

New Contexts, New Narratives and New PRs

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Abstract

We live in a world of abundance and excess. Those are liquid, fragmented, dynamic and confused times, where we are exposed constantly to a great diversity of contents which are bombarded at us by various media, traditional and digital. In this age of uncertainty, we have a great feeling of empty, caused by an absence of those narratives that could be able to affect and transform us. The way that we are in and we feel the world is changing. Those changes require a new thinking by organizations and PR professionals whom still see communication as a technical-information process. This excessive and forceful character associated to communication impairs attention and retention of contents, which may lead to a communication that may not make sense for the public and much less generate an action on their part. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is a theoretical proposition on redefining the look of PR professionals in these new times. These reflections are part of a research conducted by the Group at Studies of New Narratives at the School of Communications and Arts of the University of São Paulo (Brazil), who understand that new contexts require new PR professional profiles to create new narratives consistent with our time, with new technologies and new ways of feeling and being in the world.

Keywords: organizational communication; public relations; new contexts; new narratives; storytelling; micro narratives; organizational memory and history.

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Reflections based on the optics of a digital, fluid, random, rational excessive context that is exposed demonstrate that there is no space in today's organizations for traditions, deep experiences, myths, stories and affection. The absence of these foci leads some organizations to present narratives that age in view of new contexts and therefore it is necessary to discuss new communication strategies – new narratives – in organizational communication and, above all, a new profile of PR professionals.

New Contexts

Nassar (2013) characterizes our informational society as producing social paralysis upon contextualizing the excess of communication in our society and adapting the concepts of hypnosis and numbing of the senses from contemporary media overstimulation introduced by McLuhan (1964). In other words, the excessive information about individuals leads us to be living a life without history or geography, thus distancing us from our personal and social memories and resulting in a context where identities are absent and current narratives cannot be sustained or communicated¹¹ (NASSAR, 2013).

The current context suppressed the wealth of profound experiences and, as a result, the way of creating, receiving and above all, feeling communication. People and organizations are saturated with information, weakened in terms of experiences and in need of feelings and affection. To Larrosa-Bondía (2002), experience is what happens to us, what takes place in our lives and what touches us. However, in view of this context of information overload, many, many things take place in our lives and barely anything touches or affects us on a deep level.

Larrosa-Bondía's text features important points about the weakening of experiences, reflections on a context where people have no time, mainly for speaking and listening, in other words for communicating. Individuals are more concerned with being informers and informed than being willing to cultivate the art of meeting; they are less prepared to affect and be affected and less willing to make space and time for experiences:

Experience, the possibility that something will happen or touch us requires a gesture of interruption, a gesture that is almost impossible in today's world; it requires stopping to think, stopping to listen, thinking more slowly, seeing more unhurriedly, and listening more steadily; stopping to feel, feeling at a slower pace, lingering on details, delaying opinion, holding off on judgment, postponing will, interrupting the automatism of action, cultivating attention and delicacy, opening eyes and ears, talking about what is happening to us, learning slowness, listening to others, cultivating the art of meeting, keeping silent often, becoming patient and opening space and time (LARROSA-BONDÍA, 2002, p. 24).

When claiming about the impoverishment of experiences before a dynamic and uninterrupted world, the author is especially talking to us about the weakening of relationships, that is, the absence of time and space for affection between people, changes in feeling and communication. Memory does not have the time to undergo profound experiences. Today there is neither space for sustainable and long-lasting relationships, nor for valuing the individual as these have been replaced by mediated and trade relations. Now, emotions have given rise to the rational mode of being, communication has lost ground to simple information and building relationships has taken on new forms and meanings.

¹¹ (Verbal information). Discussion brought up by Prof. Dr. Paulo Nassar during a meeting of the Grupo de Estudos de Novas Narrativas, Escola de Comunicações e Artes da Universidade de São Paulo, on February 27, 2013.

What occurs in the context of abundant information, speed and ephemerality is a constant movement towards disenchantment, since the magic that touches the being grows weak and feeble in the face of new stimuli that rapidly replace them. Currently, concerns are about an individual who is served by new technology and new ways of being and interacting in the world, about an individual who is served by a multitude of symbolic choices, by abundance and automation (PINK, 2007). We are living at a time of weakening experiences, of diffuse attention and little affection, of speed, ephemerality and ambiguity.

