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## Article

# Digital storytelling and employer branding

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## Digital Storytelling and Employer Branding. An Exploratory Connection

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**Abstract.** *Our paper aims at explaining what is digital storytelling and its particular methodology, and how its use in the organizational settings could influence the employer branding. For such purpose, the authors have conducted an exploratory research, where a group of participants has been asked to rate their interest in a company, after viewing solely the online commercial communication (website and Facebook account), while another group has viewed two digital stories produced by two employees of the company. The results of the analysis showed that participants had more positive words to describe the company after viewing the stories, but there were not differences in perception for those who were searching for a job and those who were not searching for the job when exposed solely to the web communication or digital stories.*

**Keywords:** *digital storytelling, employer branding, commercial communication.*

### Digital Storytelling - use and practice

The creative practice known as “Digital Storytelling” (DS) originated in Berkeley, California during the mid-1990s and is now increasingly used across the world. It is a simple, powerful tool that provides people with skills to tell their personal story as a two-minute film. Each completed film is shown in a community setting before being stored on the internet so others can share it. People with little or no knowledge of computers acquire digital literacy and storytelling skills alongside an introduction to basic Information and Communication Technology (ICT). It has grown rapidly in the past two decades and has proven to be a fertile area of research for policy makers, academics, and creative practitioners. Burgess (2006, p.4) describes it succinctly as “a workshop-based process by which ‘ordinary people’ create their own short autobiographical films that can be streamed on the web or broadcast on television.”

In *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*, digital storyteller, Joe Lambert (2013) from the Center for Digital Storytelling, sets out the process for a typical Digital Storytelling workshop. First, participants work on developing a story – the process is both shared and personal so storytellers understand and narrate their own story (stages 1 to 3). In the next phases, participants select images (from their own photo archives or online uploaded copyright free images) in order to illustrate the stories (stage 4). Participants write a personal story as a 200 word script, not longer than three minutes, and combine key emotions or happenings alongside their chosen photos. The author records the script and then edits the voiceover alongside the images, while the relevant pictures are being displayed (steps 5 and 6). Once the final story is told, the digital story is shared with the rest of the group in a screening of stories (step 7) (Lambert, 2013).

Lambert (2013) goes on to argue for the importance of storytelling as a means for people to express, comprehend and articulate experiences in the everyday world. He argues that storytelling empowers people so they can engage with the world around them and identifies a series of different story types. He considers the background to Digital Storytelling and argues that the method is not just a simple means to expand digital literacy, but a greater facility for representing people through the media that contrasts with broadcast media contexts. Digital storytelling produces “conversational media” (in a chain of stories that generate other stories). It is a technique for breaking down barriers and increasing understanding across generations, ethnicities, and other divides. He sees it as a tool that stands to benefit education and corporate communication.

Thumim (2012) describes the importance of the storytelling circle comprising of games and discussion and sets out how this lays the foundation for the writing of a personal story that draws on “family photographs, ‘family archives’, sometimes people’s own drawing or artworks, and sometimes some video as well”. The workshop environment is key to story development. However, the completed story often requires help from professional tutors with editing and sound and, even with a “scrapbook aesthetic”. In saying this, she recognizes a tension inherent in the Digital Storytelling process around the framing and telling of each individual story.

Poletti (2011) explores the notion of a “coaxed” life narrative; one that is created in particular circumstances that may flow – either directly or indirectly - from the demands or interests of the workshop facilitator or the agency commissioning their work. She argues that the stories people tell can be shaped by particularly demands or by perceptions of them, and, to

