The Impact of Stories

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Abstract: Stories intrigue the field of Knowledge Management. Employing stories in both personnel and stakeholders communication is currently being recommended in several best practice guides on effective knowledge transfer and leadership communication. The aims of this article are to present further understanding of the impact of stories, and assess which kind of communication tasks stories are most apt for by considering stories as a medium. This allows for the examination of stories through two interlinked theories: Social Presence Theory and Media Richness Theory. These are found to be limited indicators of media effectiveness and it is suggested that elements of the theories should be broadened to make both theories useful for assessing core media effectiveness, although it is recommended that they be combined with other modes of evaluation to achieve thorough assessment of media impact.

Keywords: Stories, Storytelling, Communication, Social Presence Theory, Media Richness Theory, Knowledge Management.

1. Introduction: Why stories interest in an era of information overload

> *"We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative".* (Hardy 1968)

In our era of information overload, the members and stakeholders of organisations are faced with constant attempts to catch their attention. E-mails, meetings, phone calls, text messages (SMS), hallway discussions, training sessions, press releases, company newsletters and memos overwhelm with their abundance (eg. McCune1998, Van Zandt 2004).

One of the major challenges organisations are facing is how to make communication captivating, setting it apart from the overflow of mundane messages. As a result, utilising stories in organisational communication is becoming increasingly popular (eg. Snowden 1999, Cohen & Prusak 2001, Linde 2001, Thomas, Kellogg & Erickson 2001, Seely Brown et.al. 2004).

Knowledge Management literature has played a significant role in evoking a new interest in stories. Denning (2000) explains the interest arising from the fact that knowledge sharing is increasingly seen as the sine qua non to survival in the new knowledge economy. Traditional hierarchical organisations cannot cope with fast-changing client demands unless they are able to agilely share knowledge among employees, partners, and clients. And, according to Denning, storytelling is an effective method of achieving this.

Currently, scholars and practitioners are debating over the bona fide impact of stories. Many advocators amongst knowledge management corroborate the value of stories with best practise findings showing that stories are useful for commencing organisational change and sharing knowledge, especially in situations where most communication fails, such as attempts to convey strategy, organisational culture or social practices (e.g. Morgan & Dennehy 1997, Simmons 2000, Swap et.al. 2001, Ready 2002, Seely Brown et.al. 2004). Opposers, however, merely accredit storytelling as a momentary management fad.

Organisational stories have certain defining characteristics (Brown 1990), such as a sense of temporality; i.e. the past is brought into the present. Also, stories have a definite story grammar including a preface, the story lead-in, the recounting of the events, and a closing sequence, which may include the point or moral of the story. Although it is possible to identify stories with these characteristics, the close terms of story, storytelling and narrative have numerous connotations, depending on which field of research the reader comes from. Swap et. al (2001) define an organisational story as: *"a detailed narrative of past management actions, employee interactions, or other intra- or extra-organisational events.*

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These stories are usually communicated informally within the organisation. Normally, such stories consist of a plot, major characters, and an outcome." This definition is excellent for assessing stories told within organisations. In this work, a slightly broader view is required, as stories are seen as a medium for sharing knowledge in both internal and external, and verbal and written communication. Here a story is understood broadly, as *a verbal or written description of true or fictional events, structured by a plot.* A plot is understood as defined in Aristotle's Poetica as: *the arrangement of incidents that (ideally) each follow plausibly from the other*. The terms storytelling or stories are used to refer to both verbal and written stories, unless a specific distinction is made to indicate that they are being discussed separately. The term narrative is considered synonymous with story and the terms are used interchangeably.

In Storytelling in Organisation (2000) Gabriel argues that although storytelling can be seen as a principal sensemaking device in organisations, a more cautious view may be more accurate:

> *"Unlike the pub, village square or family table, organisations do not appear to be natural habitat of storytelling, as most people in organisations are far too busy appearing to be too busy to be able to engage in storytelling…In such an environment amidst the noisy din of facts, numbers and images, the delicate time consuming discourse of storytelling is easily ignored or silenced."*

In this quote, Gabriel identifies one of the principal challenges of storytelling research in the field of knowledge management: the lack of recognition that stories have as a possible medium for communicating. The need for further research of the impacts of stories is evident.