To Benjamin, this poverty of experience reflects sad men who are dispirited, tired and lacking energy, because they do not concentrate all of their thoughts into simple and grand plans to be achieved one day, instead, they devour everything, all information, all “culture,” and remain sated and exhausted (BENJAMIN, 1986, p.118).

Benjamin draws a picture of modernity through Baudelaire (GATTI, 2008), writing about the transitory nature of things, of a fleeting moment, of a world of rapid and transient visions, of magical instances that disappear rapidly. This new view also suggests a new way of perceiving the world such that man disconnects from his memory and lives in a state of shock in the present, his awareness connected to the everyday and not to facts. Man is no longer immersed in his subjectivity, thus generating change in the creation of memories and, consequently a crisis in narratives.

This thought serves as the basis for Sennett (2010) to address the question “How can a human being develop a narrative from an identity and life history made up of fragmented episodes?” (SENNETT, 2010, p.27). And it is precisely on this point that PR must also be considered according to this dynamic context of constant restructuring, where the long-term is not desired, thus encumbering dialogues and relationships where communications also become disenchanting and objective, in other words, neither affective, nor effective.

A context that is fragmented, abundant and constantly exposed to insignificant messages, lacking enchantment, and rapidly made commonplace, rarely achieve a level deep enough for exchanging and engaging. Communication channels and content producers change, since they are already uncomplaining about the industrial pace of at which messages are produced in large machines for producing emptiness.

Emptiness, the product of the absence of an affective narrative in communication, in other words, the absence of a vision that implies the ideas, practices, habits, and dreams of people who make up an organization (BOFF, 2012). Narrative is what enables explaining origins, evolutions and purposes, whether they belong to the individual’s personal or professional life, to his/her stories, of his/her place as a human being in the world, even in the organizational world.

This all means that the speed of the changes, the uncontrollable recording of life out of fear of losing the present, the weakening of personal relationships, the information overload, and the multitude of symbolic choices made possible by digital technology and social networks, by the complex and ephemeral world and the mass production of messages fired off on all media have disturbed our sight, as if it were covered by a constant cloud, undifferentiated and insensitive. Blindness about inexistent communication.

In order to exist, PR must understand this new way of feeling the world, and based on this understanding, be differentiated. It requires a view that can interrupt the continuum and change it into discontinuity, diversification, explanation, representation. It needs to be able to create really profound experiences that stir emotions, where subjectivity surpasses objectivity and rationality.

Otherwise, public relations simply create make-believe communication, where the main

roles are filled by content with no identity and the main scenes dissolution of meaning and the violence unleashed on affection, so that “information is increasingly invaded by this type of ghost content, of homeopathic transplant, of sleep awakened by communication” (BAUDRILLARD, 1981, p. 105). And it is precisely because of this new context that we must conceive new narratives.

New Narratives

From a theoretical and practical point of view of PRs, we live in a phase where we must seek new paradigms to base communication strategies on so that they can be effective. Considering all the points addressed up to this point, we can bet upon the development of the so-called “narrative paradigm” for the re-enchantment of PRs.

By appropriating these concepts, we can consider “narrative” as a differential for the professional in PR, not just from the perspective that he/she is considered a story-teller, or an analyst and interpreter of narrations about the organization, but also, in a broader sense, as a spokesperson of discourses, whether it be for transmitting ideas, concepts, the attributes of a product, of a service or brand, or to impart stories, memories, traditions, beliefs, values, myths, organizational rites and rituals, which build the reality of the company, its narrative reality.

Cogo (2012, p.80), in conformity with this thinking, reveals that narrations are what enable the liberation of opinions, feelings and intentions, the production of meaning for its world, as well as the organizational influence in this definition. This shows that human beings need to have symbols to help them understand and interpret the world (SNUNWOLF, 2005, p.305) and that these symbols, lost in post modernity, can be recovered, can be recovered by the stories told and the discourses upheld by public relations and by the those involved in organizational narrating.

