Voice:
storytelling is knowledge management

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Abstract

This paper is set in the present, in the modern organisation and in a human and social capital framework for knowledge management.

We emphasise the importance of paying attention to the implicit, particularly through the use of stories, storytelling and narratives as ways of seeing the hidden, and hearing its meaning. To do this, you must maintain the integrity of multiple perspectives inherent in individual narratives which form a story.   This is a core strength of knowledge management as a lens through which to view the organisational dynamic.

We consider the multiple narratives inside organisations or at their peripheries through three recognisable (perhaps archetypal) identities: the Hacker, the Chatter and the Nomad, all positioned in the modern world of technology where information overflow is epitomised by the internet, and identities and boundaries are fluid. The Hacker as creative rebel and the Chatter as playful participant are some of the voices in the uncontrolled realm of cyberspace while the Nomad is transitory, a visitor, observer and protagonist inside and beyond organisational boundaries.

Their narratives raise questions about truthfulness, identity, purpose, playfulness and identification with a larger story. We try to draw from this some more generalised perceptions of how story, storytelling and individual narrative can play a useful explicit role in the identity and activity of the organisation.

Key words
Narratives, story, storytelling, perceptions, visible, invisible, transgression, inside, outside, identity, hacker, warrior, chatter, journey, traveller, nomad, metaphor, joy, playfulness, voice, cyberspace.

Prologue

In storytelling there is always transgression, and in all art. Without transgression, without the red boundary, there is no danger, no risk, no frisson, no experiment, no discovery, and no creativity. Without disturbing something of the incomplete order of things, there is no challenge, and no pleasure, and certainly no joy. All true artists suspect that if the world really knew what they were doing they would be punished. Quietly, or dramatically, storytellers are reorganisers of accepted reality, dreamers of alternative histories, disturbers of deceitful sleep.
Ben Okri, "The Joys of Storytelling II"

More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experience.
Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller"

We have used three words regularly in what follows – story, storytelling and narrative. In traditional storytelling, story is the interweaving of plot, narrative and character. Story answers the 'what', plot answers the 'why' and narrative the 'how.' We have adapted this slightly to try and develop our understanding of 'what' stories are as organisational vehicles, 'why' storytelling is an organisational process, and the role of individual narratives and perspectives. We have chosen to describe narratives as oral, the 'voice' of the organisation, with an intentional emphasis on the need to be heard.

Story – the container, including choice of plot, characters, language by which multiple perspectives, experiences and insights are drawn into one vehicle which communicates truthfully (while not always using the exact truth) in a way which creates a shared sense or common understanding.

Storytelling – the process of elicitation, iteration and negotiation which creates the story.

Narratives – ('voice') the individual perspectives which can be generalised while maintaining the uniqueness and integrity of personal and individual experience.

The Doctor's Tale

An associate who supports the work of Sparknow when he is 'outside' his organisational structure is an anaesthetist when he is 'inside it'. But even when he is 'inside' he is often in between. As part of his work programme he must travel from hospital to hospital working with different teams, much as a travelling journeyman did in his apprenticeship before he settled down.[1] It is only later in his career, as he grows more senior and assumes a position as a consultant (master craftsman), that he will travel less and become attached to a single hospital set within the whole health system.

In his travels so far he has noticed an extraordinary and pointless proliferation of types of equipment, protocols and work procedures. He and his network of anaesthetists share their insights about these absurdities in the pub, through email, text messages, on the phone, in the canteen between shifts. They have not only identified a hugely expensive drain on a system which is already starved of resources but are also in a position to pass on the know how of good practice from recent work experience with other teams in other hospitals. Why do they not do this systematically? There seem to be two main reasons:

- Their observations as newcomers to the local team and culture are not always welcome. As incomers, newly arrived travellers, and temporary team members, they must wait to be invited to share what they know, or judge the climate and openness of the team they are passing through to hear what they have to say, and

- The administrators, managers and consultants at the hospitals, or in the whole health system, have not noticed, and do not use, this massive source of collective knowledge and insight, or perhaps are unwilling to unleash its power (presumably sensing a Pandora's box of truthful flows of information and knowledge as opposed to the managed indicators and measures which they use to defend their local unit's reputation and funding.)

