

Corporate Storytelling

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1 Definition

Corporate storytelling designates private and public companies' and organizations' strategic utilization of stories and storytelling (in the broad sense of man's ability to tell and understand narratives) to create coherence and progression concerning the companies' or organizations' brand, identity and development. The term 'story' does not follow the traditional narratological definition of a story (as proceeding from the paradigmatic story/discourse distinction of narratology) when applied in the field of corporate storytelling. This reflects the general looseness of the application of narratological terms commonly used in the storytelling context. In general, the specific narratological terminology is in this context rather applied as a set of tools to reach a more value-based approach to the sensemaking of organizations and their stakeholders.

2 Explication

The concept of corporate storytelling belongs to the somewhat amorphous field within business communication called "corporate communication." The idea is that the organization is a "body" (a corpus) which needs to coordinate its parts and movements to function and develop correctly. Corporate communication is therefore characterized by activities involved in managing and orchestrating all internal and external communication and by the attempt to control or influence corporate 'stakeholders'. In business communication and management 'stakeholders' is understood as all those (individuals, groups, organizations or systems) who affects or can be affected by the organization's actions, i.e. individuals, groups or organizations with an interest in the activities of the organization: shareholders, customers, employees, suppliers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Green Peace or Doctors without Borders, local

communities, the media, etc. (Friedman & Miles 2006; Cornelissen 2004).

Seen from a narratological point of view, stakeholders cannot be considered as mere 'actors' (that is characters taking up actantial positions) in the story of the organization. They are also co-narrators and narratees, so that the clear-cut (and often abstract) categories and concepts of narratology pertain only to a limited extent to studying and working with corporate storytelling. For this reason, the concept 'stakeholders' is adopted to mediate between the pragmatic aspect and the communicative aspect of this special storytelling situation.

By conceptualizing producers and recipients of the corporate narrative as 'stakeholders', we acknowledge the fact that they produce and process corporate narratives against the backdrop of their individual, pragmatic and extra-narrative interests.

In a strategic business context, storytelling is understood as the conscious attempt to produce, promote or change a story. Thus, within the framework of corporate communication, narratives or narrative elements are used to establish and maintain the organizational brand, image, culture and identity of various groups of internal and external stakeholders. New media are often used to facilitate mutual dialogue between the organization and its stakeholders. Stories or fragments of stories related in corporate blogs and Facebook groups help the organization gain an understanding of how the different stakeholders perceive the organizational identity and brand. In a communicative context, storytelling enables organizations to establish dialogical relationships with multiple stakeholders. For organizations, the overall strategic purpose is to use and control stories inside and outside the organization in order to establish long-lasting, value-based relationships with different groups of stakeholders in order to strengthen the corporate brand and differentiate the organization from its competitors.

An essential challenge of corporate communication concerns management's ability to control all aspects of storytelling in a diverse and complex context of multiple stakeholders. Formal storytelling (e.g. founder stories and stories of corporate heroes that serve as role models for the socialization of current and future employees) lies within the realm of management control and is therefore subordinate to a pragmatic function. Founder stories can be compared with Medieval exempla and with the religious stories of the lives of the saints.

Other types of stories, however, are beyond managerial control: informal stories or counter-stories told by employees or other stakeholders such as the media, NGOs or investors may challenge formal stories of front-stage activities, as was the case when Foxconn (a manufacturer for e.g. Apple) admitted to finding underage interns

as young as 14 working at one of its factories in China (Putnam et al. 2005; Mumby & Clair 1997; Deetz & Mumby 1990). This did not correspond with Apple's commitment to ensuring that the working conditions in their supply chain were "safe, [that] workers are treated with respect and dignity, and [that] manufacturing processes are environmentally responsible" (Apple.com). As in this case, informal stories and their discourse may reflect negatively on the corporate image and identity, especially if the formal stories are not authentic in their presentation of corporate culture and corporate patterns of meanings (Martin 2002).

3 History of the Concept and its Study

Once marginalized as a way of distinguishing between fact and fiction, the term 'storytelling' has developed into an academic tool applied in a broad range of scientific disciplines throughout the later part of the 20th century. With MacIntyre's (1981) claim that man is a "storytelling animal" and Fisher's (1984) characterization of man as 'homo narrans', storytelling, by the end of the 20th century, came to be considered an omnipresent meaning-making concept applied in a broad range of narrative processes (journalism, personal identity, movies, etc.). It was in this historic turn towards stories as a conscious sensemaking tool that corporate storytelling was born. Dutch management and communication scholar van Riel established himself in the 1990s as a frontrunner in the development of corporate communication by stressing the importance of stories and value-based stakeholder communication. With the term "common starting point" (CSP), van Riel laid a strong foundation for further development of corporate storytelling based on a common denominator (what he initially referred to as "accent") for internal and external communication in organizations. "Accent" refers to a common platform—or what could be referred to as a common storyline—that must remain intact in order to achieve well-balanced communication.