Reviving fascination for the world, organizational communication and the PRs is therefore reflected in this new paradigm, in the construction of new narratives, which are capable of “serving as a bridge to connect the different dimensions and conspire to recover meanings, which make people more human, honest, solidary, tolerant, compassionate and able to be one with themselves and with others.” (BUSSATO, 2006, p.12). These are ideas that are connected to the emotions, set aside by organizations in a rational world:

If facts are easily and greatly available, they lose some of their worth. What starts to become more important is the ability to weave these elements into a coherent whole – attaining not just the *context*, but the *emotional impact*, as well. [...] And that is the essence of the capability of stories – context enriched by emotion (PINK, 2007, p.100).

The new narratives of PRs founded on this so-called narrative paradigm need to seek this appearance of human awareness, sharing a community of purposes, which are able to create identification, engagement and an organizational culture that is reconstructed with human values, symbols, stories, heroes, myths, rites, rituals, styles, metaphors revealed at that exact moment experienced by the people of the organization (MARCHIORI, 2009).

Focused on humanization and its values, these narratives should be able to overcome subjectivities, as well as respect for audiences. One must know how to analyze and work with contexts to create space for dialogues and relationships (OLIVEIRA, 2009) where the feelings and dreams of the individuals can flow freely, providing a space for participating, sharing ideas, discussing and co-creating the new world.

To Nassar (2007), in a world in which everything rapidly becomes banal due to mass production, information bombardment and scattered attention, a differentiation that emerges through the history of an organization with its personnel, as well as of those people with the

organization, is an attribute that few organizations still possess. In this context, a Danish researcher, Jensen (2006 apud NASSAR, 2007, p.186) believes in the trend of a society in the near future, where consumption will have to be a lot more emotional than rational. And companies will have to connect their values and history to their products if they want to win the hearts of their clients.

It is upon this backdrop that Pink (2007) reveals the fact that we are no longer an economy and society “based on logical, linear, cold and objective abilities of the information age transitioning to [...] the creative, empathetic and systemic abilities – the conceptual age” (PINK, 2007, p.1). In order for this to happen, this author points to the development of capabilities related to issues about new ways of transmitting messages, which are narrated for the purpose of being personally gratifying and especially emotional, connected to subjectivity, yearning and affective memories.

He believes that logic and rationality are not ideal in this new context, “limiting oneself to the appeal of the rational, logical and functional needs is vociferously insufficient.” (PINK, 2007, p.33) in this new conceptual age. New narratives must understand behavior, establish relationships and be concerned about people lightly and humorously, understanding their aspirations and seeking interaction and the sharing of their ideas.

The author also makes a statement about the importance of constructing meaning, in the transcendence, to reach the essence of life – unattainable values – those that are not possible through information but rather, through communication and sharing of those who, in fact are relevant and create an identity for the audiences of interest to the organization. Society increasingly seeks more values, such as: simplicity, instead of complexity and overloading; creativity instead of standardizing and human humanizing against mechanization; time and space so that affective narratives can be interesting stories, which reconcile integration and participation to overcome hollow meanings.

To Pink (2007), the old narratives would be exactly those connected to a society of excess and abundance, which he conceives as being developed upon High-Tec abilities, that is, objective, logical and rational needs. What he believes is that these narratives no longer work with people nowadays, who need narratives developed upon two other abilities connected to the emotional and the creation of feelings, empathic and comprehensive links: *high concept* and *high touch*.

High concept is the ability to create artistic and emotional beauty, of perceiving patterns and opportunities, of conceiving interesting narratives and joining apparently disconnected ideas in order to create something new. *High touch* is the ability to create empathic connections, understand the subtleties of human interactions, find joy and provoke it in others, and look beyond the surface in search of purpose and meaning. (PINK, 2007, p.48)

These concepts can be considered to be the foundations for new narratives. This can also be associated to a new “way of being present, in which the imaginary, the oneiric, the playful, rightly, occupy a fundamental space” (MAFFESOLI, 2010, p.27) and can create narratives that are able to affect, change and inspire.

Micro narratives

In “The Postmodern Condition,” Lyotard (1989) points out the changes suffered by narratives in post modernity. In modernity, the great narratives had a significant power in people’s lives, they gave meaning to the past, present and future of humanity. Plots promised a positive view of the individual in relation to society, with ideas of freedom, transformation and

evolution. Narratives are what upheld patterns, beliefs, security and hopes, in struggles against the challenges for a positive future.