This lost opportunity is no more than an extreme illustration of a more general organisational paradox. Agents of change are rarely at the centre of power, normally they are at the periphery. They come from the outside or hover near the edge, constantly refreshing their ability to channel experiences and insights from the outside. Or they mount a challenge from the outside which is not used to regenerate the knowledge and intellectual capital inside the organisation. More often insiders respond as though these individuals are a threat, and treat them with fear, contempt or disinterest.

Our starting point – perceptions of the theory and practice of knowledge management

Visible and invisible structures
The explosion of activity in the theory and practice of knowledge management over several years is our starting point. Knowledge management as the lens through which to view the organisation has the merit of seeing both the visible ('explicit', formal) and the invisible structures ('tacit', informal) as part of an integrated whole.[2] It consciously invests in the human and social capital which make both continuity and change possible. Knowledge management is a model that points to storytelling as a powerful organisational process.

Conversation is work
There is growing recognition that sharing knowledge is essentially a social activity, that knowledge has a social life and so operates beyond the formal organisational structures – in the networks, communities and affinity groups. Organisations are developed only through continuous discourse[3] which leads to the exchange of experiences,

perceptions and interpretations with the consequence both that a collective identity is formed and that shared understanding ('sensemaking'[4]) evolves.

Informal structures are more effective than formal ones and need to operate at the periphery
Knowledge work gets done primarily through the bonds of formal and informal networks, and the roles of individual protagonists in them. These are rarely visible through formal maps of the organisation such as structure charts or directories. Apparently peripheral (and often marginal) channels, people and structures dare to question hierarchies and transgress organisational or defensive barriers and boundaries. (These may grow from the politics of organisational structure, through geographical distance or because of the schisms and misunderstandings which divide organisations at times of change, e.g. merger.) Being peripheral is what makes them effective.

Knowledge stays with the knower
It is generally acknowledged that most knowledge stays embodied – that is to say that the experiences, insights, memories and judgements cannot easily or appropriately be extracted from the bearer (think of a potter, an expert witness, a surgeon). Thus most knowledge is uncodifiable, only pertinent at a moment in time, remains tacit, and should do so (unlike information, which can be canned into databases, papers, lists, guidelines). This presents organisations with a major challenge. Even where people can, and are willing to, substitute for each other in organisations, this is at best approximate, or takes dedicated effort, prompting, and intimacy (shared experience, proximity, conversation). This normally only happens where one individual has no wish to see themselves, or another, put at risk (like one anaesthetist handing over a list to another).

Vivid words are needed to articulate the intangible
Weick talks of the importance of rich language, image and multiple approaches:

> *Vivid words draw attention to new possibilities suggesting that organisations with access to more varied images will engage in sensemaking that is more adaptive than will organisations with more limited vocabulary.*[5]

The normal official languages of the organisation (rules, manuals, processes, planning papers, reports) cannot serve well to make the invisible visible. A growing body of theory and practice in knowledge management, starting with Nonaka and Takeuchi, reinforces the role of metaphor, and careful choice of language as ways by which the organisations needs to see and describe these hidden histories and human dimensions. To quote from a recent email exchange:

> *Metaphors are powerful figurative expressions in which words or phrases are shifted from their normal use to a context in which they evoke new meanings. They are used in poetry to transport the reader into a different mental space, so allowing them to inhabit a multiplicity of spaces. Metaphors are also a kind of connective tissue in a poem, between the poet and the reader's own rich imagination, opening up a number of pathways into fantasy, and depths of meaning. [...] Exploring metaphor enables organisations and individuals to examine all the possibilities of their workspaces and turn concepts into reality, it can be an illuminating medium for change. The choice of language (metaphor) in our experience deeply affects the possible outcomes.*[6]

The relevance of invisible structures in the modern organisation

Emerging patterns which link knowledge management, organisational structure and storytelling
'Why here?' 'Why now?' What is different about the modern organisation? Three recurring patterns typify some of the links between knowledge management in general, and organisational structures today and tomorrow.

1. There is reversal of traditional flows of power, information and knowledge. In the new environment an organisation must become 'knowing' – of its people, their anecdotes, experiences and shared stories, fantasies and frustrations, as well as of its products, processes and systems. With this comes a shift in emphasis from information to knowledge, i.e. from the collection of essentially inert data to the dynamic use and analysis of information, which leads to knowledge. There also is increasing demand, expressed through direct action, that organisations manifest integrity of economic and social ambitions.[7] This leads to a reverse dependence, evidenced by the growing disinclination of individuals to sign up, whether as consumers or workers to organisations who are ambiguous in handling their license to operate.

