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Every Story Counts! The Importance of Storytelling as a Mythopoetic Engine in Brand Communication

¡Cada historia cuenta! La importancia del storytelling como motor mito-poético en la comunicación de marcas

Ciancia, M.

Polimi - Politecnico di Milano

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ABSTRACT: Brands have always sought to establish relationships with their audiences through marketing and communication: two disciplines that are defined as natural enablers of transformation processes owing to their important role in connecting businesses with the market and consumers. This paper discusses the importance of storytelling as a mythopoetic engine (now amplified by technological developments) that allows brands (profit and non-profit) to use the power of stories to promote social values and to activate processes of change. The first part of the paper presents a formal approach to discussing the narrative phenomenon, and the second part of the paper discusses the use of storytelling in brand communication. The focus is on brands that have introduced social issues into their communication campaigns to strengthen their connection with audiences through the promotion of social values, and realities that use story-based strategies to activate sustainable social change.

KEYWORDS: Brand Communication, Communication Design, Storytelling, Narrative Change, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Communication for Social Change

RESUMEN: Las marcas siempre han tratado de establecer una relación con su público a través del marketing y la comunicación: dos disciplinas que se definen como facilitadores naturales de los procesos de transformación gracias a su importante rol conectando a las empresas con el mercado y los consumidores. Este ensayo trata de la importancia del storytelling como motor mito-poético (ahora amplificado por los desarrollos tecnológicos) que permite a las marcas (con y sin ánimo de lucro) usar el poder de las historias para promover valores sociales y activar procesos de cambio. La primera parte del documento presenta un enfoque formal para hablar del fenómeno narrativo, y la segunda parte habla del uso del storytelling en la comunicación de marca. El foco de atención se encuentra en las marcas que han introducido asuntos sociales en sus campañas de comunicación para fortalecer su conexión con el público a través de la promoción de valores sociales y realidades que utilizan las estrategias basadas en historias para activar un cambio social sostenible.

PALABRAS CLAVE: comunicación de marcas, diseño de comunicación, storytelling, Narrative Change, RSC (Responsabilidad Social Corporativa), CCS (Comunicación Para el Cambio social).

1. Introduction

Since the dawn of humanity, narrative has not only represented the principal way of communicating with other people and leaving a trace of ourselves for others to come, but has also served as the main means through which 'we structure, share, and make sense of our common experiences' (Jenkins, 2006, p. 118). People have always been looking for a distinctive meaning-making approach to reality, and this has led to a narrative-based approach to communication, which is in turn a force that empowers individuals, societies, and an environment that can generate knowledge, experience and ability.

Human beings are social animals and storytelling plays a double role in our culture: one that represents a mindset, and one that represents a tool. Storytelling can be considered a mindset (Fontana, 2019) because people use stories that originate from the deepest impulses for building relationships with individuals and communities (Reinsborough & Canning, 2010, p. 28). Storytelling can also be used as a tool for shaping reality and sharing stories that can communicate intended messages to involve and stimulate other people in the construction of a collective imagination.

Throughout the years, scholars have addressed the relationship between people and stories. In 2001 Boje coined the term 'homo fabulans', which means one who tells and interprets narratives. Even earlier, Fisher (1984, 1987) proposed the term 'homo narrans', reflecting the idea that human beings are storytellers guided in their decisions by the narratives by which they are surrounded (Morris et al., 2019, p. 21). The result of the relationship between people and narrative is the so-called 'narrative paradigm' described by Fisher (1987). Within the narrative paradigm, all persons are recognized as storytellers, and all forms of human communication are assessed from the perspective of narrative (Carroll, 1987, p. ix).

From the point of view of communication designers, several questions relating to narrative arise: What do we mean by narrative? What does it mean to narrate a story? These are followed by other issues: Why is it important to narrate? How can the power of stories activate processes of change? What is the role of communication? These are some of the research questions addressed in this work.

The paper aims to describe the importance of storytelling as a mythopoetic engine that allows brands (profit and non-profit) to use the power of stories to activate processes of change. The first part of the paper takes a formal approach to describing narrative theories through a literature review and analysis. The second part of the paper discusses how storytelling is used in brand communication to promote social values and sustainable social change.