The strategic importance of corporate storytelling was stressed at the turn of the millennium in two influential works by Denning (2001, 2005). Denning establishes the concept of business narratives as 'stories with a small s' in contrast to 'stories with a capital S', as represented in established literary genres such as epics, novels and short stories.

3.1 First Wave of Theories of Corporate Communication: Controlling Communication

Taking its starting point around the turn of the millennium, the first wave of theories on corporate communication focused on the importance of managerial control and responsibility in the orchestration of all communication activities within

the organization (van Riel 1995; Cornelissen 2004). During this period, communication was seen as being too important to be left to the communication department alone. Visual and non-verbal statements such as logos, product designs, colors, artifacts, dress codes as well as verbal manifestations including press releases, slogans, mission and vision statements, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities, blogs, etc. were all regarded as manifestations of a corporate story of uniqueness, culture, identity and brand. Hence, corporate communication and corporate brand must clearly and coherently communicate to all stakeholders “who we are and what we stand for” (Hatch & Schultz 2000: 15). From a business perspective, long-term survival depends on the creation of a strong corporate brand and a unique corporate identity that help differentiate the organization from its competitors by establishing permanent value-based relationships with stakeholders. The strategic focus on the importance of building long-lasting relationships with stakeholders is reflected in the increasing focus on ‘corporate reputation’ as opposed to ‘corporate image’. Corporate reputation refers to stakeholders’ long-term relationship with the corporation or organization, whereas corporate image refers to a short-term and less stable relationship at a given moment of time (Cornelissen 2004). The five pillars of successful corporate reputation rely on a stable and coherent communication of corporate visibility, distinction, authenticity, transparency and consistency in the total sum of corporate activities (Fombrun & van Riel 2004).

Communication scholar Cornelissen operates with the following, much quoted, definition of corporate communication: “Corporate communication is a management function that offers a framework and vocabulary for the effective coordination of all means of communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favourable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent” (2004: 23). The same point is made by van Riel, who defines corporate communication as “an instrument of management” (1995: 26) whose overall purpose is to create and maintain a favorable basis for relationships with all stakeholder groups. In the context of building relationships with corporate stakeholders, storytelling performs an important strategic role as a pathos-based sensemaking tool, as pointed out by Denning: “Storytelling is natural and easy. Stories help us understand complexity. Stories can enhance or change perceptions. Stories are easy to remember [...] they bypass normal defense mechanisms and engage our feelings” (2001: 9).

3.1 Second Wave of Corporate Communication: The Contradictional Corpus

From roughly 2010, the term “corporate” increasingly refers to a holistic

understanding of the organization as one coherent and coordinated body (corpus). The body metaphor implies the additional existence of a corporate voice which is the total net effect of all the ways a company communicates organizational values and purpose to its stakeholders (e.g. Deutsche Telekom's Guiding Principles (2013): "Customer delight drives our actions, Respect and integrity guide our behavior, Team together—Team apart, Best place to perform and grow, I am T—Count on me").

The corporate voice helps present the organization as a unified and integrated whole to groups of multiple stakeholders. However, the second wave of research on corporate communication challenges the assumption of unity and questions whether or not it is indeed "possible and desirable for an organization to communicate as one whole" (Christensen et al. 2008: vii) and to speak with one voice. The second wave of corporate communication thus introduces the concept of multiple voices in postmodern organizations and the concept of antenarratives. According to Boje, "stories are antenarratives when told without the proper plot sequence and mediated coherence preferred in narrative theory" (2001: 3). Within the framework of the second wave of corporate communication, the fragmented nature of antenarratives represents a narrative action of creating preliminary, *prospective* sensemaking at both individual and organizational levels before antenarratives eventually develop into complete and recognizable narratives. In an increasingly complex and fragmented context of globalization and diversity, contemporary organizations face multiple audiences with different interests and different patterns of interpretation. This requires organizations to embrace a broader cosmopolitan approach which is able to include contradictions and plurality (Beck 2006) while also remaining open to local meanings and a view of leadership based on "a set of rich and varied basic images or metaphors" (Alvesson & Spicer, eds. 2011: 30). Consequently, communication scholars increasingly challenge the rigid notion of one organization, one body and one voice and call for a reinterpretation of the body metaphor to encompass the concept of a more "fluid corporate body capable of flowing and easily changing shape" (Christensen et al. 2008: 221). As modern corporations operate in ever-changing dynamic environments, the challenge of corporate communication lies in the ability to navigate consistently between the opposing forces of unity and diversity while maintaining credibility and authenticity across groups of multiple audiences. In this fluid and chaotic context, storytelling offers a unique possibility for establishing a common framework of multiple interpretations. The Telekom example quoted above urges customers, working teams and individual employees to take part in a unifying narrative of mutual interests and shared purpose: "I am T—Count on me."