2. 'Inside' and 'outside'. The intended and unexpected impacts and limitations of new media combine with more dispersed global activities to change activities and communications inside, outside and between organisations, indeed to change the nature of 'inside' and 'outside'. Miller and Slater in their ethnographic account of the impact of the internet on Trinidadian society, point out that for individuals, the consequence is that

> *'[people operate] within networks that transcend their immediate location, placing them in wider flows of cultural, political and economic resources'.[8]*

For organisations, the changed boundaries of nations, technologies and markets and the global/local tensions increase the need for thoughtfulness in considering different cultures, identities, languages and abilities in the official conversations of the organisation.

3. Transience undermines trust and reduces risktaking. As Sennett puts it:

> *The short term time frame of modern institutions limits the ripening of informal trust.[9]*

There is an increasing dislocation between the values and ambition of the organisation and of the individuals who travel through it (for shorter and shorter stays 'inside' and longer journeys 'outside' the boundaries of the organisation), or participate in temporary teams or projects. Reduced trust leads to an increased sense of risk, and so to a greater need for self preservation.[10]

New models, weaving in old ways

These patterns are all reflected in the experimental new models of organisation, hybrids which

- Often draw on very old ways of working, as we have mentioned (such as guilds, apprenticeship, cooperative structures, membership models), as well as
- Responding to very new forms of business structure (dotcom structures, outsourcing, new forms of complex partnership across public and private sectors).

In such structures, the patterns of stories at the individual level (narratives) become visibly connected with the overall story.[11] We suggest that embryonic business models of the 21st century will grow increasingly dependent on responding to, and weaving together, individual patterns into a different organisational fabric, of which story will be an essential vehicle and storytelling a necessary process.

The rise in stories as visible containers of invisible organisational knowledge

In the nineteenth century invented stories were used as a way to give news about changing society, or describe mental states, insights which could not easily be shared through other literary forms such as essays or poetry.[12] Walter Benjamin, writing in between the two World Wars of the last century, describes the impoverished exchange of experience of that era.[13] He points to the degradation of individual voice on the battlefield of the First World War and the diminished ability to communicate experience. The rise of information, mainly through the press, was incompatible with story; with its claim to verifiability and immediate relevance it suppresses storytelling which tries to stay clear of explanation, leaving interpretation to the reader or listener.

Today's organisations are witnessing a rise in stories as carriers of knowledge. These are particularly tapped into by employees who consider themselves powerless victims at the hands of a passionless corporate entity. Discontent, defiance, emotion, repressed beliefs etc are channelled and surfaced through narratives of transgression. Some employees share stories as a means of survival within the corporate structure; others use stories to create a space for themselves from which they can challenge, threaten, criticise and warn the dominant organisational power structure or bring to the surface accounts of management neglect or lapses.

The most effective stories are emotional journeys of fear mixed with curiosity, often containing elements of surprise and mystery which interrupt current thinking patterns, release frustration and encourage celebration. Weick stresses that stories are critical to sensemaking, and underlines the importance of interruption (shock) as a way of drawing attention to patterns which are important[14]. Stories can express traumas and bring out hostility, unlock experiences and engage both the teller and the listener much more closely with the values of an organisation than any official communication might do:

> *Content that is rich in dynamics, process, imagery, verbs, possibilities and unfolding narratives represents flows more accurately that does content dominated by static's, structures, nouns, lists.[15]*

Narratives as a way to view individuals in their relationship with organisations
The rest of this essay is devoted to examining narratives as a part of the fabric of official and unofficial stories which make up the organisation. Narrative is the sequence which moves the story from A to B (the 'flow', in Weick's terms). Narrative also implies a performance, or two-way, element. What is important is not only the message – whether destructive or constructive but also the way it is conveyed and received by others, the motives underlying the telling, or acting out, and the assumptions about who is receiving them (a faceless organisation, fellow travellers, people with the same interests etc.). Narrative is the binding element between story and it being sent/received.

We have chosen to make an exaggerated distinction between narrative and story, so as to inform the broader theme of knowledge management as storytelling. Our working definition of narrative emphasises individuality, the voice and perspective of the individual, which can be generalised while maintaining the uniqueness and integrity of personal experience.

