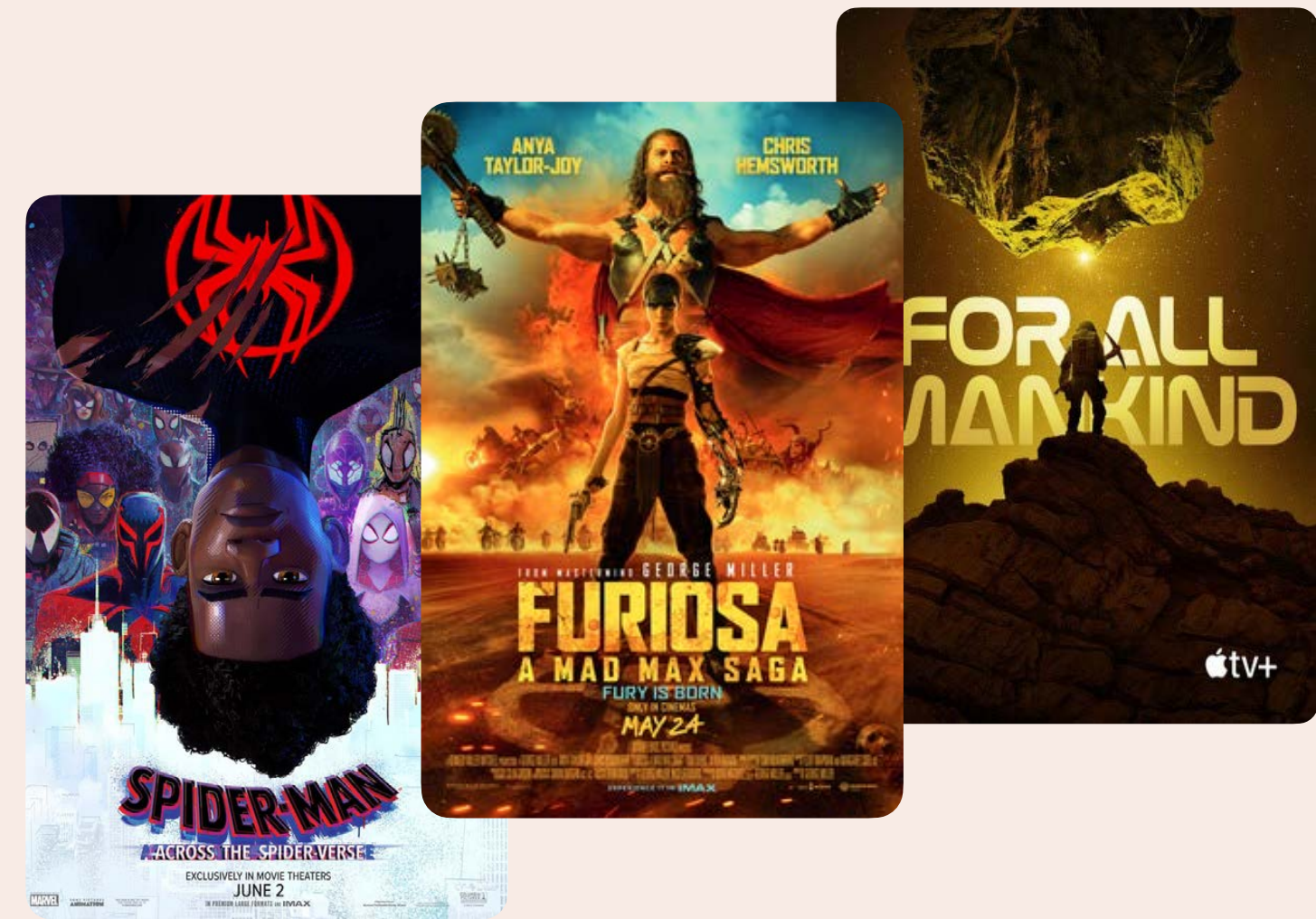

REPUBLICANS

DEMOCRATS

INDEPENDENTS

LOW VOTE PROPENSITY

DOES YOUR SLATE OFFER CONTENT THAT DRAWS IN AUDIENCE AND WILL INSPIRE THEM?

Currently, only 8% of government relevant stories analyzed are set in the future. More stories set in the future or showing, in part, what a better future can look like are needed. Stories like *For All Mankind*, *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga*, and *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* offer a broader vision of the future, sometimes across multiple timelines, pushing the audience to imagine beyond the present. Consider the following stats:

- 83% of young Americans are worried about the state of American democracy and only 47% are optimistic and hopeful when they think about the future of the United States (Sine Institute of Policy & Politics)