The main aspiration of this article is to examine the impacts of stories in organisational communication and assess which situations they are most suited for. To achieve this, stories are examined through two interlinked theories of media choice: Social Presence Theory and Media Richness Theory. Both theories are frequently utilized for assessing and explaining attributes of effective organisational communication. A secondary aim of this paper is to consider the advantages and limitations of Media Richness Theory and Social Presence Theory in assessing media effectiveness and impact.

2. How theories on social presence and media richness appraise media effectiveness

Social Presence Theory and Media Richness Theory are comparatively narrow theories on media selection, attempting to objectively categorise media fit for different communication tasks. They are typically applied to research on media choice, most notably in computer-mediated communication (CMC). In CMC studies both theories have received contradictory findings, mostly dealing with the theories' appropriateness to predict the effect and use of e-mail. (Dennis & Kinney 1998, Trevino, Webster & Stein 2000). They suggest that effective communication requires both proficient exchange of information as well as matching the task at hand with a suitable medium based on the need to negotiate meaning or to feel that someone is physically present during the communication (Carlson & Davies 1998). Social Presence Theory and Media Richness Theory originally resulted from two independent efforts, but are interlinked in many aspects and thus commonly used together (Carlson & Davis 1998).

2.1 Social presence theory

Social Presence Theory was originated by Short, Williams, and Christie in the UK in 1976. The theory has many current adoptions, but its main underlying assumption is that social presence is a subjective quality of the communication medium, which is in connection to two concepts of social psychology: intimacy and immediacy.

Intimacy refers to the sense of having a close connection in a communication situation. The level of intimacy is expressed by verbal and nonverbal cues such as physical distance, eye contact, touch, smiling and humour, and social context cues such as using inclusive and personal topics of conversations.

Immediacy has gained two commonly used definitions in Social Presence Theory. Some researchers define immediacy as a technological matter, and state that immediacy is affected by which medium is selected for communication (Heilbronn & Libby, 1973). Many researchers maintain to the original definition, in which immediacy is a measure of psychological distance, conveyed through speech and associated cues, which may be verbal, written or nonverbal. Behaviours that bring people physically or psychologically closer together are known as immediacy behaviours (Saenz 2002). The concepts of immediacy and intimacy are interrelated: immediacy behaviours are used to create and maintain intimacy.

Social Presence Theory views communication along a one-dimensional continuum of social presence (Fang, 1998). It presumes that communication media, which convey nonverbal and social context cues have higher social presence than media that do not offer nonverbal feedback cues, such as e-mails and phone calls (King & Xia 1999). The extent to which the medium can be utilised to create social presence is strongly linked to the amount of cues it provides. When the receiver of a message feels that the sender, rather than the medium, is actually delivering the message, a medium has high social presence. The social presence provided by a medium influences individuals' motivation to engage in communication (Williams and Rice, 1983).

2.2 Media richness theory

Media Richness Theory was developed in the U.S by Daft and Lengel (1984). Two main assumptions of this theory are that people want to overcome ambiguity and uncertainty in organisations and a variety of media commonly used in organisations work better for certain tasks than others. The theory argues that performance improves when team members use "richer" media for equivocal tasks. Hence, the richer the communication, the more uncertainty is reduced, and the more likely it is that effective communication will have taken place when communicating ambiguous tasks (Dennis & Kinney 1998).

O'Hair, Friedrich, and Shaver (1998) state that media richness can be defined as the "ability of a communication channel to handle information or convey the meaning contained in a message". Sitkin, Sutcliffe, and Barrios-Choplin (1992) identify two components of a medium's ability to carry information and create meaning. These two components are the *data carrying capacity* and the *symbol carrying capacity*. Data carrying capacity refers to the medium's ability to share information or knowledge, while symbol carrying capacity refers to the medium's ability to carry information about the information or about the individuals who are communicating.

Using four criteria, Trevino, Lengel and Daft (1987) present a media richness hierarchy, arranged from high to low degrees of richness, to illustrate the capacity of media types to process ambiguous communication in organisations. The criteria are (a) the availability of instant feedback; (b) the capacity of the medium to transmit multiple cues such as body language, voice tone, and inflection; (c) the use of natural language; and (d) the personal focus of the medium. In internal organisational communication, face-to-face communication is considered the richest communication medium in the hierarchy of media richness, followed by telephone, e-mail, letter, note, memo, special report, and finally, flier and bulletin.