However, these major narratives, which provided explanations about the world and served as references for society started to become weaker starting in the twentieth century and were lost in post modernity, a concept that Bauman (2001) calls Liquid Modernity, when speaking of a world in which all existing references have been liquefied. In other words, an agile, fluid, mutant reality characterized by constant restructuring in which the possible “patterns, codes and rules we could agree with, that we could select as stable landmarks and by which we could be guided, [...] are becoming increasingly rarer” (BAUMAN, 2001, p.14). In other words, the macro narratives are increasingly being fragmented and losing their larger meanings.

Bauman (2001) believes that in a liquid world, power “shifted from the “system” to “society,” from “politics” to “policies for life” – or descended from the “macro” level to the “micro” level for social coexistence” (BAUMAN, 2001, p.14). Touraine (1998 apud BAUMAN, 2001, p.14), discusses the “defense by all social actors, of, their cultural and psychological specificity (...) that can be found within the individual and no longer in social institutions or in universal principles.”

Along the same lines, to Pérez (2008), the complex and postmodern context surrounding globalization brings with it a uniformity of products, cultures, values, management models, yet at the same time reaffirms the preservation of individual values.

Thus, in view of the growing globalization that recently has been made feasible through the rise of new media, which promote the constantly growing flow of information, ideas and knowledge, which promotes the constant updating of concepts about every aspect of our reality, examines the reliability of the principles and identities of institutions from traditional society (BAUMAN, 2001), removing our major references, our dominant meanings, our main stories and our greatest heroes.

Therefore, we fear that a relevant difference between modernity and post modernity is found in the development of narratives. In post modernity “the role of the narrative loses the major hero, the huge risks, the fantastic travels and the grand goals” (D’ALMEIDA, 2012, p. 90). It is the end of the major narratives, which could provide comfort with their explanations about life.

As a result, “in individualized society, the individual must learn, under penalty of an irreversible loss, to recognize him/herself as the focus of the action.” (BECK, 2010, p. 199). The loss of holistic meaning of references and identities leads individuals to start understanding themselves as being “the first.”

Therefore, Lyotard (1989) defends smaller stories instead of large narrations, where we can reclaim a more relational and relative man. There is a contradiction between the global and the local: if on the one hand we have global corporations and brands, we have strategies for miniaturization, micro segmentation, micromarketing and all the other “one-by-one” techniques on the other (PÉREZ, 2008, p. 582).

It is upon these aspects, which, as an example of new narratives, on the narrative paradigm and the strength of the “micro” of today, is where we can work with the concept of micro narratives. These would be, in the context of internal communication, statements by the small parts of an organization, of its target audience, fragments of personal stories to which everyone can contribute with their ideas and feelings, reinforcing the links of empathy and raising intangible values so necessary for the rekindling the charm of PRs.

Providing a voice to individualities enables the creation of interesting and affectionate

narratives based on the understanding of *high concept* and *high touch* (PINK, 2007), in other words, on the emotion, creativity and humanization able to create interactions and collaborations. Narratives are what make space for cognitive and affective expression and reception, for participation. They affect audiences to create a change in them, a reconstruction of their fragmented identities and a new meaning regarding their actions in the world. Therefore, due to this affective and transformative aspect, the concept can be broadened to “affective micro narratives.”

This concept is also in conformity with the considerations by Paulo Nassar (2012) who introduces the idea that there are two opposing narratives in the organization: the organizational macro narrative, which is connected to major pillars of business, mission, vision and values and micro narratives related to the narratives about the experiences of the organization’s target audience. These two ideas are extremely important for the concept of affective micro narratives, since the organization relies on macro narratives being known by their audiences. However, increasingly more so, communicators must pay attention to the micro level of communication to build the macro narratives, especially considering that if the organizational ideas do not communicate with the personal values of everyone who has a relationship with the organization, they will probably stop seeing a reason for continuing such a relationship. Therefore, we are afraid that personal narratives could be considered to be more important than the macro narratives, since

We are our stories. We condense years of experience, reflections and emotions into synthetic narratives that we share with other people and repeat to ourselves. It has always been like this. Yet, personal narratives are now more important, and perhaps more urgent in a time of abundance, where so many people have greater freedom to seek a deeper meaning about themselves and their lives and life goals. (PINK, 2007, p.111).