We have taken three different types of character or identity which we believe may be useful ciphers for typical (perhaps, hesitantly, we might say archetypal) narratives of individuals in their relationships with the modern organisation. We have chosen these through a combination of personal interest and case study experience and do not pretend that these narrative types present a comprehensive picture – more fragments we have explored and believe are linked and illuminating. These are

- The Hacker – warrior of the new techno-territory
- The Chatter – playful communicator or fictitious personality?
- The Nomad – the traveller who helps the organisation to hear its narratives and construct stories to act on

'Inside' and 'outside' and the impact of a digital environment.
The first two of our three characters, the Hacker and the Chatter, are, strictly speaking located outside the organisational boundaries (i.e. beyond the modern organisation we have chosen as our setting) but demonstrate new types of collaboration, communication or subversion. The third, the Nomad, often only has a temporary association with the organisation, and might be described as an outsider on the inside, one whose self-sufficiency and mobility is increased by a digital environment.

Internet-based communities of interest and practice with their shifting alliances and multiple stories raise the question of how the nature of the organisation has changed with globalisation. Given the shifts in the modern organisation as to what constitutes 'inside' or 'outside', and the importance of being at the periphery, and of transgression in our whole theme, it seems reasonable to explore the narratives of outsiders.

Technology, alienation and alternative narratives
The contemporary organisation, particularly the global one, deploys technology on a widespread basis. As a delivery channel, technology quickly presents the employee with information and knowledge, ostensibly of value to carrying out the task at hand. This technology-first approach to knowledge assumes that all employees enjoy its use, know how to manipulate its features and feel comfortable with it as a vehicle through which accurate, unbiased information of the organisation is diffused and shared. But, people and society are increasingly being overwhelmed by an avalanche of information, and find it hard to make sense of things.

As a defence against alienation, employees, both in their professional and private lives, are increasingly scripting an alternative narrative. One which seeks to battle the organisation's attempts at homogeneity and "sameness".
Organisational stories, as told through manuals and procedures, are challenged by private emails telling of the way an employee was mistreated or by an employee, outside working hours, finding empowerment through computer hacking or participating in chatrooms.

Voice, empowerment and control issues in the digital world
The internet is an alternative world which functions as a subculture to mainstream society, even though organisations have tried to seize the internet as their domain for official transaction and exchange. The technology which has created the internet has affected our experience of how we move through space and time, and our experiential grounding**.**

While the organisation relies heavily on the computer to maintain its formal communication channels, digitise its corporate memory and explicitly tell the company story via policies and procedures, the PC at the employee's desk stands as a silent sentinel – a powerful, yet almost unsuspected, gateway into a virtual world where unconscious fantasies and real life fantasies can be reclaimed and played out. Virtual communication has the power to unleash the individual voice – employees can communicate feedback on issues, thoughts on strategy or company policy etc. Often this is done via private email channels between disaffected colleagues and these informal channels create a subculture – a subculture where the individual voice is trying to reclaim its passion and authentic expression.

This is the paradox – the organisation believes that the hegemony of the corporate computer network offers one way communication, from the organisation to the homogenous employee, safely ensconced in the work cubicle. This one way communication tells the corporate story. But the same computer network has the power to be the company's downfall. The employees' PC sits on the desk inviting the employee to 'play with me'.

Individual reclamation of voice starts to be expressed in the mid to late nineties (in parallel with the emergence of knowledge management as a model) when employees started to play; with screensavers, wallpaper, mousemats, greetings and signatures, cyberpets, identities and genders, language, chat.[16]

Technology and fluid identities
The employee at work and in the personal domain of home can be immersed in virtual worlds, can become an architect of desire, can sculpt alternative realities, can take on and explore the use of many voices. The attraction of cyberspace has almost religious connotations – anyone can enter technological heaven, as long as you have the technology. You are not denied entry because you represent a minor religion or hold deviant or antisocial views. Cyberspace is seductive because of its non-hierarchical space, because loneliness can be replaced by joining in

conversations with people you may never meet, because your gender can be hidden and indeed explored and manipulated.

A person can feel very special when in cyberspace. "Real Life" concerns and relationships seem less real. Voice can be volunteered, not artificially forced. You can participate in cyberspace when and how you wish, unlike the voice in a corporation. The joy is in trangression, in disturbing the order of things for the sake of disturbing it, and is an act of individualism often exaggerated by the sense that this is so unlike what happens in the formal environments of work.

On the internet, an individual can reclaim voice in two ways – by becoming a hacker or by participating in live chat. Both forms of participation result in quite different narratives and voices.

