



The power of storytelling in public relations: Introducing the 20 master plots



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ABSTRACT

Storytelling has been part of human activity for thousands of years. Stories have the power to inform, persuade, elicit emotional responses, build support for coalitions and initiatives, and build civil society. This essay describes the 20 master story plots used throughout history, as well as the rhetorical, persuasive, and message design skills used to create compelling stories. The master plots and narrative techniques are advanced as important communication and academic skills to teach storytelling to professionals, and to explain narrative theory to public relations scholars. Emplotment, narrative theory, and Burkean identification and form, are contextualized as narrative tools, along with “master plots” from the professional writing literature.

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Storytelling is a staple of public relations, from crisis, to branding, to identity, to reputation (cf., Heath, 1992, 2000, 2006). As homo-narrans, or story telling animals (Vasquez, 1993; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001), public relations professionals would benefit from stronger story telling skills, and academics would find narrative theory a useful framework for understanding organizational communication.

Heath (1992) described the value of understanding and using stories or narratives in public relations decades ago noting, “One reason that perspectives become widely believed is because they are embedded into stories that are told over and over through interpersonal conversation and mass media” (p. 57). More recently, the power of the story has captured the attention of public relations professionals and tens of thousands of professionals now offer advice online for using stories in public relations.

Organizational goals, histories, heroes, and informational and persuasive communication, are often communicated via myths and stories. Reifying organizations, and organizational members, as trusted and beloved community members requires the use of subtle rhetorical principles and communicative tools designed to elicit identification, empathy, and memorable situations and experiences. Thus, organizational messages often take the form of stories. Unfortunately, knowing that storytelling is important and knowing how to create effective narratives is not the same thing.

This essay fills that gap for academics and professionals by drawing attention to some fundamental narrative, rhetorical, and persuasive principles, and tying them to organizational communication practice. The essay is divided into three sections. Section one provides a brief overview of storytelling and how it is talked about in public relations. Section two provides an overview of the rhetorical principles of storytelling, including emplotment (White, 1973), narrative theory (Fisher, 1984, 1985), identification (Burke, 1969a, 1969b), and form (Burke, 1968/1931). The third section of the essay introduces the “20 master plots” (Tobias, 1993) that have guided storytellers for thousands of years and explains how the plot *topoi* can be

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used by public relations professionals. Section three also elaborates in detail on five plot types that have great potential for creating compelling messages for both organizations and activists.

1. Telling compelling stories

Storytelling goes back tens of thousands of years and has its roots in oral traditions and ancient Greek and Roman philosophy where cultural knowledge, myth, superstition, religious, and cosmological beliefs were shared and passed down through speeches, anecdotes, and stories. Humans have evolved to respond to narratives from an early age, conditioned through children's stories, religious services, local myths (gossip, family histories, etc.), and liminal and preliminal ceremonies and rituals such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funeral rites (cf., Kent, 1997; Paxton, 1990).

Stories inform nearly every aspect of cultural life, from political ideology and party identification, to interpersonal perceptions of colleagues and friends. Stories shape how people perceive events and make sense of the world (Weick, 1995).

Woodside (2010) provides an apt summary of some of the key features that make stories so powerful, noting "human memory is story based" (p. 532; cf., also, Schank, 1990); memory retrieval is largely episodic, comprised of "stories that include inciting incidents, experiences, outcomes/evaluations, and summaries/nuances of person-to-person . . . relationships within specific contexts" (p. 533); and stories are cathartic, "Watching, retrieving, and telling stories enables . . . [people] to experience . . . archetypal myths" (p. 533) and feel a part of shared experiences that one might not initially have been a part of (cf. Brown, 2015; Jung, 1959/1916). Rhetors, or storytellers, draw upon shared emotional experiences, and interpersonal and group interactions as a means of informing, persuading, and socializing others (Aristotle, 1991; Bormann, 1972; Burke, 1966; Fisher, 1985).

Because of the ubiquity of storytelling (Fisher, 1984, 1985), their compelling structure (Burke, 1968/1931), and the usefulness of stories for creating and reinforcing identification and commitment (Burke, 1969a), stories permeate all social and economic levels of society. As Heath (2000) explained, "People identify with those they trust. They trust those with whom they identify. They also trust those who enact and advocate narratives that they accept and enact" (p. 81). We tell stories to our family members, partners and spouses, and children, our friends and co-workers, even strangers whom we have known for only a few minutes. Stories have also become a staple of advertising and marketing, as advertisers compete for brand loyalty and customer identification (cf., Woodside, 2010).

Recognition of the power of the narrative form has attracted a lot of attention in public relations. A Google phrase search for "storytelling and 'public relations'" returns 1.5 million results. Clearly, the importance of storytelling in public relations in all its myriad forms (feature stories, histories, social media, backgrounders, annual reports), as part of marketing and branding, and in crisis communication is already well established. Yet, when we examine what some of the 1.5-million organizations and professionals are saying, we see problems. Many professionals have oversimplified views of persuasion and narrative theory, and how to use stories on behalf of stakeholders, publics, and clients. Perhaps the most common treatments of narrative among professionals are the lists of heuristics about how to use storytelling, some that show no awareness of the rhetorical situatedness of information and persuasion. Almost universally, story telling is treated asymmetrically, as a tool of information dissemination, rather than as a rhetorical strategy that has the power to move people.

Consider some of the claims made by major public relations organizations, many of which have nothing to do with storytelling. From Edelman, "The world's largest public relations firm" (www.edelman.com), on its "Global Features" instructional page, suggests storytelling involves (1) putting a human face on topics; (2) using graphics to reach employees in multiple languages; (3) verbally explaining complex or technical concepts; (4) using gamification; and (5), leveraging content to start conversations" (2013, www.edelman.com/post/five-storytelling-tools-for-communicating-strategy-to-employees). Edelman's list actually seems to be missing any features of storytelling.

Elsewhere, Edelman suggests: "Brands Must Master Short-Form Storytelling . . . [and] be more concerned about their ability (or lack thereof) to tell engaging stories about their brands in seconds" (2013, www.edelman.com/post/brands-must-master-short-form-storytelling)." And again, "Great storytelling today requires a more intimate relationship with our audience, supporting analytics and a strategy that drives the brand narrative" (2013, www.edelman.com/post/how-a-journalist-does-real-time-marketing). From what Edelman suggests, storytelling is just a branding tool that seems not to require any explanation.

We see similar lists on other web pages, with many organizations treating storytelling as something quite simple that everyone already knows how to do well. SocialMediaToday, for example, "an independent, online community for professionals in public relations" (www.socialmediatoday.com/about), on their "Fun Fact Fridays: 16 Ways to Be a Better Storyteller" page tautologically explains, "PR people are natural storytellers. And the reason is simple: Storytelling is PR; it essentially boils down to connecting organizations and people through a story" (2013, www.socialmediatoday.com/content/fun-fact-fridays-16-ways-be-better-storyteller). Indeed, the idea that public relations and storytelling are part of the same skill set is a common claim among professional communicators in public relations, where the power and value of storytelling are seen as obvious, but insight into how to conduct storytelling is rarely addressed.

I could continue for thousands of more professional sites, but what they reveal is an oversimplification and in many cases a genuine lack of understanding of storytelling in general, and the rhetorical skills involved in effective storytelling in particular—a topic that has been studied since ancient Greece. Being a skilled storyteller is not simple, but it is a skill that can be learned and taught.

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