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Metropolitan Group crafts strategic and creative services to amplify the power of voice of change agents in building a just and sustainable world.

Digital Democracy: Supporting a Trustworthy Ecosystem

The rise of mis/dis/mal information (MDM) is a critical issue in the digital ecosystem, impacting issues at the intersection of human rights, democracy, and governance. In line with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)'s Digital Strategy, Metropolitan Group utilizes a multi-tiered systems-level approach to strengthen the digital ecosystem, integrating digital and social tools, narrative and message development, as well as social and behavior change (SBC) strategies, to combat the rising threat of MDM, and to mitigate its impacts. MG has a proven track record in leveraging digital tools for social change, as well as extensive experience in deploying SBC research, interventions, and change management. These experiences demonstrate the potential of SBC to empower citizens, foster engagement, and combat misinformation, while simultaneously fostering open, secure, and inclusive digital ecosystems that advance democratic values.

[Metropolitan Group \(MG\)](#) is a global small business and a [Certified B Corp](#) that specializes in narrative change and strategic communication to create lasting and sustainable impact for people and communities. At MG, we design and implement social and behavior change (SBC) initiatives, work to shift narratives, build capacity of local partners, and conduct and disseminate actionable research. Since 1989, we've worked to directly impact social change in two core ways: 1) by creating strategic campaigns and initiatives that change enabling environments—including attitudes, behaviors, practices, policies, and mindsets/expectations and 2) by building the capacity and resilience of institutions and organizations that drive social change. MG and its Mexico City-based sister company, [Impacto Social Metropolitan Group \(ISMG\)](#), work with national, state, and local governments, foundations, NGOs, and private sector partners.

MG has worked for more than three decades in open and hybrid political contexts and both middle-and low-income countries on a wide range of democracy and technology issues. Our work has included developing understanding of the information ecosystems and how mis/dis/malinformation can be combined with authoritarian narratives to delegitimize and undermine democracy, democratic values, and civic space. We have also worked extensively on how digital information ecosystems are used to target and harass human rights defenders, particularly women, members of the LGBTQIA community, indigenous groups, and other marginalized populations. Our team includes people who have experience working in regional and multilateral processes including the UN and the Open Government Partnership, and with global digital platforms and coalitions including the Global Coalition for Tech Justice.

We have worked in more than 30 countries on five continents, including Africa, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and Southeast Asia. Our in-house staff in Mexico and the U.S. includes multiple bilingual speakers (English and Spanish), as well as staff who are professionally proficient in French, Portuguese, and Swahili.

MG began working with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2021 as a subcontractor to multiple prime contractors for activities related to SBC, strategic communication, and narrative and message creation, as well as direct technical assistance and capacity building for partners across multiple regions. Throughout our activities, we prioritize our commitment to localization as a critical force for creating resilient change.

We offer a range of services within three integrated practices:

- **Strategic Communication and SBC**—SBC strategy development and implementation; narrative and strategic messaging design and testing; stakeholder mapping and engagement; formative research; audience research; policy and public sector transformation initiatives, social marketing campaigns; branding, digital strategy, and human-centered design; SBC training and technical assistance

- **Intercultural Engagement and Social Inclusion**—creation of strategies and tools designed with cultural context, language nuance, and appropriate literacy levels; stakeholder assessments; equity, diversity, and inclusion-facilitated training; co-creation and nontraditional/locally centered evaluation and assessments
- **Organizational Strategy and Innovation**—change management; strategic planning; capacity building; training; leadership development; and technical assistance

Local capacity building is integrated across all three of our practice areas to ensure increased resiliency of the changes achieved, increased opportunity for scaling and replication, and supported localization.

SBC Experience and Methodologies

MG/ISMG is an innovator in designing and piloting SBC activities and social and behavior change communication (SBCC) related to democracy, human rights, and gender equality, as well as in sustainable development/climate mitigation and global health. SBC methodologies and tools are critical in reshaping the enabling environments that can advance policy, institutional, cultural, and individual changes. MG specializes in SBC at the structural levels and integrates individual behavior change to advancing systemic change. Our approach includes developing, testing, and applying narratives and messaging that aligns with people’s closely held values to create long-term shifts in mindsets and social norms. Our expertise in [public will building](#) and [narrative change](#) methodologies and locally driven approach are highly effective in shifting deeply entrenched behaviors that are related to social norms, beliefs, and values. MG is deeply versed in all stages of SBC research, analysis, assessment, design, iterative implementation, and learning capture and dissemination.