The Hacker – warrior of the new techno-territory

> *A person who enjoys exploring the details of programmable system and how to stretch their capabilities….A malicious meddler who tries to discover sensitive information by poking around.*[17]

Hackers and hippies

The virtual, hidden world is creating its own e-legends which centre on the Hacker, and these legends and stories are piercing the organisational fabric.The Hacker is becoming an archetype – an alienated warrior possessed of almost supernatural powers. The Hacker resides in what often seems to the physical body a distant, disembodied source which radiates powers. These powers threaten the innocent PC owner who is cast as victim, helplessly prone to the random computer viruses generated by the rogue hacker.

Myths around hoaxes, viruses and hackers are symptomatic of a society in transition – a society that is gaining a stronger sense of community through being technologically interconnected, yet a society which has a new sense of alienation and vulnerability because the very same technology is beyond the everyday PC users' control.

Whilst helping to build the internet, the Hacker is simultaneously tearing down its architecture. Hackers can be compared with the 'hippies' of the 1960s – groups of people collected around the fantasy of lashing out at 'the establishment' and the greedy, ivory towered corporations.

Every generation can be characterised, not only by its defining features and fashions, but by the alternatives to the mainstream that it produces. For the internet generation, hackers and hacking represent the use of a voice which re-empowers. Unlike the hippies in the 1960s, most hackers are devoid of philosophical intention – they do what they do because they can master the technology, and because they enjoy the sense of power that is created by subversively taking control of something that is owned by someone else.

But another type of Hacker loves the computer not just for what it can do and the hours of entertainment it can provide, but for its absolute honesty and infinite patience. Legitimate, law abiding hackers can trace their spiritual ancestry to US universities, especially MIT and Stanford, in the 60s – universities which fundamentally helped create the computer revolution.

Hackers form an hermetic, almost subterranean elite. They are usually well educated males roaming a largely male world.Illuminated by the dim glow of the computer screen, working by night, a relationship between man and machine. The Hacker voice is therefore relegated to a fragile underground – hackers are contemptuous of the average PC user, they hero worship amongst themselves and dream of techno utopianism where the hacker is supreme. They cannot afford to make their voice public or understood by the "ignorant" PC user, because that would mean revealing unsavoury, often unlawful activities which could lead to arrest and public scorn.

The Hacker's joy is in a 'virtuoso, playful performance,'[18] his sense of self in understanding and outwitting big organisations and in recognition by the shifting, web-based communities through which he builds and shares his knowledge.   One of the challenges of the modern organisation is to find ways of acknowledging the Hacker, his well-informed subversion and playfulness in using cyberspace as playground for new narratives and the disruption of old ones.

The Chatter – playful communicator or fictitious personality?

Life and voice of the chatter: deception and dynamics in the virtual world

The cyber Chatter also has historical roots, anchored in freedom of speech and democratic rights and principles. The voice of the Chatter is an anonymous one. Chatters often use pseudonyms or screen names (known as "handles") which mask their gender, or take on a persona the real chatter can only fantasise about.

The voice of the Chatter is fraught with psychological overtones. Unlike the Hacker who is either noble or malicious, the Chatter can take on a number of identities and the multiplicity of these voices and identities causes us to question whether cyberchatters are authentic in their expression and voice.

The voice of the Chatter does not exist within a multidimensional, real world. Cyberspace almost forces the individual into seclusion and the user is left dealing with an abstract world, comprising abstract communities where your senses are not satisfied by physical contact. Constructed personalities, constructed voices, constructed identities come to stand for the real and the trusted.

Yet, the virtual world also extends our sense of place beyond our immediate perspective. Place ceases to be determined by geography or time, and becomes the topic under discussion. The click of a mouse can take the Chatter from one simulated experience to an entirely different one. Fundamental distinctions between reality and its representation are becoming increasingly evident, perhaps reflective of the postmodern world, and the Chatter is caught up in the fluctuating distinction.

Embodied voices become disembodied voices in cyberspace. This is plausibly even more so in chatrooms which can be likened to bars where singles and couples drop in for a drink. Unlike virtual, graphical worlds a user can move through, the Chatter is anchored in a text based dimension, communicating through narrative, engaged in playing with the compression, anonymity and immediacy of the medium. Experientially, a chatroom offers a community within which you can become a core participant and build relationships, or a transient dimension which you pass through on your way to finding your voice.