illustrate her point, draws attention to the difference between stories commissioned by the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) and those made by *tallstoreezproductionz* where the former emphasized historical reflection while the latter highlighted the aspirational narratives of youth. Other writers have also extended the terrain initially explored by Lambert to include the use of Digital Storytelling as vernacular creativity (Burgess, 2006), as a method for qualitative research into particular policy issues (Gubrium, 2009), as a form of personal creativity, a means to preserve a community's identity, as a form of oral history (Klaebe, Foth, Burgess & Bilandzic, 2007, p.33). Brushwood and Low (2014) consider DS a program aimed at „empowering participants through processes of representation, affirming their capacity to communicate their experiences to others and asserting the socio-political significance of doing so”. The ways digital stories are re-defined and re-used goes beyond the initial meaning - of merely giving a voice to the voiceless, by allowing them to tell their view of life events in a format including technology. Corporations and community-based organizations, institutions and non-governmental organizations start considering digital storytelling as a form of developing their brand (Adi, Crişan & Dinca, 2015). There are several reasons for which different organizations start looking at digital stories as a form of corporate communication and branding. In our view, *the main reason is connected to the way legitimacy is defined in the post-modern world.*

According to Alain Tourain (1996, p.39), “modernity is defined by the break of a cosmos which had a certain finality, it was created by a god or by super-human powers, was organized in accordance to laws which could be discovered reasonably; and was replaced, on one hand by a „technical environment“, created as stated by the classical thesis by the scientific reason and, on the other hand by the inner conscience of man. The pre-modern world was at the same time the intention of god and an eternal order; in the modern world the subjectivity gets separated by objectivity, and the moral laws are not natural laws anymore”.

It is true that modernity was born at the same time with the laic ideologies, viewed as an alternative to Christianity. As such, they have been eschatological, compelled to postulate, like Christianity *a sense of history*, outside which they could not offer *a sense of life*. At the same time they wanted to see themselves *built*, and in order to become real, they appealed to „large-scale subjects“, true heroes of the universal history. This is the reason for which Lyotard (1993) calls them “grand stories” (*les grandes histoires*). All these „legitimacy stories“ (Lyotard, 1993) contain an ontology, a gnosiology and an ethic; most contain a „sociology“ and a „politology“ and some propose a „pedagogy“. Their exhaustive character allowed them to

participate in the process of legitimacy in the same manner as the Christianity has done and as tradition has acted in the „closed societies“ (Popper, 1993). This manner is called by Lyotard (1993) „narrative legitimacy“. Considering that long time ago the participation in a tradition was enough to ensure the social recognition, concretized in the moral feeling of „respectability“, the grand ideologies have allowed the continuation of an *up to bottom legitimacy*. While prior the legitimacy implied the appeal to the „sky of tradition“ (Habermas, 1983), now it resorts to the values proposed by the grand ideologies. The fundamental function of the grand stories is to harmonize the picture of the world and the „world of life“, these would give the man, in the end, both a sense of the history and a sense of his own life. Through this, the „grand stories“ satisfy the fundamental needs for a *unitary painting of the world, emotional security, devotion and meaning of life*. Commenting on all these „elaborated systems“ Erich Fromm wrote: „Whatever their content, they all respond to the double need of the individual to have a system based on which to support her thinking, and a devotion object which to support her meaning of life and her status in the world“ (Fromm, 1993, p.93). One can say that the grand ideologies have acted until recently as *symbolic canopies* for entire human communities. Thus they took over the support from Tradition and Christianity, as the main source of social recognition, respectability, and credibility (including self-recognition, self-respectability and self-trust).

But the symbolic canopy has a twofold function: a) on one hand it offers identity reference points to a community and ensures the coherence of social conduct, and b) on the other hand it creates a „greenhouse effect“ which delays the adaptation of the community to the environment. Therefore, we can say that people give up a symbolic canopy when it becomes obvious that it is no longer ensuring their survival, and implicitly, their evolution when they feel they are choking. Sometimes, the tension between the objectives demands of development and the existing symbolic order becomes obvious too late, it is ideologically processed and loaded on other phenomena than the real ones. In such cases, devastating conflicts occur, and the symbolic canopy falls apart in the loud noise of war.

