



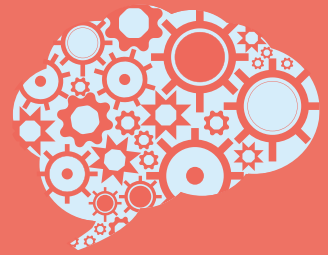
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Behavioural Insight Brief: The Role of Narrative in Public Policy



The Role of Narrative in Public Policy

Context

Narratives (i.e. persuasive stories or accounts that help people make sense of the world around them) have been used throughout history to effect social, political, and economic change. As the digital age allows narratives to interpret and influence ongoing events in real-time and reach, an in-depth understanding of narratives is becoming increasingly relevant. Narrative is a powerful tool to influence judgment and decision-making and can help influence behaviour in areas such as conflict, the environment, and the economy.

How Narratives Can Be Used

Narratives can help individuals interpret complex social and political events. They can influence how people act, in accordance with their identity and situation. By influencing how individuals interpret the world, narratives have a direct impact on decisions and actions.

Examples include:

Silicon Valley: The quintessential tech-cluster, Northern California's reputation has inspired countless startups to relocate based on the belief of greater opportunity.

Olympics: A powerful narrative of a historical link to Ancient Greece and world unity, while also being one of the most ambitious commercial ventures cities can undertake.

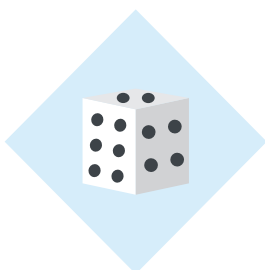


Components of a Successful Narrative

Narrative Probability: Is the story believable? Are its lessons coherent?

Narrative Fidelity: Does the story represent the world as the reader understands it?

Attitudes & Expectations: Does the narrative influence the audiences' expectations of how events will play out?



Levels of Narratives

Society: Master Narratives

Narratives that operate at the cultural level can be classified as “master narratives”. Cultural master narratives participate in the process of identity formation for a society by establishing criteria for membership.

Because of its universality and relative simplicity, the cultural master narrative provides a basis for easy reference upon which both group and personal narratives are developed.

Examples include:

- “Immigrants seeking hope in a new world”
- “The American Dream”



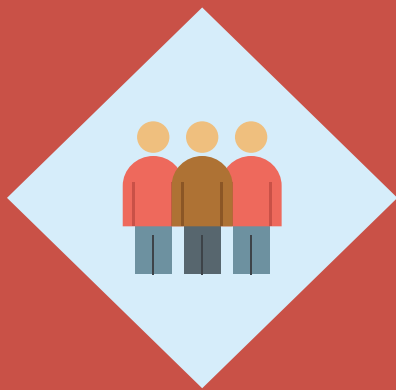
Group: Movement Narratives

Group narratives have a tendency to be associated with specific political movements and discourses. This is seen most clearly through political leaders telling stories to the public in an attempt to frame the public’s interpretation of events.

Operating in a contested space, movement narratives come into competition with one another when explaining events to the general public.

Examples include:

- Democracy vs. Communism



Personal: Individual Narratives

Individual narratives help individuals understand their own lives, explaining the situations they are in and why certain things have happened to them.

With shifting circumstances and contexts, individuals identify with different narratives that place them as the central protagonist, deeply influencing actions and decisions. How these individuals reconcile this identity with the images put forward by competing narratives influences their responses and actions.

Examples include:

- “The Self-Made Man/Woman”
- Strong Parent Figure



Narrative Fidelity and Structure

A story has narrative fidelity if it represents the world as the reader understands it. The familiarity of the structure allows a narrative to be accessible, relatable and effective. The persuasive power of a narrative is dependent on the structural similarities between the story being told and stories the audience may have heard, or experienced, in the past. Compelling narratives also provide a way for individuals to see themselves as the protagonist of the story. The story of David and Goliath reflects an individual overcoming overwhelming odds and finding courage by remaining committed to his convictions.



Counter/Competing Narratives

When multiple narratives influence an individual's behaviour, they compete to help an individual interpret and respond to an event.

A case study explored incidences of cyber security breaches in organizations that sent executives emails explicitly warning them "This is a phishing email. If you click on this link it will harm your computer." Despite the warning, executives proceeded to click on the link. This motivation is linked with two competing narrative identities.

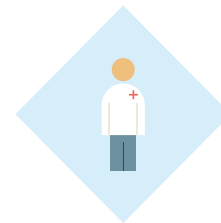


Someone who has a scientist's nature may be more likely to test the phishing email. A scientist:

- values the pursuit of truth and understanding
- is curious and conducts experiments to expand knowledge

So an executive who decides to test the phishing email is likely to be the type of person whose self narrative says:

- I like to be at the cutting edge of technology
- When I see a feature I haven't encountered before, I try it out to see if it will be helpful in my work



Nurturing personalities:

- value safety for their family and friends
- are always on the lookout for possible sources of danger

The underlying self narrative for this type of executive:

- I train to notice and respond to risks
- My vigilance protects citizens and keeps them safe

Narrative Awareness is Key

As narratives represent an important driver of constituent behaviour, recognizing how these stories influence responses is a key component to public policy. Identifying the role that organizations play in the narratives of constituents, and how these relate to the role of the constituents themselves will help leaders anticipate how their actions will be received and responded to in the future.

Compelling narratives have potential applications in tackling complex problems such as climate change, cyber-security, public trust, and public participation, with the most successful narratives adhering to the principles of narrative probability (being believable), and fidelity (consistent), and are in line with attitudes and expectations.

BI in Brief is a series of summaries of behavioural insights topics to expand knowledge and stimulate discussion regarding the rapidly evolving field of behavioural insights. For more information, please send an email to: info@horizons.gc.ca

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