2. Methodology

This research employed several methods to deepen knowledge about the storytelling and its use in brand communication. The study first conducted a literature review, then desk research and case study analysis.

The literature review aims to define the ontological status of narrative. To do so, the review considers the main theories of narratology, which were advanced by Russian formalists (Propp, 1928/1968); American structuralists (Chatman, 1978); and French structuralists (Barthes, 1975; Genette, 1972/1980, 1983/1988; Prince, 1982). The proposals of such theorists gave rise to models and theories for understanding the narrative phenomenon, and applying the power of storytelling in other fields, such as in brand communication and communication for social innovation.

Given that the current mediascape is becoming increasingly articulated and inhabited by expert audiences that consume stories that are disseminated through many different media channels and technological devices, it is necessary to understand not only the ontological status of narrative, but also its social influence. Thus, the principal theories from the field of narratology are considered alongside the reflections of other scholars (Doležel, 1998; Pavel, 1986; Ryan, 1991; Wolf, 2012) relating to the distinction between story, storyworld, and their relationship with audience participation.

The literature review was followed by desk research, which analyzed how brands are using storytelling to promote change. To achieve this understanding, several Italian and international case studies were collected and organized into the following two main clusters: 1) brands that have introduced social issues into their communication campaigns to strengthen the connection with audiences through the promotion of social values; for example, the Benetton campaigns developed by Oliviero Toscani (1982–2000, then from 2018 to the present), or Dove's 'Real Beauty' campaign (Unilever, 2004); 2) non-government organizations (NGOs), non-profit organizations, foundations and activist groups that use communication strategies to drive general social change and corporate social change; for example, the massive 'subvertising' campaigns promoted by Greenpeace.

The case studies have a common thread, which is that they all apply a story-based strategy. Thus, the analysis was conducted not only from the perspective of the communication strategy (i.e. its aims, messages, media mix and funnel), but also from the perspective of the elements of the stories told.

Reinsborough and Canning's (2010) model for narrative power analysis is used as the basis for conducting the case study analysis. They identify the following five story elements essential for the deconstruction (analysis) of existing narratives of the dominant culture that should be challenged, and the construction of new narratives: 1) conflict, 2) characters, 3) imagery, 4) foreshadowing and 5) assumptions. Conflict is the backbone of any narrative because every story represents conflict from a specific perspective (Galbiati et al., 2010). Characters are an extremely important story element because all good stories have characters in which audiences can recognize themselves. Deeper reflection on this element reveals that well-constructed characters support processes of the identification of people in the stories, enhancing the effectiveness of narratives, with the final aim of promoting a switch in thinking and social change. It is important to address the role played by the characters in narratives. While Reinsborough and Canning (2010, p. 39) mention heroes, victims, and villains as 'sympathetic roles', this paper advances the discussion of characters by explaining the role of characters within stories, using the archetypes defined by the screenwriter and author Christopher Vogler (1992/2007). Vogler identified seven archetypes that reflect recurring patterns of human behavior, and are symbolized by standard types of characters that are related to narrative functions that can be played into stories: 1) the hero (the main figure in the story); 2) the mentor (the hero's guide); 3) the threshold guardian (the one who stands in the way at important turning points); 4) the herald (the one person or event that brings the 'call to adventure'); 5) the shapeshifter (the character that changes its role during the unravelling of the story); 6) the shadow (the villain); the trickster (the mischief maker); 7) the allies.

The third story element is the imagery, which refers to the ability of the narrative to show rather than to tell (Reinsborough & Canning, 2010, p. 39). This element is therefore connected to the themes of dramatization and representation. The mechanism of drama applies not only in the field of entertainment (e.g. films, television series, or reality television shows), but also to brands, social and political communication. Drama is a process that occurs every time we want to represent a situation according to a story-based strategy. Such an approach is able to promote services, disseminate new behaviors and best practices, and challenge fears and prejudices in public opinion to facilitate processes of change (Galbiati et al., 2010). The fourth element of stories is foreshadowing. Every story has its own structure that leads to the resolution of the conflict. Through the unfolding of the storyline, hints are presented that suggest a possible resolution to the audience. The fifth story element is the assumptions, which refers to all the implicit premises and values that are promoted by the narrative.