- When asked if you feel confident or not confident that life for our children's generation will be better than it has been for us, 78% said they do not feel confident (WSJ/NORC Poll July 2025)
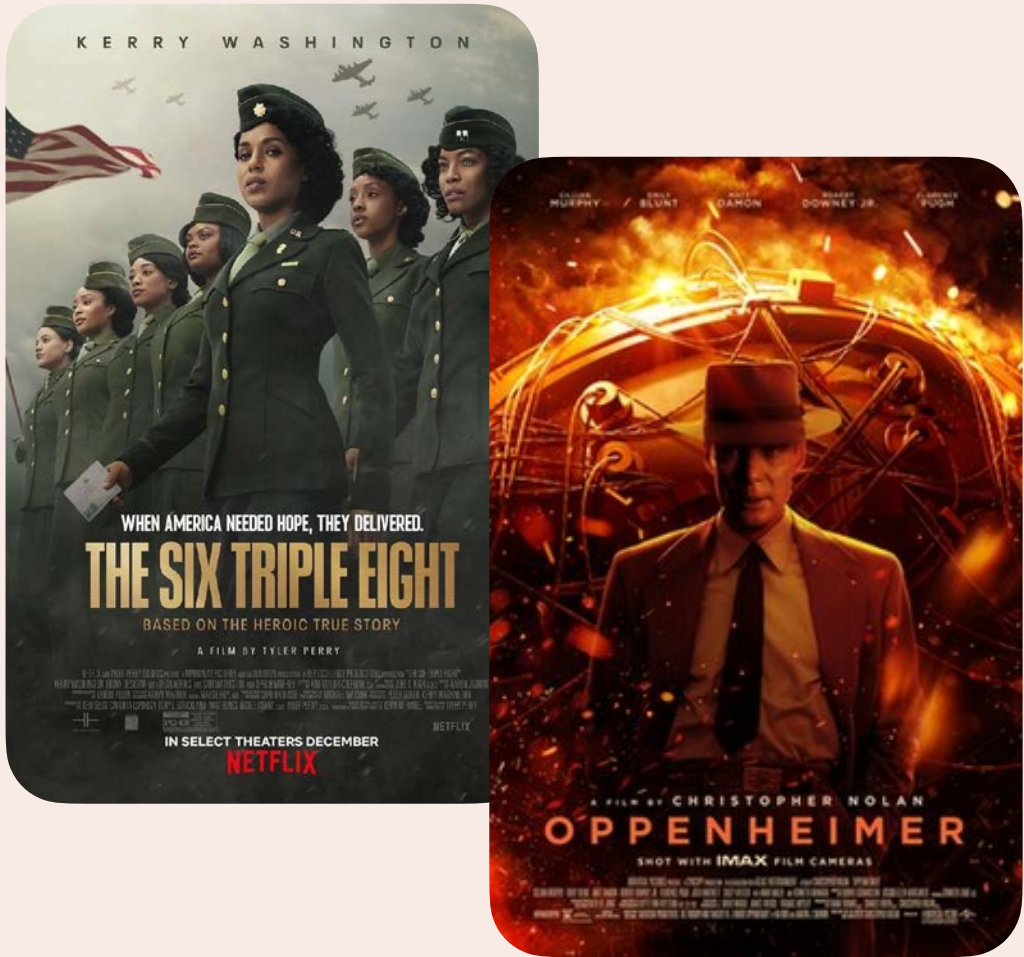

POPULAR STORY EXAMPLES OFFERING VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

WILL YOUR STORIES ENGAGE AND RETAIN AUDIENCES BY SHOWING HEROES STRIVING TO CHANGE THE RULES OF THEIR WORLD?

Offering the audience a sense of agency can increase their engagement with the content (see here). Whether they win or lose, it's critical for audiences to see their heroes try. Seeing a hero give up or be overtaken by the system (e.g. the robots winning over humans) reduces people's belief that they have agency. There are many stories that feature heroes trying against the odds. In *The Six Triple Eight*, soldiers reform a broken wartime mail system from the inside. In *Oppenheimer,* the physicist strives to influence nuclear policy after the bomb and ultimately loses control, but still tries.

POPULAR STORY EXAMPLES WITH HEROES
TRYING TO CHANGE THE RULES

QUESTIONS FOR DEMOCRACY ADVOCATES

The questions in the following slides can be used alongside your strategic communications practice as you're building messaging campaigns or cultural strategies.

These questions aren't meant to be a prescriptive set of "how to's." Rather, they are intended to help develop a stronger understanding of your audience and how the messages you create can further engage and inspire them, particularly when it comes to imagining a better future for democracy.

Forthcoming joint research from Harmony Labs and the Democracy Communications Collaborative (DCC) will offer democracy advocates a bespoke audience framework that is compatible with this general guidance.

THE PROBLEM WE ARE TRYING TO SOLVE

We see an opportunity to improve communications by democracy advocates—research shows that by focusing on storytelling (i.e. telling a story with a beginning, middle and an end), rather than messaging, democracy advocates can ensure that audiences remember what they are sharing and are more likely to influence beliefs. Our research can support organizations on two fronts: reaching people outside of their existing supporters and ensuring that the messages they're putting out are having their intended effect. We offer a way to categorize audiences based on values rather than demographics. Each audience has its own preconceived notions about democracy that we've identified by looking at entertainment media. This means they each have a different entry point for the conversation. Based on research, we can offer a set of actionable insights to consider when creating messaging and outreach material.