Our expertise and capabilities are in the following areas:

Digital Analysis & Evaluation: MG's full-service digital team utilizes tools like social listening to analyze digital ecosystems, shaping analyses of narratives, and activating responses through digital channels to promote democratic values and human rights globally. We have collaborated closely with research partners in nearly a dozen countries across Africa, Southeast Asia, Central Europe, and Latin America to build capacity for, and to undertake, intensive digital analysis related to democracy and democratic principles, ensuring a localized approach.

Empowering Citizen Engagement & Building Movements Through Digital Platforms:

MG specializes in using digital tools to empower citizens to engage more effectively with democracy and human rights issues, particularly those related to technology. Our capabilities include building and growing online movements; raising awareness of critical democracy narratives; and providing citizens with essential tools and knowledge through digital literacy campaigns, digital security and privacy training, and educational programs on misinformation targeting vulnerable groups. By fostering collective empowerment among digital stakeholders and continuously refining our strategies through advanced analytics, we cultivate a culture of movement-building. This encourages sustained participation and advocacy.

Change Management and Human Centered Design (HCD): With over three decades of experience, MG has led change management processes across various sectors, supporting clients throughout the entire change process, utilizing elements of SBC to engender values-based shifts in behavior. Through an HCD approach, MG can support USAID, implementing partners, and other local actors (such as civil society and government actors) in (1) analyzing the motivations, opportunities and barriers to encourage stakeholders to uphold a rights-based approach to technological innovation and/or digital literacy, (2) implementing recommendations affecting digital ecosystem governance, such as new regulatory pathways and (3) facilitating shifts in institutional cultures and advancing social nudges, permissions and norms key to implementation of digital hygiene and rights respecting uses of technology.

SBC Campaigns to Shift Narratives: MG has extensive experience conducting formative research pertaining to social norms, narratives, and behaviors, using this data as a basis for SBC campaigns that shift the narratives and upstream elements affecting the digital ecosystem. Campaigns that impact upstream



narratives are a critical tool to shift expectations, enabling environments, and mindsets that address, counter and inoculate against dis/mis/mal-information in the digital space.

Message Development, Testing and Stakeholder Mapping:

As part of SBC campaign development, MG has extensive experience in developing and testing new values-based messaging to address democratic values and human rights, especially in highly polarized societies. MG regularly conducts intensive stakeholder mapping to identify and prioritize trusted messengers, elevating specific stakeholder groups who can advance greater engagement through a rights-based approach to digital democracy.

MG firmly believes that an SBC approach is key to fostering a digital democracy and in order to foster these specific behaviors, they need to change across all stakeholders segments. For instance, decision makers need to advance legal and regulatory frameworks that align with human rights and then implement these frameworks. The private sector needs to develop socio-technical systems that respect human rights by design and default. Critical to these behavior changes is ensuring that there is an enabling environment that advances digital democracy and provides social permissions, reinforcements, and structural incentives. The enabling environment must also provide the conditions for cross-sector decision making and implementation, as well as the enforcement of digital democracy policies, practices and norms. Decisionmakers, decision influencers and impacted stakeholders across sectors need to be aware and understand the relevance of a digital democracy.

Client Examples

USAID

MG has recently collaborated on multiple USAID-funded projects, research activities and social behavioral change campaigns with the **Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (DRG)** Center and other Centers and Bureaus including:

- Developing **Strategic Messaging for Democratic Values** including a twelve-country global scan of narratives that advance authoritarianism and undermine democracy and the development, (with testing and refinement in 3 countries and implementation in one country) of effective, evidence-based pro-democracy narrative and messaging.
- Design, capacity building and launch of a comprehensive **SBC Campaign and new narrative to advance the rights of women agriculture workers** in Tunisia.
- Conducting five-country **Research on Countering Corruption Through SBC** efforts for the Anti-corruption Task Force.
- Supporting **Strategic Communication Capacity Building for Defending Civic Space in Mexico (under LACLEARN)**.
- Supporting **Learning Workshops and Technical Assistance (TA) on Democratic Narratives** in Central America including social media monitoring, identification of digital information that attack democratic principles and opening to advance democratic principles with Cloudburst.
- Supporting **Strategic Communication and Messaging for Exploratory Programs and Innovation Competitions (EPIC) and Development Innovation Ventures (DIV)**.
- Providing **Strategic Communication on Justice Reform** as part of Conjusticia with the Mexico Mission (with our sister company ISMG).