To what extent the Chatter voice is an imaginary one is an interesting concept. The Chatter can role play, speak with the other genders' voice, indulge in sexual banter that may be titillating in cyberspace, but disagreeable to the Real Life chatter, and confess fantasies, desires, and wishes to strangers.

The Chatter exists inside the organisation as well as outside it, although usually less overtly, and may assume different identities which challenge the ethics and permissions of the organisations. How can the democratic principles of chatter, and the experiments of the Chatter with identity, narrative and authentication of experience in cyberspace, be used positively to develop playful and joyful uses of technology to communicate inside the organisation?

The Nomad –travellers who help an organisation hear its narratives and construct stories to act on

Finally, there is the traveller or Nomad, a key protagonist in the modern organisational structure.

The Nomad as storyteller and a carrier of news?

We imagine the storyteller either as someone who has come from afar bringing back tales of unfamiliar customs and places or as the person who knows the local tales and traditions.[19] In either case, however, much of the success of their stories is down to the authority of the teller and the receiver's willingness to listen.

There is a conflict between the opportunity of the Nomad, as outsider, to bring new stories from his travels, and the fact that a temporary stay may mean he is unwilling to challenge the power structures of the organisation he is passing through, or the organisation is disinclined to listen.

The Doctor's Tale at the beginning illustrates the institutional perspective – knowledge assets generated by travellers across organisational borders go to waste as they go unnoticed. What about the individual perspective? What are the other consequences of a world where you carry your narratives, crafted into a presentable story of who you are and what you do with you from one organisation to another? Business Week Europe (August 2000) in a special edition on the corporation of the 21st century described the Nomad of new organisational structure as analogous to the blacksmith who carried his trade from village green to village green. Gabriel (who also describes the organisational researcher as a 'fellow traveller') writes of stories as spaces where all kinds of organisational controls are evaded, dodged or side stepped.[20] They test and retest the boundaries of the organisation. What kinds of questions does this raise? For example:

- What is the impact of this on truthfulness – does the need to perform threaten the truthfulness of the story you tell? Does the Nomad invest energy in constructing and presenting a plausible and economically advantageous identity at the expense of a more honest version?

- Does the temporariness of the Nomad's stay increase the chances that he is a casual reinforcer of the status quo?

- Does the need to maintain and refresh the Nomad's own portfolio of experiences (individual capital?) lead to a kind of plundering at the expense of the organisation's social, human and intellectual capital?

- What are the organisational conditions which would encourage greater mutuality of interest between individual and institution?

- Or, if Gabriel is right, and stories are about **sidestepping** organisational control, does it become impossible to use the testing and retesting of boundaries as an act which **strengthens** the organisation? Are the interests of the individual and the institution incompatible?

We would like to summarise these questions by suggesting that the coalition of interests between institution and individual will constantly be uneasy, with risk of abuse on both sides. At the same time, it is not impossible to forge new kinds of relationships, through stories which act as organisational vehicles of challenge, change and communication, while maintaining their integrity of the individual perspective.

Narrative and stories can serve as a visible bridge or channel to connect individuals, through networks, to organisations, in a productive way, and can provide a way to integrate the Nomad temporarily whilst honouring his perspective as outsider. To illustrate our point, we will conclude with a case study of Sparknow work in which we deliberately used conscious 'transgression' of 'the red boundary' to 'disturb something of the incomplete order of things'.[21] We used storytelling and reincorporation of individual narratives (voices) into an organisational story to make visible patterns, which once visible could then be shifted, mindful of the need to protect uniqueness when generalising.[22]

'The Missing Links'

'The Missing Links' is a story which was commissioned in the second phase of a piece of knowledge management strategy work with a government agency.

The brief for the first phase of the work was to develop a knowledge management strategy and implementation plan, and for this Sparknow was asked to work with another consultancy with specialist expertise in setting up the technologies for Learning Networks. During the investigative phase the two consultancies worked to Sparknow interviewing methodology. We found narratives which formed a story of great passion and commitment, coupled with resistance, individualism and frustration.