Advocates can use these insights on audience preferences to ensure that the stories that they're telling are the types of stories the audience will want to watch. Understanding the types of stories audiences are drawn to can help as you select what stories about government will be most familiar to your audience, what heroes they'll be drawn to, and the narrative arcs that will move them on questions of agency and optimism for the future— whether you are sharing and engaging other content or developing your own communication, from emails, to blog posts, to social media clips.

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR AUDIENCES ARE STARTING FROM?

Audiences have distinct stories they choose to watch about democracy and government. Start by recognizing that the content that people watch is reflective of their world view and the types of stories and genres they are most interested in watching . Put simply, the content people watch in entertainment reveals audiences preferences.
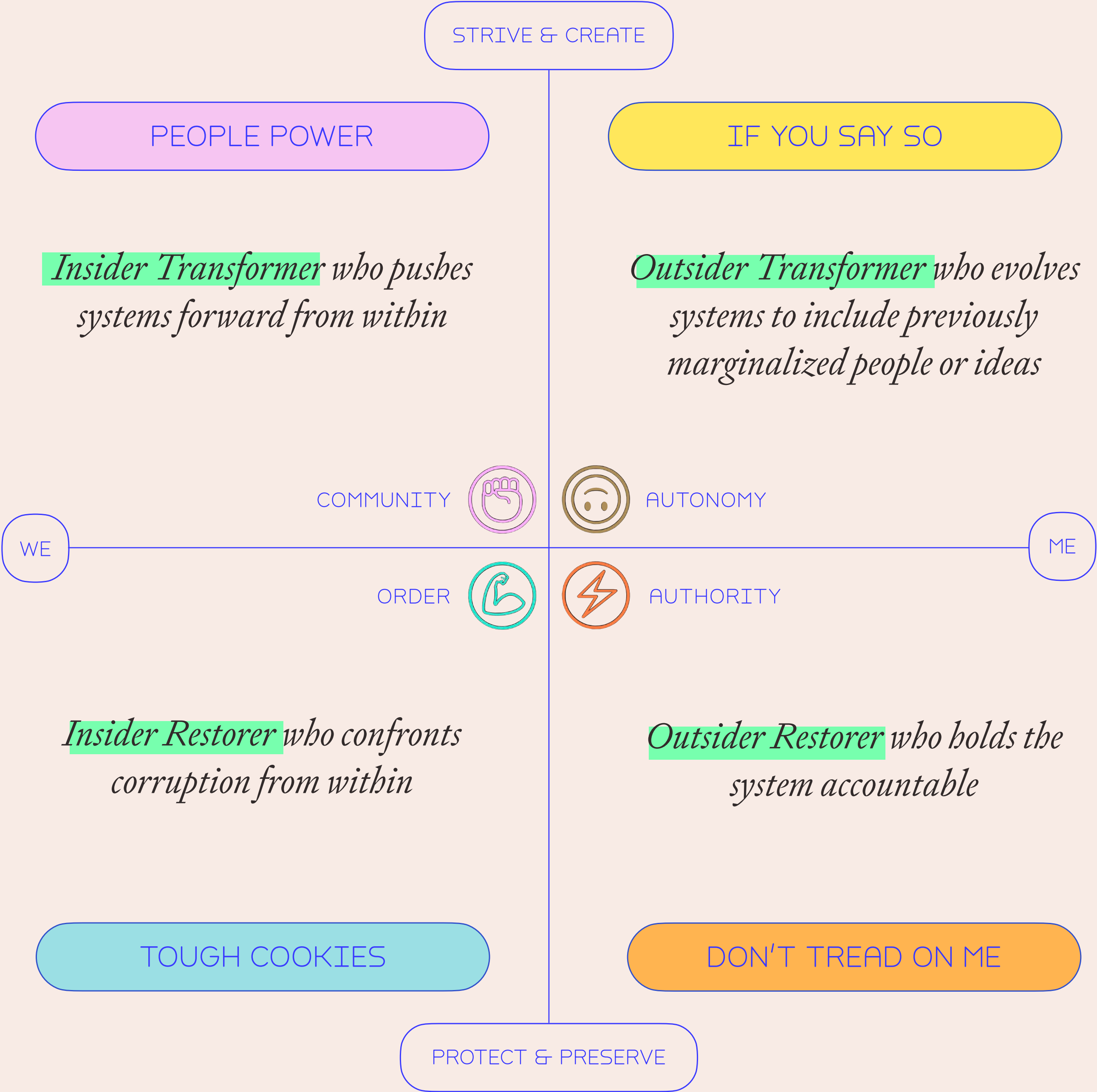
STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER

IF YOU SAY SO

Community: Connects with stories where all kinds of people come together to fix the system, especially stories about ensembles or heroes struggling with how we can be human while being influenced by systems of power and money which work to corrupt us.

Autonomy: For this audience, there's no one way to succeed, so freedom is paramount. They like imagined worlds in which characters struggle against systemic forces to create successes for themselves and their friends.

COMMUNITY

AUTONOMY

WE

ME

ORDER

AUTHORITY

Order: For them, playing by the rules is the key to success. They like crime procedurals and content that shows the role of government as maintaining law and order.