### **The small stories - the bottom-up legitimacy**

The end of the grand stories of legitimacy is being owed, ultimately to some prodigious evolutions of the advanced capitalist societies. The post-industrial society or the new capitalism has abandoned the hierarchical way of management, transforming itself into a network of networks in an anti-system, based on the autonomy of agents, teamwork, flexibility and communication (Hauser & Michon, 2001). In this new form of society, the

new way of producing meaning is easily described by using the term „small story“. People still need stories, but in the absence of the grand one, they appeal to substitutes of the grand ideologies, i.e. to replacing the theory with genres like „ethnography, journalism, animated books, documentaries and, especially, the novel“ (Rorty, 1998, p.30), a new priest of the „metaphysical culture“, which he considers to be „nonetheless possible rather than post-religious, and equally desirable“ (Rorty, 1998, p.29). Richard Rorty (1998) explains the „historical breakthrough“ whose essence would consist in replacing the Truth with the Freedom. The Truth becomes a private value like the Faith at the beginning of secularization of the modern societies while searching for the Truth - a strictly personal issue, like looking for God, meaning a problem of „self-awareness“ and „private perfection“. In the public space, we cannot become legitimate by appealing to the Truth, because today it becomes obvious that the self-awareness and the justice and the private perfection and the human solidarity cannot be united in one single vision (Rorty, 1998). We would like to focus on this point of view not only because of its significance but also for its social relevance; the fact that Rorty became overnight a star of US television talk shows, maybe the most popular philosopher of all times, can be explained by the coincidence between his ideas and the obsession of the US society for *Consensus*. The re-orientation of the neo-capitalist society from Truth to Consensus is interpreted by Rorty as a major turn, „targeted against theory towards narration“. This is why „the novel, the movie, and the TV show have replaced slowly but firmly the sermon and the treaty as the main tools for moral change and progress“ (Rorty, 1998, p.30). We would like to add to the list the *digital stories*.

On the other side of the ocean, Gilles Lipovetsky (1996) observes the same departure of the contemporary society from the truth and theoretical explanation towards favoring the consensus and the intuitive image. In his book „*The Dawn of Duty*“ (*Le Crépuscule du devoir*), Lipovetsky (1992) speaks about a post-Kantian ethics, specific to a post-moral society, where we don't believe any more in the dream of changing lives, one can only find the sovereign individual busy to manage the quality of his life (Lipovetsky, 1996). In this new socio-cultural context, the legitimation strategies in the public space get to be radically modified. We cannot become legitimate from a grand ideology, neither from moral principles. Thus, if the moral values stop being *end values* and they become *performance values* we find ourselves in a situation labeled by Lipovetsky (1996) as the *moral utilitarian operationalization*, illustrated the best in the new communication strategies of corporations: „Presently, the legitimacy of the corporation is not being given nor contested, it is built and sold, we live in the age of values marketing and promotional legitimacies, the last stage of post-moral

secularization“ (Lipovetsky, 1996, pp.291-292). We can say that the legitimation does not take place through end values, inoculated in the social corpus through the grand ideologies, but through performance values (Piaget, 1967), which are presented and received as end values. Thus, the political ideologies are being replaced with the political marketing, and propaganda is replaced with advertising. One does not disseminate a set of end values, but transfigure the performance values of a group into end values, with a pretense of universality. Replacing the *up-bottom legitimation to bottom-up* has been generalized and entered all social systems. People, organization and national states legitimate through *managing their own image* - a euphemistic expression where the true meaning is distorted to *managing the social representations*. In order to serve this purpose, a whole system of social engineering has been set out, with all the additional technology - *the public relations*. The science per se does not legitimate anymore, but its results are being used successfully in building efficient communication strategies, servicing the purpose of legitimation (Bortun, 2012).

The large corporations do not promote goods and services; they build reputations and the most skilled ones build the legitimacy of the subject they serve. The real name of public relations is *marketing of communication in the public sphere*. Once that marketing enters the game, everything is allowed under the dogma that: „This is what the public wants!“ - a dogma that has two functions: on one hand it allows the use of any means (including non-ethical ones) to boost sales; on the other hand it allows producers to stop the engines of innovation, creativity, and responsibility. However, focusing solely on the consumers' needs involves enormous risks in the real economy, see for instance the collapse of ENRON in 2001 and the financial crisis of 2007.

