



STORYTELLING RECLAIMED

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“Storytelling” has become yet another buzz-word, not only in marketing and corporate branding, but increasingly in development cooperation. It is typically deployed in the context of participatory communication approaches, providing means for people to tell their life stories, often with the employment of digital media (i.e. ‘digital storytelling’). But storytelling can of course also be part of a top-down dissemination approach, as social marketing, or a combination of communication strategies, as in edutainment, i.e. conveying messages in fictional stories, through theatre, comics, radio, TV series, etc. Storytelling can in fact imply almost everything. [In Wikipedia, it is defined as follows:](#)

“Storytelling is the conveying of events in words, images, and sounds often by improvisation or embellishment. Stories or narratives have been shared in every culture as a means of entertainment, education, cultural preservation, and in order to instill moral values. Crucial elements of stories and storytelling include plot, characters, and narrative point of view. [...]Traditionally, oral stories were committed to memory and then passed from generation to generation. However, in the most recent past, written and televised media have largely surpassed this method communicating local, family and cultural histories.”

The vast definition becomes unintentionally comical. One may ask what the point is in using a term so general that it encompasses practically all human culture and communication.

In corporate storytelling, a core idea is that the stories be “true”, as opposed to the arbitrary made-up advertisement slogans. But the claim on authenticity is of course as elusive as the alleged truths that all identity-building is built upon –not least the national narratives that still very much determine the public spheres. In the West, we are accustomed to believing that we are enlightened and somehow stand above the conflicting particular interests in the world. We believe that the media give us an “objective” and non-partial view of what is going on. Not every single medium, of course, but the public sphere as a whole. There is little if any censorship, and all the information is available for every individual to make up his/her own mind. This uncontested cornerstone of liberal freedom-of-the-press ideology was shaken by the unvarnished patriotism of US media in the aftermath of 9-11 and the early War on Terrorism. But most Western journalists, notwithstanding, retain a firm conviction that

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their stories are unbiased depictions of reality.

Take Argentina, for example. The country adheres to the same liberal press tradition of the West, even in times of military dictatorship¹, and has historically been one of the cultural and intellectual centers of the Spanish-speaking world. From 2 April 1982 and three months onwards, however, during the last dictatorship, practically all the Argentinean media conveyed one and the same story. What happened on 2 April was the surprise disembarking on the disputed island in the South Atlantic, known as Malvinas in Latin America and Falkland Islands to the rest of the West (i. e. Europe and the US), which unleashed the short and disastrous war with Great Britain that was to seal the fate of the Argentinean military Junta. The story told all the way through the campaign was one of national reconstitution and regeneration. After six years of the most murderous military regime in the country's history, there was an accumulated quest for change, and Malvinas, the trump card that the military junta played out in its desperate attempt to cling to power, served the purpose of a unifying national cause. The media played a very active role in the build-up of the conflict, the so called *Malvinización*, stirring up the patriotic fervor and forging the national imaginary. The young conscripts waiting in their trenches for the British troupes to arrive became the vanguard of the young aspiring Argentinean nation, challenging the decaying colonial empire. The Malvinas campaign remains a painful and shameful memory to most Argentines, because everyone - even the victims of the "dirty war" - shared the national delusion. (Patriotism was of course raging on the British side as well, the Falklands victory serving to firmly consolidate the image of the uncompromising "Iron Lady" Margaret Thatcher. In the British media, the ill-equipped and poorly trained Argentinean conscripts were depicted in a pitying yet derogatory, if not blatantly racist, way, possibly similar to later images of the Iraqi soldiers in the Desert Storm and the Iraq war. The image of innocent boys who were sent to their death by ruthless officials was later to become a common understanding of the war in Argentina as well.)

But there was another story that radically contradicted the mediated official lie. It was circulated in photocopies just after the war, before the first casualties had been transferred to the mainland, before the prisoners of war returned and testified to the horrors of the trenches. It was a short novel by an eccentric writer, Rodolfo Fogwill, written in a creative trance during the culmination of the war. "Los pichiciegos" (published in English translation in 2007 as "Malvinas Requiem") is one of the most remarkable pieces of literary fiction that I can think of. Its all-imaginary story of a subterranean colony of Argentinean deserters, who survive trading with both sides and building a rude and ruthless free-market economy literally under the war, is not only the most truthful depiction of what was really happening on the barren islands, but also a chilling prophesy of post-dictatorial Argentina. I have lately been immersed in analyses and accounts of the Malvinas conflict, as part of an ongoing research project

on fiction's role in transitional societies, and Fogwill's tale comes to mind as the exemplary opposite of smooth corporate storytelling. I therefore pose it as an example for the reclaiming of the very term storytelling, from its instrumental and manipulative use in marketing –be it corporate or social– to one of engaging with and understanding the world. Storytelling is evidently a matter of sharing experiences and construing collective memories and narratives –around a brand, or an identity, or a defined development goal– but it is just as important to learn to analyze and deconstruct these same narratives –the fictional fabric that constitutes society.

Storytelling and Participation will be the theme of the second Glocal NOMAD seminar to be held in Malmö, Sweden, on June 5. See [the Ørecomm website](#) for more information. (The first Glocal NOMAD seminar is being held in Copenhagen, Denmark, on May4, as this new issue of “Glocal Times” goes online. The theme is *Communicating for Social Change –lessons learnt from Public Health.*)

Expect to read more about these and other events in coming issues of *Glocal Times*. In the meantime, enjoy this, the 14th issue of the ComDev webmag.

1 The last dictatorship, 1976-1983, was in a way the exception to the rule, but restraints on the public debate were largely due to self-censorship of the major media, which supported the military government.



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