Understanding these five elements of the story is fundamental when using narrative power analysis (Reinsborough & Canning, 2010). Narrative power analysis can be used as a model for deconstructing hegemonic narratives because it allows the identification of implicit assumptions, which can enable the challenging of negative unspoken premises and the promotion of positive change. Moreover, narrative power analysis can also be used as a storytelling tool, enabling the identification of the positive values we want to promote, and the creation of narrative worlds that audiences can enter vicariously through characters.

Table 1 – Questions Guiding the Analysis of the Case Studies

Story element	Related questions
1. Conflict	1.1 What are the topics dealt with by the story? 1.2 Who is the conflict between?
2. Characters	2.1 Who is the narrator? 2.2 Who are the heroes and the villains? 2.3 What is the relationship among the characters? What roles are portrayed? 2.4 Can the audience itself be considered a character?
3. Imagery	3.1 How does the story represent the conflict? 3.2 What does the world represented look like? 3.3 Which genres are involved? 3.4 What are the visual style and tone of voice used?
4. Foreshadowing	4.1 Is the story envisioning a possible resolution?
5. Assumptions	5.1 What are the underlying premises and values? 5.2 Is it possible to infer these premises and values from the story?

3. Literature Review and Analysis—The Power of Storytelling

According to Hardy (1968), narrative cannot be considered only an aesthetic invention used by artists in controlling or manipulating people's experiences, but must also be considered a primary act of the human mind. The reflections of other scholars, intellectuals and practitioners can be considered along with Hardy's ideas. For example, Fisher (1987) stated that the human species pursues a narrative logic in all its experiences acting as storyteller (Carroll, 1987, p. ix) and behavioral psychologist Weinschenk (2014) stated that stories are our normal mode of processing information. In consideration of these premises of the function of narrative in human existence, it is possible to state that telling stories is a social experience that enables the transformative role of the story to emerge.

Regardless of the shape, size or name ascribed to the narrative content human beings 'rely on storytelling to build relationships, unite constituencies, name problems, and mobilize people' (Reinsborough & Canning, 2010, p. 12). Therefore, narratives can be used to represent possible scenarios, opening perspectives and activating new interpretations. Given that people pursue narrative logic throughout their lives, understanding how stories are constructed is fundamental not only to human beings, but also for communication designers because it allows them to understand how they can reach, move and form a relationship with their audience.

Narrative is a complex and articulated subject that has been examined by different fields of investigation over the years (e.g. in the disciplines of literature, art, psychology, cognitive sciences, pedagogy, marketing and communication). The starting point for answering the first question addressed - What do we mean by narrative? - is to provide a brief summary of the main issues relating to narrative construction to aid understanding of how storytellers tackle the process of narrative design. Thus, rather than presenting a precise analysis of the entire spectrum of theories of narratology, this paper now presents a definition of the ontological status of narrative through the description of its main invariant elements.

In the attempt to establish a common definition of 'narrative', a strong consensus among narratologists emerges. Narrative can be defined as the representation of events or actions, requiring the narrator (i.e. the one who relates the events and actions) and the narratee (i.e. the one who receives the narrative content related by the narrator). According to Prince (2003), narrative can be defined as the 'representation ... of one or more real or fictive events communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) narrators to one, two, or several (more or less overt) narratees' (p. 58). Abbott (2002) defined narrative as the 'representation of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse' (p. 16). Therefore, from the perspective of the ontological status of narrative, Abbott (2002) defines narrative as being composed by the so-called *fabula*—the chronological sequence of events—and the *sjužet* (also known as narrative discourse or plot)—the order in which the events are presented to the narratees. According to that, the same story can be represented in many different ways, using a variety of different languages and media, and each time following a different narrative order.