Anna Schwartz (quoted by Ungureanu, 2008, p.3), co-author with Milton Friedman of the book *Monetary History of the United States 1867-1960*, was observing in an interview in the *Wall Street Journal*, that we are seeing a crisis of trust. In other words, it is a crisis of legitimacy. In all these cases, the greed and the corruption have been accompanied by lies, meaning deceiving communication both inside the organizations and in the public space. Our thesis here is that the digital stories are replies to the generalized marketization, an attempt of the individual to save her identity, individuality and, in the end, her humanity. Through the digital stories many individuals from the post-industrial societies build their own identity, their own recognition, their own respectability and credibility which is not a small endeavor considering that through this process they get a self-awareness, self-respect and self-trust - meaning exactly those things that the grand stories of legitimation cannot offer any more. In other words, in

line with the *new tradition of bottom-up legitimation* (Habermas, 1983), more and more people try to give a meaning to their existence using their own, at hand, resources. For them, the online environment is the ideal environment. Our thesis is in agreement with Meadows (2003) who looks at digital stories as a means to 'allowing ordinary people to take back the power' and with Rossiter and Garcia (2010, p.38) 'it is a powerful means by which disempowered populations can make their voices be heard'.

### **Digital storytelling in organizational context - ethical implications**

The stories used for this paper have been created as part of an internal communication campaign by an IT company from Romania. By being a sponsored seminar there are several potential ethical implications for the stories produced, most importantly the potential of the stories to reflect a social desirability or compliance with company expectations rather the authentic story of the persons. Dush (2012) is arguing that in seminars sponsored by certain entities with the purpose of producing stories reflecting a certain state of affairs or with the aim of promoting certain activities, there are at least three dimensions one should additionally consider from the ethical point of view when referring to authorship: *vulnerability of subjects* (can some of them refuse to have their story told by their benefactor), *moral and psychological accountability* (to which extent is the subject in control of the story, even after signing a consent form that the story can be produced), *the relational self and proximate others* (to what extent is the identity and intimacy of subject and others a concern and how does that reflect the right angle in which the story is being put).

With this limitation in mind, the production of the stories has passed a few preliminary stages. The participants in the Ambassadors program have been selected based on a couple of filter question: is there anything positive you would like to tell about your company and would you like to put that in a digital story. From this point forward, the company representatives have taken a distance from the DS workshop and the stories have been crafted by the employees without any feedback or input from the company. Thus the participants have been in no state of vulnerability or lack of moral control or accountability. The final product has been displayed in a public screening attended by human resources and middle managers. Out of the 20 stories created, for the purpose of this paper we have selected two, randomly, one produced by a female employee and one produced by a male employee.

In line with the bottom-up legitimation argument for the corporate communication by the means of digital stories, we would add the fact that



the voices unaltered by the company's PR or marketing message could prove to have a bigger authenticity for external clients and stakeholders - however, it is not clear (due to a lack of research in this area) if this authenticity can produce any effects for organizations in terms of business outputs.

### **Employer branding and storytelling**

Since Boje's (1991) storytelling organization, there has been a great body of literature dealing with stories people tell in and about the organizations (Boje, 1995, 2001; Mosberg, 2008), stories people tell in order to get a job with an organization (Berkelaar, Birdsell & Scacco, 2016), and in the last years research has focused on the online and social media communication of organizations pursuing to develop their employer branding (Edmiston, 2016; Kissel & Buttgen, 2015).

There is also compelling evidence for a relationship between employer branding and strategic recruitment, with Wilden, Gudergan, and Lings (2010, pp.69-70) concluding: „the effectiveness of a brand signal to potential employees is dependent on the consistency, clarity, credibility, and associated investments in the employer brand“. Grunewalder (2007, p.2) defines the employer branding as „the process of placing an image of being a great place to work in the minds of the target group. It is a concept borrowed from the business side of the company...An employer brand creates an image that makes the targeted candidate want to work for the employer's company due to the image of a well-managed company where workers are continually learning and growing“. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004, p.502) „define employer branding as the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the employer brand as a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors“. At this point, it was important to us to explore and understand if there is any impact and how significant it is, in terms of using digital storytelling for developing the employer branding, and if third parties, outside the organization, would perceive the DS message as being more authentic compared to the official communication.