Authority: They see strong leadership and hard work as the only solutions. They like shows about the military and other ways the government is protecting "us" from outside threats.

TOUGH COOKIES

DON'T TREAD ON ME

PROTECT & PRESERVE

POPULAR STORY EXAMPLES

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER

IF YOU SAY SO

COMMUNITY

AUTONOMY

WE

ME

ORDER

AUTHORITY

TOUGH COOKIES

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PROTECT & PRESERVE
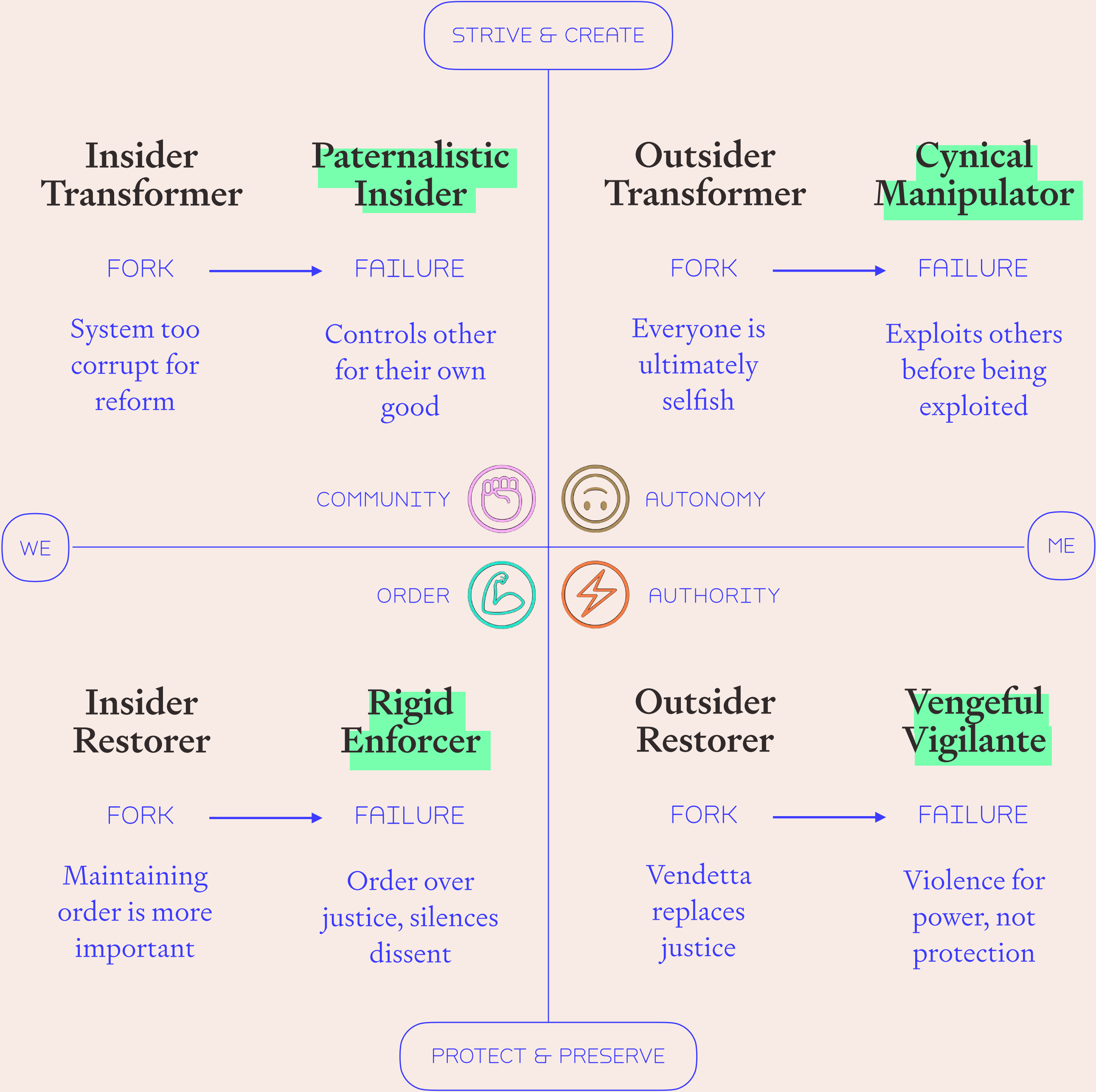
DO YOU KNOW WHAT HERO YOUR AUDIENCE NEEDS?

Use the values-based audience quadrants to understand the type of hero your audience needs in order to engage with your content. Use this to assess your messaging and messenger. This can help you reach more people and be more effective in what you say. Audiences have preferences on their heroes—you won't move audiences using a hero or a narrative of change they don't align with. The four values-aligned buckets can be much more informative than typical demographics.

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER

IF YOU SAY SO

Insider Transformer who pushes systems forward from within

Outsider Transformer who evolves systems to include previously marginalized people or ideas

COMMUNITY   AUTONOMY

WE   ME

ORDER   AUTHORITY

Insider Restorer who confronts corruption from within

Outsider Restorer who holds the system accountable

TOUGH COOKIES

DON'T TREAD ON ME

PROTECT & PRESERVE

DO YOU KNOW HOW TO MAKE A HERO FALL FROM GRACE?