3. Why stories can be considered a medium

Social Presence Theory and Media Richness Theory are commonly used to assess the impact and use of different media such as television, telephone, e-mails or reports. Stories are commonly considered a form of communicating, usually either face-to-face or textual and thus not a *medium* as such. Consequently, the social presence or media richness of stories has not been studied, although perceiving stories as a medium is slowly gaining recognition in the field of knowledge management. For instance Connell, Klein & Meyer (2004) study the use of "stories as a knowledge-bearing medium" and John Seely Brown discusses storytelling under the heading: "Narrative as a knowledge medium in organisations" (Seely Brown et.al. 2004).

Defining what is meant by a medium is a longstanding debate, which has intrigued accomplished scholars such as Umberto

Eco and Marshall McLuhan. A rudimentary attempt is made to pinpoint the core of the debate concerning the definition of media: In essence, a medium has two common definitions. First, it is considered a means of mass communication, such as newspapers or radio. Or, in computer sciences: an object or device, such as a disk, on which data is stored (e.g. dictionary.com, yourdictionary.com). Second, a medium can be defined as any of the means through which people express themselves. It often refers to the technology used for expression, but can also include any mode of artistic expression or communication (Merriam-Webster Online). Simply put: a medium is a method or way of expressing something (Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary).

When taking the latter definition, it becomes evident that stories are a medium, as they are plainly distinguishable as a unique method of expression. As most storytelling researchers assert, the narrative capability of humans is a unique, fundamental cognitive process, which is crucial to the interpretation and reconstitution of cultural, social and personal reality (eg. Bruner 1986, Fisher 1987).

4. Principal research findings on storytelling

Some of the most relevant research, which has affected the understanding of storytelling today, comes from studies conducted in sociology and social psychology, explaining the cognitive effects of storytelling. One of the best examples is a study conducted by Martin and Powers in 1979, (Martin 1982), where they compared reactions of MBA students who were provided with material on winemaking procedures of an American winery attempting to use traditional French methods to ensure high quality. Martin and Powers compared reactions of students who received only an abstract statement of the issue (an advertisement) to those who were presented with supplementary material in either the form of statistics, a story, or both. The results showed that students presented with the supplementary story were slightly more likely to predict that the winery would continue the use of winemaking procedures from France and significantly more likely to believe that the advertisement was truthful. In general, the story had a stronger impact than the combination of the story plus statistics and the combination had more impact than did the statistics by themselves. This study was one of the first to provide evidence that narratives have a powerful cognitive impact.

In 1980 Martin and Powers set up a second study with MBA students, which provided more evidence on the cognitive effects of storytelling (Martin & Powers 1983). In this study they handed out a policy statement that was read by all students. The policy statement claimed that a company would avoid mass layoffs in times of economic difficulty by asking employees to take a temporary 10 % cut in pay. Again, they distributed three forms of supplementary material: 1) a story, 2) a table of statistics or 3) the combination of story plus statistics. However, they used two versions of the story and statistics, which either supported or disconfirmed the policy statement. The supporting story's protagonist feared he would lose his job, but the manager assured him that he would keep his job with a short-term pay cut. The disconfirming story's protagonist faced the same situation and was promptly fired. The stories were otherwise identical, only the ending was changed. The students who received the combination of the story plus statistics read either supporting versions of both or disconfirming versions of both.

Martin and Powers found that the students presented with only the supporting story alongside the policy statement believed the company's claims more than any of the other groups and showed higher commitment to the company. However, the opposite pattern of effects was found when the information disconfirmed the policy statement. The disconfirming story was found to have an impact equal or less than the impact of the disconfirming statistics or the combination of disconfirming story plus disconfirming statistics. Apparently, the subjects dismissed the disconfirming story as the single exception to the general rule. Thus Martin and Powers concluded that if a story is to have a strong impact, it must be congruent with prior knowledge.