Our contention is that digital storytelling could be used as a means of increasing the employer brand by bringing more authenticity and legitimation into the commercial communication of companies. As a result, we have set as research objective to explore the extent to which digital stories make a difference, compared to other means of online communication, namely the webpage of the company and its Facebook page, for employer branding. For the purpose of our paper we have defined

employer branding as the degree of interest, participants have, to apply for a job in a certain organization.

## Research design and methodology

Our research has used two digital stories that have been produced by two employees of the company.

The first story, called „You should not worry“, narrated by a team leader (M, 30) was following the main moments of his experience in the company, especially the hard times when most of his colleagues were deciding to leave the company to seemingly better places: „it looked like all my colleagues were living to go to the corporate heaven where the wages were higher, there was little or no workload...“. The narrator says that he has felt like a fraud, that he has worried a lot, until he has discovered that in his team there was an older and more experienced colleague, with a good mastery of soft skills. The fact that this person was on his team, and he was coordinating someone with higher experience has made the narrator feel better and that his worries were not, in fact, solving any of his problems: „making a lot of worries was similar to solving a math problem by chewing gum“ said the narrator, quoting another colleague. At the end the author concluded that the worries do not solve problems, one needs to approach a new critical situation with confidence, so now when he encounters such situation, he says: „Bring it on!“ In essence, the story was presenting a turnover problem in the department and the narrator explained how he found the strength to cope with it and move forward with his job.

The second story was created by a female employee working in the training department (F, 28). Her story was called „Take another look“ and the narrator started it by explaining that she has learned a valuable lesson from her grandmother, that one should always try to find a new use for the old staff. She is telling how she has started from a low-level position in the company as help desk technician and after a short while, she has been asked by friends and colleagues if she was not bored with the job. She explained how the activity was not boring at all, and how some habits turned out to be really funny, how, for instance, every morning she was asked to reset the computer password for a user from Mexico: „turns out that the weekends in Mexico have as consequence severe memory losses“. She then explains how she has moved to the training department and even if she sometimes delivers the same courses, the group of participants is always different, thus she cannot be bored by her job. She concludes that what helps her cope

with potential boring situations is the fact that she learned to change the angle from which she sees the situation.

Both stories depicted real situations from the organization, they were making reference to other colleagues and sometimes clients, and both showed the transformations the authors passed through while working for the organization.

In terms of the official communication of the company, prior to our research, we have identified the webpage and the official Facebook account for the Europe, Middle East, and Africa (EMEA) office. The main section of the web page are: About, News, Careers, Worldwide Locations and Contact Us and it has direct links to the Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram accounts. The Careers page has a large message: Join our team and then you can choose the country where you want to work and the positions available. Alternatively, on the same page, an applicant can upload her CV and may be contacted by the company. There are several messages related to how the company commits to customer and people, and how someone can reinvent their career while working for the company.

The Facebook account is updated sometimes weekly, sometimes more often - but not daily - with both official information, but also with less formal messages, i.e. company events for employees, e.g. *Bring your kid to work day!* The likes of the posts range from five to more than 1,500, depending on the post.

Both the web page and the Facebook account for the EMEA region are managed from an international office, are mainly in English (the Facebook account includes some posts in Romanian) and have content from all the national branches of the company, while the digital stories have been narrated in Romanian.

As a result, in order to be able to design our research methodology, we had to look for participants who were fluent in English, so they are able to understand the content provided by the company.

As our primary aim was to understand if there are differences among groups of participants who encounter a company's employer brand through online communication or digital storytelling, we made sure we have included in our research only participants who have not heard about that company before.

That has narrowed down the list of potential participants, considering that the IT company is a major employer for youth, and has an active policy of

recruitment in the universities. We have managed to select two groups consisting each in 14 participants, who have stated that their English level is above medium. The 28 participants (26 female and 2 male) have been selected from second-year students of the Faculty of Psychology, within the National University for Political Studies and Public Administration.