Tested narrative arcs can show you what makes a hero fall from grace when messaging. This insight can ensure your hero doesn't fall short in how you message them; it can also show how to make an audience stop considering someone a hero. Caution: trying to turn a hero into a villain for a particular audience can diminish their sense of agency or imagining a better future. If doing so, consider who else you cast as a hero to take up the work.

STRIVE & CREATE

Insider Transformer　　**Paternalistic Insider**　　　　**Outsider Transformer**　　**Cynical Manipulator**

FORK ⟶ FAILURE　　　　　　FORK ⟶ FAILURE

System too corrupt for reform　　Controls other for their own good　　　　Everyone is ultimately selfish　　Exploits others before being exploited

COMMUNITY　　AUTONOMY

WE　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　ME

ORDER　　AUTHORITY

Insider Restorer　　**Rigid Enforcer**　　　　**Outsider Restorer**　　**Vengeful Vigilante**

FORK ⟶ FAILURE　　　　　　FORK ⟶ FAILURE

Maintaining order is more important　　Order over justice, silences dissent　　　　Vendetta replaces justice　　Violence for power, not protection

PROTECT & PRESERVE

DID YOU INCLUDE SOMEONE TRYING TO CHANGE THE SYSTEM?

Always include a story of someone trying to change the system—this will offer people a sense of agency. Just showing problems without an opportunity to change the situation will leave people feeling defeated. Also, offering audiences a sense of agency increases their engagement with the content (see here).

DID YOU TALK ABOUT SOLUTIONS?

It's critical to show a vision for the future by offering a future that your audience can imagine.

According to Frameworks Institute, 71% of Americans say the political system needs a major change. Therefore, don't just focus on the problem, offer something better.

83% of young Americans are worried about the state of American democracy and only 47% are optimistic and hopeful when they think about the future of the United States (Sine Institute of Policy & Politics).

When asked if you feel confident or not confident that life for our children's generation will be better than it has been for us, 78% said they do not feel confident (WSJ/NORC Poll July 2025).

The size of the solutions needs to match the scale of the problem (Frameworks Institute). If you're telling Americans we're sliding towards authoritarianism, the solutions need to match the level of alarm that you're raising and not feel like actions that we do in normal times (e.g. voting).

POPULAR STORY EXAMPLES WITH HEROES TRYING TO CHANGE THE RULES

POPULAR STORY EXAMPLES OFFERING VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

DATA & METHODS

DATA & METHODS

DATA

We began by collecting all consumption of streaming content from Jan 1, 2024 through Dec 31, 2024, using Nielsen panel data. We used Nielsen's predefined streaming genre and sub-genre mappings to filter out programs that are not story-driven. We included programs like feature films, general dramas, adult animations, comedy sketches, westerns, police procedurals, children's shows, and documentaries. We excluded programs like sporting events, game and reality shows, and news. This gave us more than 116,000 panelists watching over 32,000 individual programs. From these programs, we selected 800 pieces of media based on their reach and distinctiveness to one of the four Narrative Observatory audiences (DON'T TREAD ON ME, IF YOU SAY SO, PEOPLE POWER, TOUGH COOKIES). This ensured that we obtained not only commonly viewed programs, but also a wider variety of programs.

SYSTEMS CHANGE CONTENT

To identify stories that are specifically about systems change, we used artificial intelligence with human verification to identify media that met the following definition:

- A film, episode, or season is relevant to governance change if main characters work to change systems of power, authority, or governance in the following media.
- In the information, identify any story arc that is relevant to governance change. A film, episode, or season is relevant to governance change if main characters work to change systems of power, authority, or governance in the following media. This includes not only formal governments but also:
  - Law enforcement agencies
  - Military organizations
  - Educational systems
  - Corporate power structures
  - Community governance
  - Any institution with authority over others