Researchers coming from a background such as sociology, anthropology or folklore have also contributed greatly to the study of storytelling. They generally perceive storytelling as a social and cultural phenomenon that people (unknowingly, in most cases) use to make sense of their life, the organisation they work in and the world they live in (e.g. Czarniawska 1998, Gabriel 1995 & 2000, Orr 1990).

According to these research traditions, the implications stories have in organisational communication as well as organisational life in general are considerable. In a comprehensive review of storytelling research from these fields, Boyce (1996) concluded that past research has shown that storytelling has a number of applications that warrant consideration by organisational members, managers, and practitioners. These are: (a) expressing the organisational experience of members or clients; (b) confirming the shared experiences and shared meaning of organisational members and groups within the organisation; (c) orienting and socialising new organisational members; (d) amending and altering the organisational reality; (e) developing, sharpening, and renewing the sense of purpose held by organisational members; (f) preparing a group (or groups) for planning, implementing plans, and decision making in line with shared purposes; and (g) co-creating vision and strategy.

Ever since the publication of Gareth Morgan's *Images of Organisation* in 1986, it has been widely accepted in organisational studies that a form of story, the metaphor, is an expressive construction through which humans experience and conceptualise organisational life (Nymark 1999). Many researchers see storytelling as a paramount organisational sense-making device. Evidence supporting this claim can be found from research conducted on informal organisational storytelling, often referred to as gossip.

According to Martin, Feldman, Hatch and Sitkin (1983) organisational stories told by employees tend to cluster within familiar archetypes. In their paper "The Uniqueness Paradox in Organisational Stories" they divided corporate stories into seven types that occur regularly across a variety of organisations. These seven common stories are: 1) The rule-breaking story; 2) Is the big boss human?; 3) Can the little person rise to the top?; 4) Will I get fired?; 5) Will the organisation help me?; 6) How will the boss react to mistakes?; and 7) How will the organisation deal with obstacles?

Martin et. al. (1983) present three explanations why these seven types of organisational stories can be found in most organisations. These stories deal with issues of value conflicts, offer ways of taking credit for positive situations and laying blame for negative situations, as well as give an organisation the feeling of uniqueness with which its members can identify with. They are, thus, all chief sense making and communication devices of organisational culture, enabling employees to share and understand organisational values.

The omnipresence of storytelling in any forum where people meet has led several researchers to argue that it is in the human nature to communicate with stories. The most known example of this trend is Fisher (1984), who posits that humans are by nature storytellers, *homo narrans*, and that stories are meant to give order to human experience.

Likewise, Barthes (1977) perceives that a narrative is *'international, transhistorical, transcultural; it is simply there, like life itself'*. Or, as Polkinghorne (1988) explains, stories are *"the primary scheme by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful*." Other similar examples include, for instance, Boje (1991), who argues that since organisations are populated by individuals, they are essentially storytelling systems. Through the telling and retelling of stories, organisational life is created.

5. Assessing the media richness and social presence of stories

Media Richness Theory and Social Presence Theory consider some of the same aspects when examining media, but they have important distinctions, which make it beneficial to use both for assessing media impacts. In the following assessment, the impacts of stories as a medium is examined using the central

criteria presented in Media Richness Theory: a) data carrying capacity; b) symbol carrying capacity; c) the availability of instant feedback; d) the capacity of the medium to transmit multiple cues such as body language, voice tone, and inflection; e) the use of natural language; and f) the personal focus of the medium. Each of these criteria will be considered separately with reflection on the concepts of intimacy and immediacy described in Social Presence Theory, when applicable.

5.1 The data carrying capacity of stories

When assessing the data carrying capacity of stories, especially verbal stories appear deficient. Verbally communicated stories are often short, told in a social situation and their content may vary from telling to telling. Thus, in this sense, stories cannot be considered high in media richness. The data carrying capacity of a written story has no fixed boundaries, but in organisational or stakeholder communication the length is often limited to what people will read in a reasonable time span. Additionally, it is not simple to glance through a longer written story to find relevant pieces of information, as it is when viewing a chart or memo. Meaning and content is often buried within the story. Thus initially, the data carrying capacity of stories should be deemed low.