3.2 Key Concepts in Corporate Communication: Culture and

Brand

The amorphous concept of corporate communication has been aptly described as a “corporate umbrella” (Schulz & Kitchen 2004), since it encompasses a large number of activities such as the establishment, maintenance and communication of corporate values and uniqueness to various groups of stakeholders. Acknowledging that the corporate umbrella covers a large number of relevant organizational activities, the following discussion highlights the key concepts of culture, brand and leadership that implicitly contribute to the concrete realization of corporate communication.

Research and studies on the importance of culture in organizations got under way during the 1980s, represented by the works especially of Deal and Kennedy (1982), Peters and Waterman (1982) and Schein ([1985] 1992). These works studied the influence of organizational stories and their hero figures as well as organizational rites, rituals and artifacts. These early studies of organizational culture were based on a functionalist understanding of culture as instrumental and operational. Culture was considered a management tool, and thus culture was seen as something to be manipulated, constructed and controlled by management.

This normative approach to cultures was subsequently challenged by more complex and dynamic views of organizational culture. The functionalist understanding of culture as something the organization “has” is complemented by an understanding of organizational culture based on what the organization “is” or “does” (Cheney et al. [2004] 2011). The descriptive approaches to culture advocate a view of culture as a social construct and argue for the need of a pluralistic view of culture which encompasses ambiguity and fragmentation. Attention is drawn to the existence of organizational subcultures based on professional subcultures or subcultures of resistance, for example (Martin 1992, 2002). The complexity of organizational culture further entails different patterns of interpretations as well as individual sensemaking of organizational life and values (Weick 1995). In the descriptive approach to culture, fragmentation and ambiguity challenge the functionalist concept of a single integrated and unifying organizational culture mirroring discussion in corporate communication of one body and one voice as essential for developing and maintaining a strong corporate brand. Expressed in terms of narrative: the descriptive approach opens up room for counter-stories and accepts a higher degree of fragmentation and disparity of the organization’s overall narrative. The corporation’s narratives are less focused on making sure that ‘the left hand’ of the organizational body knows what ‘the right hand’ is doing than it is on telling the stakeholders about what the left and right hand are doing respectively, and why it both adds value to the organization and is in the stakeholders’ interest.

The corporate brand reflects a development in marketing in which the need to brand the physical and concrete product has been superseded by a realization of the need to brand the corporation behind the product. Consumers and other potential stakeholders no longer see themselves as mere passive receivers of rational messages of prices and products. While product branding represented the first step in theories on branding, the strategic focus of branding in corporate communication is primarily concerned with branding the corporation together with its culture, image and values—and no longer the physical product (Aaker 1996; Gobé 2001; Hatch & Schulz 2003).

3.4 Mind and Market

In recent years, especially with the increasing and uncontrollable influence of social media such as interactions in virtual communities and networks like weblogs and Facebook, the concept of corporate branding has been taken one step further. The former attention toward conquering market shares has been transformed into the important, long-term strategic focus of corporate communication: conquering the minds of corporate stakeholders, thus placing 'mind shares' first and market shares later (Olins 2003). Google is an example of a company that managed to conquer mind shares, as for a long time the first brand people thought of when they needed to search on the Internet was Google. Relationship branding or network branding become increasingly important in corporate communication as consumers and other potential stakeholders demand the added value of emotional bonds and immaterial value memberships in which personal and corporate personalities synergize into a common story of higher purposes and moral branding (Hatch & Schulz 2008; Wattanasuwan 2005).

Stories of moral branding and stories of corporations and stakeholders with a higher ethical purpose reflect "a new dimension" in corporate communication (Morsing 2002 : 40). In their recent branding campaign, "Solutions Ready—For the challenge of climate change," the industrial company Danfoss exemplifies how its product solutions can help its customers save energy (e.g. "1 million tons of CO² are saved every year through the Danfoss Turbocor compressor"). In this case, Danfoss applies moral branding to assume the role of 'helper' in an actantial sense, which corresponds with their overall purpose to provide solutions for Climate & Energy. In Danfoss' internal communication, stories are centered on employees taking up the role of heroes developing energy-efficient products, increasing market shares, etc. Stories of corporations and their noble quest for a better world provide excellent potential for consumer and stakeholder identification and ultimate self-realization which have proven vital in customers' choices of products and in a company's ability

to attract future employees. We find these stories, or fragments of them, on corporate websites and reports on corporate CSR activities as well as in mission and vision statements, job advertisements, blogs, Facebook groups, Twitter dialogues, etc.

The view of storytelling as a tool for management has come to include a recognition of storytelling as a framework for establishing value-based and emotional bonds with stakeholders on a long-term basis.

4 Topics for Further Investigation

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the use of narratological concepts and models in the framework of business communication is characterized by a certain pragmatic looseness. Consequently, an obvious topic for further investigation would be to identify how specifically narratological concepts such as narrator, protagonist and focalization can be applied in corporate storytelling and whether they should be reconceptualized. This would bring out what is narratologically interesting and unique about the application of narration in the practice-oriented context of corporate communication.

(a) Corporate storytelling in social media and viral marketing. (b) The use and function of fiction and fictionality (Schaeffer → Fictional vs. Factual Narration [1]) in corporate communication.

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