DATA & METHODS CONTINUED

RANDOMIZED CONTROL TESTING

Finally, we tested popular stories lines that we had observed in our media analysis using randomized control trials (RCTs). To do this, we did not test actual pieces of media, but rather we created original story arcs represented as short storyboard videos, each tailored to an audience's preferred hero's journey and our democracy narrative goals. We tested 30+ original pieces of content in five rounds of RCTs with an average of 4,200 online respondents per RCT, and we compared the responses of individuals who viewed the story to the responses of individuals who viewed an unrelated story. We asked respondents to rank their level of agreement (e.g., "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree") on the following five questions, based on the target narrative:
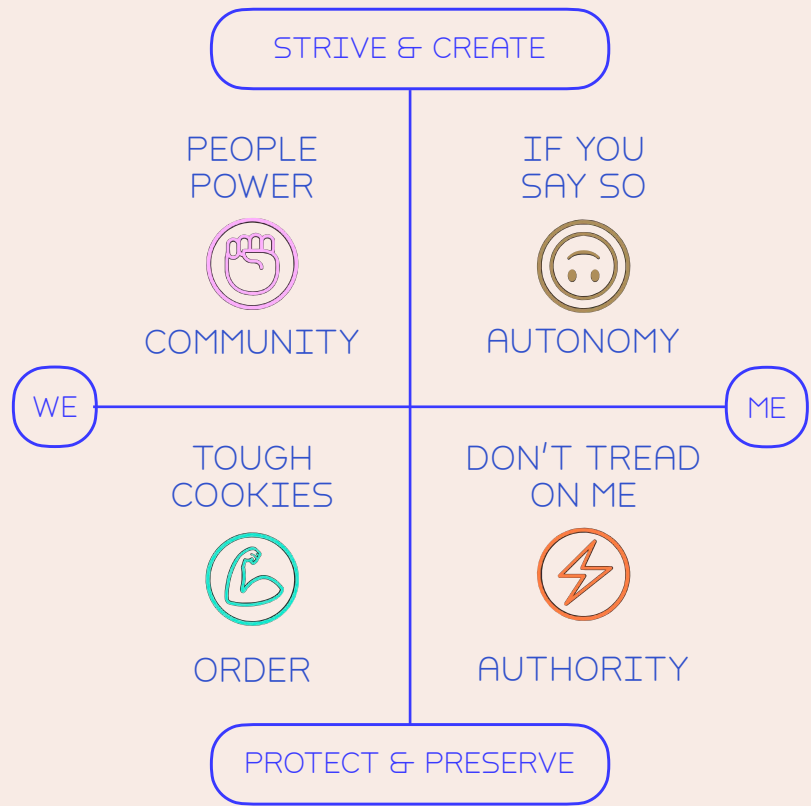
- Inequality harms democracy.
- Right now, it is a problem that our democracy represents some people better than others.
- Right now, it is a problem that our democracy makes some people more free than others.
- I am ready to work closely with people I disagree with politically to make democracy work.
- I can easily imagine how democracy will work in the future.

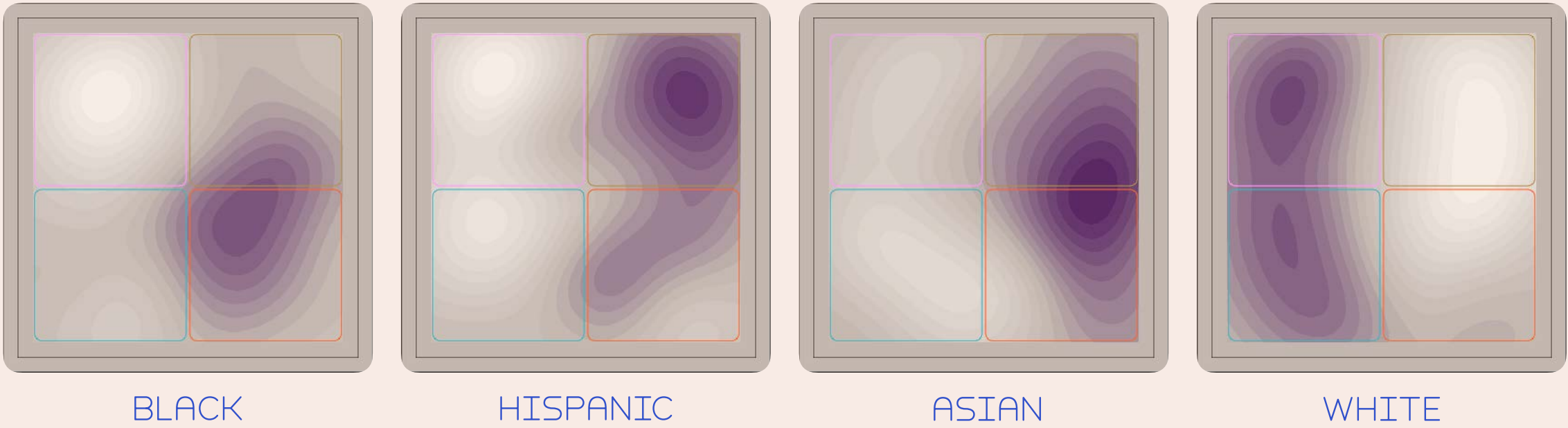## DEMOGRAPHICS & VOTER FILE DATA

We generated audience demographics using the Harmony Labs Deep Story Survey System, which included demographic questions as well as audience assignment based on Harmony Labs' values questions.. For the audience map, we created a demographic audience model and utilized voter file information to identify the most common audience in each county.