However, there are salient aspects of both verbal and written stories, which imply higher data carrying capacity, if a somewhat broader definition of data carrying is taken. This broader definition can be called *meaning carrying capacity*. It indicates the ability to carry any level of the knowledge hierarchy: i.e. data, information, knowledge or wisdom (eg. Knight & Howes 2003). A good example of how stories are media rich with meaning carrying capacity can be found from an extremely brief story taken from *The Story Factor* by Annette Simmons (2000):

> *"The early bird gets the worm, but something that is just as true — and people don't talk about as much — is that the second mouse gets the cheese!"*

In 28 words, this story carries substantial meaning. Thus it is arguable, that the meaning carrying capacity of stories is in fact high as even the briefest stories can concentrate and express vast meaning.

Furthermore, Martin's (1982) research shows that the meaning that *is* transferred is recalled far better when it is presented as a story. Recollection is an important aspect to consider when assessing media impacts, as cognitive science has shown that memorable information is more likely to be acted upon than information that remains unconscious and not retrieved from memory (Swap et. al. 2001). Even though the notion of recollection is overlooked in both Media Richness and Social Presence theories, recollection is evidently a fact that is linked to meaning carrying, taking it a step further and looking at the "meaning conveying capacity", which takes into account the absorption of meaning in addition to the carrying of meaning.

5.2 The symbol carrying capacity of stories

The symbol carrying capacity of stories is considerable. The previous research findings presented in this paper clearly indicate that stories communicate more than the information given. Good examples of this can be found from the numerous different influences organisational storytelling has on the life of its members, such as new member socialisation, generating commitment, co-creating vision and strategy and expressing organisational culture, as described by Boyce (1996).

All of these aspects denote that the stories include information about the senders of the message and are used to create immediacy or intimacy between the senders and receivers. Additionally, written stories can convey a strong feeling of the sender, rather than the medium delivering the message, especially when written in first person.

It is arguable that symbol carrying capacity is, however, too restricted a concept to rationalize the assessment of media effectiveness. It would be beneficial to broaden this definition as well and take the respondents' interpretations into account by discussing *symbol conveying capacity,* which would assess how the communicated symbols are absorbed and interpreted by the receivers.

5.3 Instant feedback in stories

Verbal stories allow instant feedback to the sender and mutual reflection on the communicated matters when presented in a social situation. In a social context, stories are often answered with a similar story from one's own experience, thus creating immediacy and even intimacy between the communicating parties.

When storytelling takes place in more formal situations, such as presentations, the capacity of instant feedback decreases, although still remains possible.

Written stories are, however, negligible in this aspect, as they offer no direct method of feedback. Thus verbal stories can be considered high or relatively high in this aspect of both media richness and social presence, whereas written stories are considerably leaner.

5.4 Transmitting multiple cues in stories

Stories are capable of transferring a multitude of verbal and nonverbal cues. Verbal stories offer numerous possibilities of transmitting nonverbal cues such as tone of voice and body language, which written stories cannot convey.

Both written and verbal stories do, however, provide multiple cues through the plot and content of the story, which often directly assess what emotions the protagonist was feeling or what her body language was like. The seven typically told stories in organisation found by Martin et. al. (1983) clearly indicate that stories hold more information than the mere facts (or fictions) presented. The stories offer cues of for instance, organisational culture (how will the boss react to mistakes?) as well as company values (will I get fired?), without directly dealing with the issues.

Merely stating that a multitude of cues will add to media richness or social presence is however, yet again, too restricted to fully assess how cues impact the effectiveness of a medium. Receivers may interpret cues in various ways. Thus, transmitting multiple cues does not in itself indicate media effectiveness. An effective media will convey multiple cues, which are likely to be interpreted by the receivers in a similar fashion. Previous research has indicated that the interpretations of stories are likely to have underlying similarities, which construct shared meaning such as common culture and co-creating vision and strategy, but research has also indicated that stories may present occasions for multiple interpretations and plurivocality (Boje 1995). It is evident that both verbal and written stories are high in the narrow definition of transmitting multiple cues. The suggested broader definition would indicate somewhat lower media richness and social presence of stories, as the multiple interpretations of stories may broaden the perceived psychological distance and immediacy between the sender and receiver.