Ford and W. K. Kellogg Foundations

In Mexico, ISMG partnered with civil society organizations, policymakers, and influencers to create and apply a groundbreaking SBC initiative focused on addressing severe human rights abuses, including forced disappearances, femicide, murder of journalists, and state-sanctioned torture. Through innovative stakeholder mapping and deconstruction of dominant narratives that advance impunity, ISMG designed a new metanarrative that activates core values and engages citizens as part of an effort to build a more trusted judicial system. The initiative has engaged millions and mobilized thousands through activities that counter disinformation and corruption and promote justice, the rule of law, and civil society activism. National



polling has indicated growing alignment with the new narrative and indicator shifts on the issue of human rights.

In Mexico and El Salvador, ISMG partnered with civil society organizations, policymakers, and influencers to create and apply a groundbreaking SBC initiative focused on promoting democracy and rule of law, including digital democracy. Through this work we provided direct technical assistance to civil society groups, particularly journalists, human rights defenders (including gender and LGBTQIA rights defenders), community based organizations, indigenous groups, and private sector entities who have been targeted through surveillance technologies in hybrid political contexts, including Mexico and El Salvador. Through this work we witnessed how targeted surveillance against human right defenders usually translates into digital harassment and violence, including from media outlets aligned with governments. Our assistance to threatened groups has been focused on developing a narrative and SBC strategies, that includes developing key messaging and the internal infrastructure and rapid response capability to respond strategically to surveillance and to other attacks when they happen. This work includes capacity building to targeted groups to increase digital security and safety and by raising awareness of human rights risks, protections and safety measures.

Key Team



Eric Friedenwald-Fishman—SBC innovator: creative director/CEO/founder, MG/ISMG

As creative director, Eric drives strategy development for MG/ISMG. He is an innovator in using values-based SBC methodologies to create resilient changes in social norms, policies, practices, and behaviors. He is an expert in analyzing and developing narratives. In addition, he developed the [Public Will Building](#) model. Eric has worked to counter corruption and impunity, address hyperpolarization, strengthen democratic institutions and good governance, counter violent extremism, and reduce hate crimes. Clients include USAID, NASA, U.S. Forest Service, Ford Foundation, and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.



Rebecca Gerber—digital strategy lead: vice president, MG

Rebecca is a dedicated digital leader with over 15 years of expertise in digital advocacy, creative storytelling, and multichannel engagement strategies that inspire and mobilize people to take action. Rebecca maximizes digital platforms to address the intersections between technology and social change. Her leadership focuses on storytelling, accessibility, and leveraging emerging tech for the greater good. Her specific expertise includes: crafting effective advocacy strategies across digital platforms, developing innovative social campaigns, measuring analytics and engagement, and crafting compelling and persuasive narratives for targeted audiences.



Haim Malka—international policy expert: executive vice president, MG

Haim works on a global portfolio of narrative, messaging, and social and behavior change campaigns focused on advancing democracy and countering malign actors. He spent nearly 20 years as a conflict resolution and security researcher and analyst in North Africa and the Middle East before joining MG in 2019. He has conducted research and analysis for numerous U.S. government agencies, with a focus on countering violent extremism, ethnic conflict, and political violence. At MG, he has led work with NASA and USAID.





Alejandro Vélez Salas, Ph.D.—human rights research expert: vice president and Mexico City lead, ISMG

Alejandro leads stakeholder research and mapping, technical assistance, peer-learning design, and social media listening programs, with a focus on anti-impunity and corruption and rule of law. Prior to joining MG, Alejandro edited the website of Nuestra Aparente Rendición, a CSO that works to understand and counter state-sanctioned violence in Mexico. He has studied forced disappearances; edited the book, “Tú y Yo Coincidimos en la Noche Terrible,” which compiled the life stories of murdered and disappeared journalists in Mexico; and works as a partner for relatives of missing persons in Mexico.

MG/ISMG has a [full team of 50-plus](#) experts and practitioners that includes communication and policy specialists; researchers; narrative change, anti-corruption, digital democracy strategists, and SBC experts; multilingual facilitators; innovators in visual communication; designers etc.

Contract Vehicles

We hold the General Services Administration (GSA) Professional Services Schedule, and are a leading partner with The Cloudburst Group under USAID’s Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Bureau’s Learning, Evaluation, and Research III Task Order. We are a resource partner on USAID’s Digital APEX mechanism managed by Vistant. We have joined teams on Analytical Services IV for LACLEARN and SEGA tasking, and we are a subcontractor to DAI for Mexico’s ConJusticia contract.

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Schedules

541-2: Public Relations Services
541-4a: Market Research and Analysis
874-1: Integrated Consulting Services

Contact

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GSA Number

GS-07F-0224X

NAICS Codes

541430, 541611, 541613, 541618, 541720,
541810, 541820, 541830, 541840, 541890,
541910, 541990

Procurement Designation

Small Business