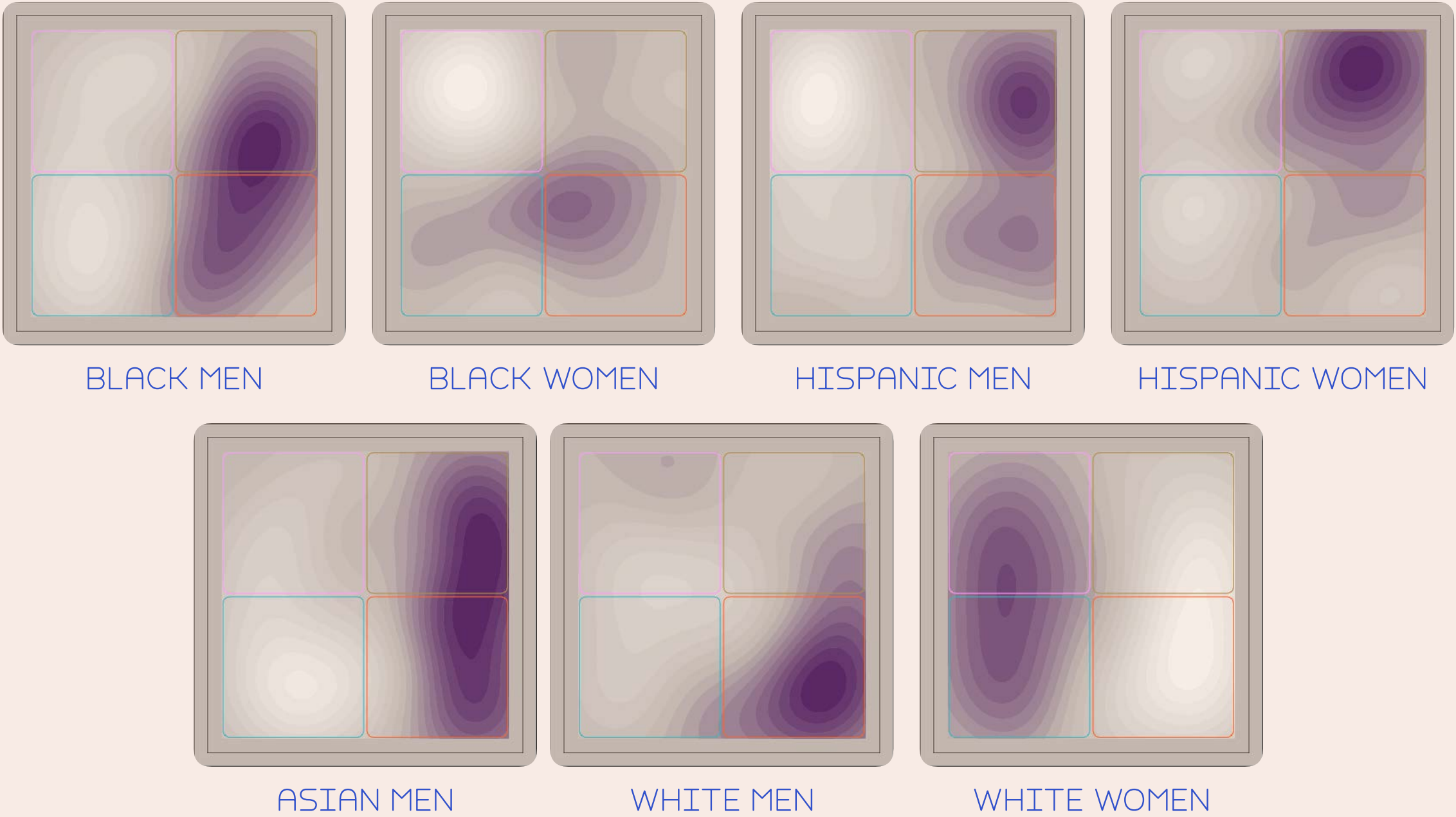For more details on the data and methods used for this work please email hello@harmonylabs.org.

BONUS DEMOGRAPHIC MAPS

RACE & AGE 26+

BLACK · HISPANIC · ASIAN · WHITE
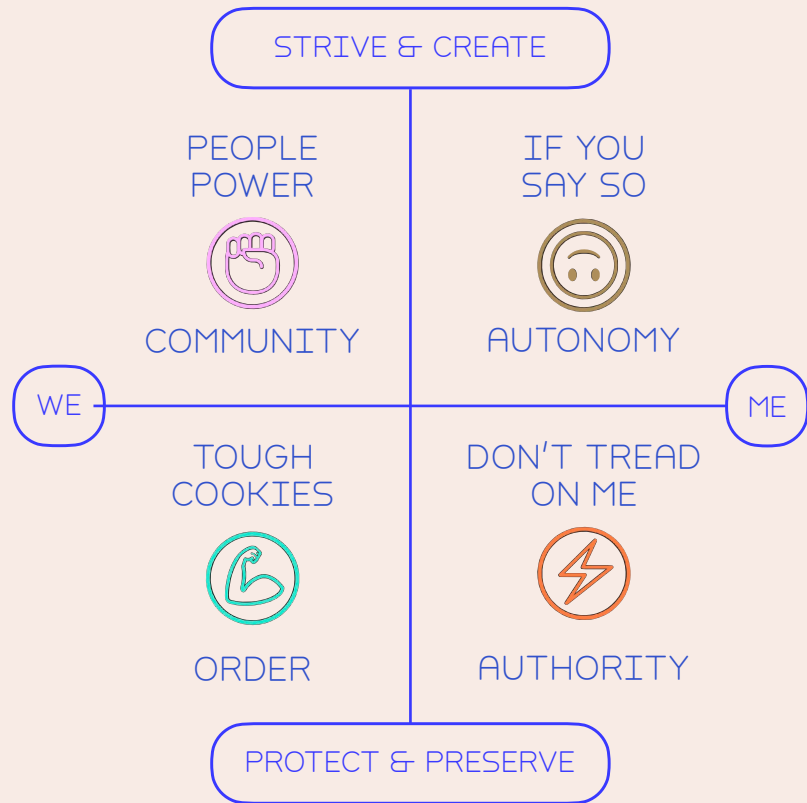
RACE & GENDER