The paper now addresses the second and third research questions: Why is it important to narrate? How can the power of stories activate processes of change? Fisher (1987) introduced the idea of the 'narrative paradigm' to approach narrative as a mode of social influence. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Ryan (2006, 2007) adopted the concept of 'narrativity' (as other scholars had done) to refer to the ability of media text to be perceived as a narrative construction in the mind of the audience (i.e. the reader or viewer). Both Fisher (1987) and Ryan (2006, 2007) analyzed narrative in terms of narrative practice that is able to influence society, thus addressing the questions of why it is important to narrate and how stories can activate processes of change.

From the communication design perspective, this means addressing two issues: 1) the role of narrative within communication systems; 2) the power of narrative change (i.e. the process of building and promoting narratives, challenging hegemonic narratives and driving social change) (ORSImpact, 2019).

4. Brand Storytelling and Story-based Strategy—How Can a Story Change the World?

Fontana (2019, p. 10) stated that a story is a cognitive medium through which the narrative structures represent content that is meaningful for the audience, including on the emotional level. Moreover, we are living in a mediascape characterized by a continuous flow of information with pieces of content that are competing with each other to attract our attention.

This is the scenario in which brands began to communicate values beyond the product to audiences. In the context of the new media landscape and the digital transformation, brand communication no longer has product visibility as the main aim. The primary objective of such communication has become the activation of relationships between the brand and the consumer. In this setting, narrative has become a vital strategic asset to be delivered through key skills at different levels: that is, the individual level (personal branding); the product and service level (product and service storytelling); and the corporate level (company and brand storytelling) (Fontana, 2019, pp. 6–7). The paper focuses on narrative as used at the corporate level.

Working with branding and storytelling means designing content that allows audiences to experience narratives that convey the values of a brand, thus encouraging people's participation in and engagement with the brand through 'brand storytelling'. The term 'brand story' refers to a brand for which a narrative has been created; the story provides a context in which the narrative experience occurs (frame, of reference), relates the events and their order (story and plot), and uses languages (a system of signs) that are related to the specific medium (storytelling techniques), according to the distribution channel strategy (Matrone & Pinardi, 2013, p. 77). The relationship that connects the narrator and the narratee is repeated, and a so-called 'fictional pact' between the brand storyteller (narrator) and the consumer (narratee) is established. The final result is that the power of storytelling allows the narratees to 'suspend their disbelief' and reach high levels of pleasure in consuming the content.

In line with this new strategy adopted in marketing and communication, several brands have been using brand storytelling and story-based strategies to shape experiences, sharing and promoting social values.

4.1. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Communication for Social Change (CSC)

The case studies selected to analyze how brands are using storytelling to promote social change and human welfare have been analyzed in relation to their strategy and narrative content through the narrative power analysis suggested by Reinsborough and Canning (2010). This analysis led to the identification of two main clusters: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Communication for Social Change (CSC).

The concept of CSR gained momentum between the 1950s and 1960s thanks to Bowen's (1953) seminal work *Social Responsibility of the Businessman* in which the ethical and moral responsibilities of a company towards society were discussed for the first time. CSR became a popular topic in the 1980s thanks to scholars such as Freeman (1984) and Carrol (1991). Following the 2008–2010 global economic crisis caused by unethical and sometimes illegal corporate behavior, CSR became a parameter for evaluating the behavior of corporations. Today CSR is a broad concept that refers to the way in which a company responds to social and ethical issues, thereby creating value (economic or social) for all stakeholders and shareholders.

CSC is a field of inquiry that examines processes, techniques and media channels to help people express their opinions, and to participate in decision-making processes that affect their community. The main goal of CSC is to promote and guide sustainable social change. The typical promoters of such changes are NGOs, non-profit organizations and foundations, but small social enterprises operating in small territories and activist groups also participate in promoting such change.

CSR and CSC refer to different fields of action in relation to the actors involved, but they share the same aim of advertising for human good. The field of communication has the difficult task of developing effective story-based strategies to strengthen the connection with audiences through the promoting social values (CSR) or driving social change (CSC). However, efficient storytelling is vital in effecting change.