5.5 Natural language of stories

Media Richness Theory perceives natural language as speech or writing which is uncomplicated to relate to and understandable for the receiver of the message. When assessing the natural language used in stories, two issues should be considered. First, the types of words used in the stories, i.e. the evident issue this criteria is covering. Second, one should look at the *form* of the language used in a media to assess if it can be considered natural and easy to relate to.

Stories commonly use natural language. Especially verbal stories, which are retold around an organisation use expressions, which the listeners can easily relate to, understand and remember. Written stories also often utilise natural language in the entire text or in sections of the text such as dialogue.

When taking into account researchers such as Polkinghorne, Fisher or Boje discussed earlier, it becomes apparent that the form of the language in stories and written stories is inborn to humans in all cultures. People resort to storytelling naturally when communicating with others as well as when reflecting on their own past. As the use of natural language in stories is strong both with the words used and the form of the message, stories can be considered extremely high in this sense of media richness.

Natural language can also be seen as a strong indicator of social presence. Communicating with stories that use natural language can be seen as immediacy behaviour from both the traditional viewpoint of bringing the sender

and receiver of the message psychologically closer together, as well as from a technical viewpoint, i.e. the choice of utilizing the natural language used in stories as a medium will create immediacy between the sender and receiver.

5.6 Personal focus in stories

The last criterion of Media Richness Theory, personal focus, is the focal point of Social Presence Theory, including aspects such as how personal the communicated topics are. Personal focus is plausibly the single detail where stories prevail most other forms of communicating.

Connell, Klein and Meyer (2004) argue that one of the significant distinctive features of stories might be their (real or imagined) confidentiality, which creates a kind of 'shared exclusiveness' between the teller and listener(s).

This notion pinpoints why all stories, both written and verbal, can be considered high in social presence. Stories provide a sense of intimacy with the protagonist of the story, even in situations where physical distance, facial expressions, eye contact and other cues affecting immediacy and intimacy are absent.

For instance, the stories used in Martin's (1982) and Martin & Powers' (1983) studies were all in written form, and thus did not provide as strong personal focus as verbal stories. Yet they showed significant impact on the readers. This is probably due to stories often having one sole protagonist with whom the receivers of the communication can relate to when they interpret the sent message. The personal focus of the stories will naturally be higher in situations, where stories are told verbally and the protagonist is either telling the story or the storyteller is closely connected to the events that occurred.

6. Conclusions: stories provide high social presence and media richness

Media Richness Theory and Social Presence Theory are found to be incomplete indicators of media effectiveness. No form of data, information, knowledge or wisdom can be transferred directly from a medium to the receiver. The receivers of a message always interpret the meaning sent through a media. It is thus suggested that some of the basic criteria of these theories should be reassessed and broadened to take receiver interpretations into consideration. The suggested criteria would be 1) meaning conveying capacity (instead of data carrying capacity), 2) symbol conveying capacity (instead of symbol carrying capacity) and 3) multiple cues conveying capacity (instead of multiple cues transmitting capacity). In addition it is suggested that the criteria of *use of natural language* be broadened to assess the form of the language in addition to the words used. Albeit initially lacking, both theories are found useful for assessing core media effectiveness, provided that the suggested criteria modifications are used. Still, they should be combined with other modes of evaluation to achieve a meticulous evaluation of media impact.

In conclusion of the assessment carried out in this paper, stories can be affirmed as having both high social presence and media richness, as research has proven that they carry symbolic information and convey meaning, as well as greatly enhance both commitment and recollection. Stories help readers or listeners feel a closer connection to the issues and people whom the stories are told about. Additionally, stories use natural language and a form that is undemanding to relate to. Both verbal and written stories are found high in media richness and social presence, but verbal stories can be considered a richer medium than written stories in various aspects, as written stories offer no form of feedback, often lack intimacy and do not provide various more subtle cues, such as body language.

Mediums with high social presence and media richness are considered most suited for communicating ambiguous issues**,** whereas leaner media should be used to convey less complicated messages. Thus, if stories are to be utilised as a communication medium, verbal stories would be best suited for communicating complex or ambiguous matters such as organisational change efforts or strategy, whereas written stories would be more suited for communicating moderately complex issues, such as an organisation's vision, values or brand promises.

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