BLACK MEN · BLACK WOMEN · HISPANIC MEN · HISPANIC WOMEN

ASIAN MEN · WHITE MEN · WHITE WOMEN

Note: Segments with less the 50 people in the sample are not included here

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER	IF YOU SAY SO
COMMUNITY	AUTONOMY

WE — ME

TOUGH COOKIES	DON'T TREAD ON ME
ORDER	AUTHORITY

PROTECT & PRESERVE

BONUS DEMOGRAPHIC MAPS

REGISTRATION & VOTE PROPENSITY

REGISTERED

NOT REGISTERED

HIGH VOTE PROPENSITY

LOW VOTE PROPENSITY

LOW VOTE PROPENSITY X AGE & GENDER

AGE 18-25

AGE 26+

MEN

WOMEN

LOW VOTE PROPENSITY X RACE

BLACK

HISPANIC

WHITE

Legend

STRIVE & CREATE

PEOPLE POWER
COMMUNITY

IF YOU SAY SO
AUTONOMY

WE — ME

TOUGH COOKIES
ORDER

DON'T TREAD ON ME
AUTHORITY

PROTECT & PRESERVE

Note: Segments with less the 50 people in the sample are not included here

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PHASE 1 & 2 SUMMARY

	PEOPLE POWER	TOUGH COOKIES	DON'T TREAD ON ME	IF YOU SAY SO
NARRATIVE SUPERPOWER	Illuminating the problem, catalyzing action, imagining the future	Illuminating the problem	Catalyzing action	Imagining the future
CORE VALUE	Community	Order	Authority	Autonomy
ROLE	Social Champions	Problem Solvers	Free Agents	Imagineers
VIEW OF GOVERNMENT	Government should represent everyone, especially the rights of the minority.	Government should provide solutions that balance the needs of majority and the minority.	Governments should embrace people's power to choose, to decide, to be free, to act.	Governments (in the future) should work when it responds to people's problems according to who is in the most need.
PREFERRED HERO	Insider Transformer who pushes systems forward from within	Insider Restorer who confronts corruption from within	Outsider Restorer who holds the system accountable	Outsider Transformer who evolves systems to include marginalized people or ideas
DISTINCTIVE PROGRAMS	*Ted Lasso*, *Silo*, *Conclave*	*The Six Triple Eight*, *Space Force*, *The Resident*	*The Mother*, *Equalizer 3*, *The Accountant 2*	*The Boys*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *Spiderman: Across the Spiderverse*
PHASE 1 HIGHLIGHTS	PEOPLE POWER don't need happy endings, but they need productive conflict. All those dystopias are profoundly demotivating for PEOPLE POWER.	While most audiences respond best when people, not systems, are the characters, TOUGH COOKIES liked to see that some heroes were insiders who navigate conflict.	There is an opportunity to emphasize individual agency in order to reach DON'T TREAD ON ME.	Creating some happy endings in imagined contexts might be powerful in helping If You Say So create their own imagined next steps.
PHASE 2 HIGHLIGHTS	PEOPLE POWER are easily moved to demand more but when the hero gives up, or has no agency to begin within, they are less likely to want to work across differences.	Working across differences comes easy to TOUGH COOKIES—they were moved by their own preferred heroes *and* the heroes of all the other audiences—as long as all parties share a common goal.	DON'T TREAD ON ME, was most moved to recognize problems by stories where a hero is called upon to fix something broken, even if that hero falls from grace in the process.	While IF YOU SAY SO struggles to recognize their agency they're still the most likely to imagine a democracy that works, at least when stories end better for everyone.

ABOUT US

Democracy 2076 is on a mission is to build a more responsive, effective, and representative democracy for future generations. By working long-term to change our Constitution, popular culture, and political coalitions we can have a better democracy in 2076 and have an immediate impact by shifting the window of acceptable ideas to provide the inspirational thought leadership to renew our democracy for the next generation. Democracy 2076 supports the existing democracy space by allowing other organizations to continue to prioritize urgent, short-term needs while participating in coalitions that Democracy 2076 anchors, focused on long-term work. Learn more at democracy2076.org

Harmony Labs is a nonprofit media research lab, using science, data, and creativity to research and reshape society's relationship with media. For more than a decade, our work has helped storytellers and strategists, decision makers and dreamers, harness the immense power of media to shape a positive, pluralistic future. Learn more at harmonylabs.org

THANK YOU

DEMOCRACY 2076   ✕   HARMONY LABS