The two case studies presented below—Dove's Real Beauty (Unilever, 2004) and Greenpeace's (2011) VW: The Dark Side campaign—approached the promotion of social values and corporate social change through the use of narrative strategies.

4.2. Case Study 1: Dove's Real Beauty

Starting from the idea that all women are beautiful in their natural being, Dove has aimed to challenge the unrealistic standards of beauty advertised by media and society, promoting an healthy and inclusive societal vision of beauty. Dove's worldwide marketing campaign was launched in September 2004, following the company's commissioned research *The Real Truth about Beauty: A Global Report* (Etcoff et al., 2004).

The first phase of the campaign created a series of billboards in which the classic models who sell body care products were replaced by regular looking women. This invited consumer engagement: audiences were asked to make a 'judgement' on the women presented in the advertisement by voting online on the campaign's website. The second phase of the campaign was launched in June 2005, with 'real' curvy women as the main characters in the campaign. The topic of natural beauty became the center of a debate that led to the ban of anorexic models from Spanish fashion runaways (2006). Between 2006 and 2007, Dove produced a series of short films that went viral: *Daughters* (2006), *Evolution* (2006), and *Onslaught* (2007). In 2010, the Dove Self-Esteem Fund project was created to support and motivate young girls with low body confidence and self-image anxiety. The campaign continued, and in April 2013 Dove released its *Dove Real Beauty Sketches* video. In this video, the audience sees several women enter a room and describe themselves to a forensic sketch artist, who cannot see the ladies and draws them following only their instructions. The audience then sees the same women described to the sketch artist by a stranger who has met each of them briefly. The sketch artist creates two sets of sketches for each woman: the first based on the description of the woman herself and the second based on the description of the woman by the stranger. The plot twist occurs when people see the reaction of the women to whom the two sketches are shown: the one based on the description of the stranger is more flattering and more accurate, emphasizing how women often have a negative perception of their own beauty.

Thus, Dove created long-lasting campaign that challenges beauty biases, starting from the assumption that people activate connections and develop empathic relationships with character-driven stories.

4.3. Case Study 2: VW: The Dark Side

During the 2011 Super Bowl (which is the football final played in the United States), German automotive company Volkswagen (VW) broadcast the commercial *The Force* (2011) to advertise the VW Passat. In the commercial, a child in a Darth Vader costume attempts to use 'the force' without success on various things around the house, for example, on a doll, on a washing machine and even on his dog. Dejected, the child goes outside the house, and tries to start his father's car (a VW Passat), and this time, he succeeds. However, the audience soon discovers that the car has been started by the father with a remote control. This narrative-based commercial was used to present the technical features of the product.

The response from Greenpeace (the well-known environmental NGO) came shortly thereafter. Greenpeace decided to challenge VW because of reports it was hindering the process of reducing CO2 emissions in Europe. Greenpeace activated an operation of corporate social change, challenging the VW to address climate issues, and in doing so, also developed a story-based strategy. In fact, Greenpeace used the same storyworld of *Star Wars* used in the VW Passat commercial, but now identifying VW as the Dark Side of the force that is opposed by Greenpeace's Rebel Army. Moreover, Greenpeace's campaign was characterized by the distribution of the narrative content through a multichannel strategy, aiming to activate audience engagement. The rabbit hole (a term that refers to the primary entry point that allows people to immerse themselves in the multichannel experience) was a fictitious invasion of London on 28 June 2011 by people dressed up as Stormtroopers. In the advertising campaign, the Rebellion had begun. This was followed by the distribution of several online and offline narrative contents, including two parodies of the VW Passat commercial, and content gamification to invite users to join the Rebellion through an eight-step training program.

In the first 48 hours, the campaign engaged 100,000 Jedi around the world, with 7 million site visits, and 67,000 likes on the Facebook pages and Tweets (Sadri, 2013). Moreover, after two years, and with the pressure of people engaged in the Greenpeace campaign all over the world, VW announced its intention to meet and support European climate targets. The success of Greenpeace's campaign demonstrates how narrative can engage users, and make corporate social change possible.