The research consisted of two phases. In the first phase, 14 participants have been brought in a room with a computer connected to the internet. They have been asked to study the web page of the company and its EMEA Facebook account and after they thought they had enough information about it, they have received a questionnaire with five questions. The first has been a filter question - asking participants if they have heard before of the IT company being on display. The next question was asking participants to which extent they would be interested in working for this company on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 was very interested and 5 very uninterested. Participants had then to explain their choice. The next two questions were socio-demographic questions and the last question was asking participants if they were looking for a job at the time when the research was taking place. In the second phase, other 14 participants have been asked to enter the research room and they have been shown two digital stories, produced by employees of the IT company. After watching the stories, the participants received a questionnaire similar to the one of the first group, only that the second question was asking participants if they would be interested in working for this company on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 was very interested and 5 very uninterested, after viewing the two digital stories. They were also asked to comment on their choice.

Thus, our assumptions have been:

1. There are differences in the quality of perception among the participants interested in working for the IT company, between those who have studied the online communication and those who have watched the digital stories.
2. There are significant differences among those who have browsed the website and the EMEA Facebook account, between participants looking for a job and those not looking for a job.
3. There are significant differences among those who have watched the digital stories between participants looking for a job and those not looking for a job.

After the questionnaires have been collected, the numerical data has been inputted in an SPSS database, while the text has been codified manually, and the coding has been the subject of consensus between two evaluators, in order to ensure the reliability of the process.

Prior to testing the hypothesis, a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to test for normality on the main dependent variables: interest to apply for a job based on web research (WEBINT) and interest to apply for a job based on the story (STOINT). The percentage of WEBINT for the first group,  $D(14) = 0.012$ ,  $p < .05$ , and the percentage of STOINT for the second group,  $D(14) = 0.000$ ,  $p < 0.5$ , were both abnormal, indicating that the data was not normally distributed in both groups. Thus, we have further used for demonstrating our hypothesis the Mann-Whitney test.

In the case of the first hypothesis, we have used for coding the data three types of evaluations: positive, negative and neutral. The unit of analysis has been the words. We have considered positive terms like *interactive, promotion, interesting, modern, development*. We have considered negative terms like *fake, no details, non-persuasive, monotonous*. In addition, we have considered as neutral, comments like *this company does not match my skills, and I am not interested in it*.

Thus, in the case of the stories seen, participants wrote 10 positive words, 4 negative words, and 2 neutral comments. In the case of the web page, the participants wrote: five positive words, five negative words, and five neutral comments. We could infer from the data above that participant who have seen the stories of the company have evaluated it in more positive terms and less of them found that they do not have the abilities needed to work there.

In the case of hypothesis 2 and 3, we have used the Mann-Whitney tests. For the participants who have browsed the web and accessed the EMEA Facebook account, there has been no difference between those who were looking for a job and those not looking for a job ( $Mdn=3$ ,  $U=16.5$ ,  $p=.393$ ,  $r=0.22$ ). The same results have been registered in the case of the participants who have seen the digital stories ( $Mdn=3$ ,  $U=12.5$ ,  $p=.478$ ,  $r=.18$ ).

## **Conclusions and discussions**

We could notice that the stories have yielded a positive opinion of the company among the participants, although a couple of them, in the negative comments, stated that the stories felt not authentic or like a fake promotion. However, it helped them understand the job better and fewer of them were inclined to say that the company or the jobs it offers are not interesting to them.

The participants in our sample have not allowed us to conclude if just by browsing the web page or by seeing stories, in case they were looking for a job, they could be more inclined to apply for a job in this company. A larger sample is needed and a different research design - perhaps a comparison in pairs. We could conclude that the employer branding by using digital storytelling deserves further exploration, we see a more positive attitude towards the company when the employer branding message is using digital storytelling. At the same time, further research will need to explore in which way digital storytelling and the information provided on the web, complementing each other, could be more persuasive for the prospective employees. This could be done through a more complex research design, perhaps testing the priming effect (digital stories first, online communication second and vice versa) or asking for cumulated effect through one perception measurement. We think that our exploratory study needs to be continued in order to understand the implications and effects of personal authentic stories and building bottom-up legitimacy for business, commercial communication, and employer branding.

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