We had set out to play this story back to the client in negotiated conversations, engaging them in listening, reflection and action, but were drawn by the client into writing reports. This we did reluctantly, but stayed determined to reflect back the patterns in what we had heard, if not in form of a story, at least in vivid language.[23] We hoped this would surprise, interrupt their expectations, engage them and shift them from thinking the strategy was something which would be done to them, to understanding it was something they all had to do to themselves. Rather than a report, we decided it should have the quality of a Responsibility Record as proposed by Brand (1999), a way of fostering *'slow direct feedback-loops in policy'*.[19]

Even so, we felt dissatisfied at a sense of incompleteness, of insufficient disturbance of the order of things. We were invited to work again with the knowledge management team to develop a presentation for the annual staff conference. The first reports, taped and transcribed interviews, other interviews and events were the raw materials for a more archetypal story to engage the several hundred staff who would be attending the conference, and make possible the listening and action which the knowledge management team needed from across the agency.

> *This is not one story, but more than a thousand. It is not about one person, but several hundred. It is not set in one place, but everywhere. It is a story about the links between people who care.*

What then follows is made up of four episodes, which are also narratives - that of the Chief Executive, that of a pair engaged in trying to get attention for a new initiative, that of the head of knowledge management, and that of the individuals invited to join the group being formed as the knowledge management steering group. Each narrative has unique emotions, frustrations and achievements crystallised in such a way that the individuals are recognisable, the integrity of the narratives is preserved, but the whole story is communicated in such a way as to engage both individual listening and collective action.

> *The day of the meeting dawned cold and wet. Mosquito and the Great Bear, with one half of the Pushmepullyou in atttendance, extended an invitation and asked for contributions from the Steering Committee to build on their Knowledge Management vision for the Clan. ...That invitation is now extended to every one of you today. This is a story with no end. An ever evolving that that cannot evolve with you. You are invited to take this opportunity to help find the missing links.*

Both Carol, the storyteller who wrote and performed the story, and the client who commissioned it, reported back a sense of joy and recognition amongst the participant of the conference which led to a dramatically increased energy in committing to the knowledge management strategy in the workshops that followed. That their first exposure to it was oral, Carol as the teller, the audience as the listeners, is also consistent with our views of the importance of the spoken over the written word in knowledge management.

In this instance we were able to work with the client as outsiders, able to introduce a travelling storyteller to draw together the threads. From the perspective of the Consultant-as-Nomad, it is unusual to be given so much permission.

Conclusions – storytelling is knowledge management

People think and act narratively. Weick points out that this is an important insight for organisational theorists, as most models of organisations are based on conflict through argument rather than knowledge shared through narration.[25] The authors of this paper subscribe to the importance of paying attention to the implicit, particularly through the use of stories, storytelling and narratives as ways of viewing the implicit or hidden histories, and of maintaining the integrity of multiple perspectives inherent in individual narratives which form an organisational story.

There is, we have proposed, a tension in the use of storytelling as an organisational tool:

- Storytelling can be deployed as a technique or strategy to 'harness' the energy of resistance and transgression for the benefits of the organisation and joy of workers, but/and

- Using voice/narrative to promote constructive anarchy and individual expression may challenge organisational structures and increase disturbance, unease and volatility at times of change, so increasing the leadership vulnerability

It is possible that this tension leads to irreconcilable differences in the needs and wants of individuals and the organisations they pass through, or challenge. The conscious use of storytelling-as-an-organisational-process makes this explicit, although this tension is always there anyway, implicit in the identity, purpose, structures, methods and processes of the organisation. The challenge is twofold:

- Both to use storytelling to amplify the voice of unease, uncertainty and individual narrative, and

- To do so in such a way that does not just become another sanitised explicit process which triggers another layer of implicit insurgence against the ruling or explicit structures.

Important questions are raised questions about truthfulness, identity, purpose and identification with a larger story. These need conversation.

The role of the story, and the perceptions, narratives and identities of the teller, particularly of the Nomad who passes through organisations on his travels, the Hacker who challenges organisations from a basis of deep knowledge, and the Chatter who plays with the fluid identities afforded by the internet, are critical in 'disturbing the incomplete order of things' as Ben Okri describes it in one of our opening quotes, and will become a major force in the organisation of the 21st century.

A note on our method (Epilogue)

The authors have chosen to fuse their narratives, stories and experiences in this, their first joint endeavour. They have never worked together, met or spoken. Correspondence has been entirely through email, and generally in the margins, not the mainstream, of the working day (and night). Nor have they chosen actively to impose structure and purpose at the expense of individual reflection or perspective. If, through the fabric of what is presented, it is clear that there are 2 distinct styles, experiences and points of view, this is an accurate reflection of our chosen working method. It is consistent with our main point, which is that the inconsistencies and challenges of the implicit need to be favoured over the explicit, even if this makes for friction.

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