5. Conclusion: Narrative As Mythopoetic Engine

Narrative has dominated human life throughout the centuries, and continues to do so. Moreover, technological innovations and changes in people's media habits have led to audiences wanting to be directly or vicariously involved in stories and storyworlds.

This paper has addressed the topic of narrative and its ability to create meaning and value in order to provide evidence and reflections that can be employed in communication design and advertising, enhancing the effectiveness of messages.

The preliminary findings underline the ability of storytelling to activate processes of narrative change through the construction and promotion of stories that are capable of creating a new frame of reference for the audience, according to which people can interpret the received information and their real-life experiences (ORSImpact, 2019).

To further the discussion about the way in which the power of stories activate processes of change, this paper combines consideration about storytelling with the practice of world building. This means that instead of starting from the construction of a single line story, brands (profit and non-profit) can start by building a narrative world, keeping the logic of production and consumption alive for the audience.

Since the focus of this work is on brands that have introduced social issues into their communication campaigns, the paper considered two main fields of communication (CSR and CSC) that share the aim of advertising for human good and motivating progressive behaviors in the public. Increasingly, companies are introducing sustainability strategies into their business plans, activating campaigns to communicate social values and promote virtuous behaviors. Dove's Real Beauty campaign (Unilever, 2004) is one of the many examples of CSR campaigns released by consumer brands. For example, *Thank You Mom* by Procter & Gamble (P&G) (2012) is a cross-platform campaign that celebrates the roles mothers play in raising children. Through the campaign, P&G raised money to support local youth sports programs in different countries. In addition, the *#prideforeveryone* campaign by Google (2016) aimed to support equality and free expression for everyone, particularly in relation to the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) worldwide. To promote their campaign, Google documented LGBTQ pride parades all over the world using 360° cameras, virtual reality and Google Cardboard to involve people who could not march in person in the celebrations. The campaigns of P&G and Google are very different, but the strategic use of narrative is common to both: in particular the use of character-driven stories. As Fisher (1987, p. 47) stated, characters are one of the fundamental story elements given that the very credibility of the narrative itself depends on the reliability of the characters.

While CSR aims to promote ethics, moral and social values, the aim of CSC is to drive real change. The promoters of actions for change are typically NGOs, non-profit organizations, foundations and groups of activists who aim to promote general social change and corporate social change (i.e. by increasingly challenging companies to address social and ethical issues). The campaigns analyzed for this paper represent communication strategies characterized by the use of storytelling to promote change. These strategies employ immersive, multiplatform storytelling systems that deal with social or environmental issues that can differ slightly in their final aim. For example, they can aim for awareness (*Transmedia for Good* – Stone, 2013); engagement (*Transmedia Activism* – Srivastava, 2011); or behavioral change (*Transmedia for Change* – Pratten, 2015).

In all the case studies, we should recognize that the activity of brand storytelling leverages the social function of stories (i.e. the creation of identity, community and culture), inviting audiences to gather, participate and express themselves.

Human beings have always been oriented towards the personalization of mass culture and brands with the aim of recognizing themselves, activating meaning-making processes and participation. If people are accustomed to experiencing, consuming, and building their own dramatic simulation of experiences, they will be eager to consume open narratives in which well-designed storyworld and character-driven stories play a key role:

- Storyworlds can be seen as generative narrative engines, capable of activating new perspectives on a topic. This is important both for narrators and

narratees, and means that communication designers can empower the transmission of values and messages through world making, and creating narrative spaces in which audiences can immerse themselves;

- Characters are powerful story elements that encourage users to connect with the events represented, and therefore enter the storyworld.

Indeed, well-designed storyworlds and characters in advertising and communication campaigns can be powerful story engines that are able to ‘unlock’ the contemporary mediascape to promote virtuous behaviors and support changes in media habits. Advertising and communication campaigns that use successful brand storytelling lead to users being encouraged to be involved and to take action, transforming passive attitudes into a personal and shareable experience. As Passon (2019) stated, we ‘need to think less about “getting people to change behaviors” and more about inviting people into our story and then curating amazing ... experiences that allow people the chance to live out their own personal ... story’ (p. 476).

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