Therefore, affective micro narratives used by public relations must be able to create engagement and identification by those who receive and interpret them and, as well as touch people, at the point when these short speeches can be creative, unique and intimate, working off of not just the needs of the individual, but their dreams and wishes, with their motivations and fears. They are fun, heroic and evocative anecdotal autobiographies of the individuals in relation to the organization, stimulating the sharing of their experiences, passions, affection and feelings, making up the reflection of their criticism or involvement and of their pride in being part of a larger narrative and can thus lead to understanding themselves and their goals in life.

New PRs

The power of small: The public relations professional of new contexts can not only focus on standardized, technical messages, sent to all audiences equally. PR must think about how much each of small parts that make up or build up an organization have affects, desires, opinions, criticism and positive or negative images about various organizational aspects and that these small parts themselves have their own human networks and relationship capital (inside and out of the organization they belong to), and they can have an influence on other people, leading these ideas and views about the organization.

Unhappy organization that does not produce its heroes: although there are so many differences and complexities between one individual and the next, the stories bring elements of identifications through the cultural-representative signs that are able to affect people’s imagination, that of those who narrate and those who listen, thus, involving them. In this way, a strategic point in PR is the transformation of the “common person,” a participant in the organization, into an everyday hero as a result of his daily activities at work, which is in

conformity with the new feeling of the modern man, who needs acknowledgment of his individuality. Today's heroines are people who struggle, meet challenges and survive in this chaotic world. In the organizational and work world, relationships must take place upon these aspects. PRs must keep organization's macro narratives alive, but need to give them new meanings, reinforcing their references based on micro narratives, acknowledging all the memories and stories of its members, creating its heroes from daily life, surrounded by feelings of acknowledgment and belonging, as well as their emotions, subjectivities and vulnerabilities.

The richness of details - the grain is what makes things grand: The life that people have is not made up of major moments all the time. The small things we experience are what make up our greatness. Therefore, it is important that the public relations professional to value the wealth of day-to-day details in the organizations that are essential for building our being and meaning of life. Naturalization of routine, information overload, high-speed facts, often make "these small miracles in of our lives insignificant." When we realize this phenomenon, the public relations must know how to value and see how great the small details narrated from daily experiences of the audience really are.

Every micro narrative has relevant information: the PRs must reveal that, depending on the purpose of the actions to be created through the micro narratives, it is important to consider both the positive citations to encourage acknowledgment, a sense of belonging, creativity about the mythologies and the organizational heroes, as well as the negative ones, to reconsider some processes or even use them as a source of identification. The extent that the reception and encouragement of communication are connected to affective and cognitive issues (PIAGET, 1969), which are dependent on cultural standards, individual experiences, interpretive experiences, interactions, perceptions, imagination, memories and even the intensity of these memories in each individual. This is why it is so important for public relations professional to understand the wealth of information that comes from these narratives, such as:

1. Externalization of feelings (laughs, reflexive pauses, positive feelings and negative feelings),
2. Manifestation of subjectivities (dreams and wishes, uncertainties, intuitions, likes, beliefs, secrets and guesses),
3. Humor (irony, diminutives, metaphors and fun facts),
4. Mythological presence (origins, mythological figures, myths transformation, rituals, humanization and spiritual act),
5. Heroism (common word/call to adventure, help something or someone, way of tests/difficulties, overcome, apotheosis/be an example and returns),
6. Detailed memories (time records, first memories, social/historical memories and cultural matrixes),
7. Recognition (feel proud, feel motivated, recognize your opportunities, recognize their actions, recognize the organization and having recognized family),
8. Sense of belonging (connections with colleagues, belonging to a project, workplace environment, changing attitudes because of an organization's values and identification with the organization's values),
9. Dissemination of knowledge (trends of the period, problem solutions, technical words, explanation concepts and explanation process/project),
10. Vulnerabilities (something that did not work, out of a job, preconception, did not reach goals yet, something that is not remembered, chaos/confusion and something that is unknown).

So, there are important points can be considered to be a new communication logic to be used strategically by PRs in accordance with new contexts where it is necessary to reconsider the logic of humanization, engagement, subjectivity, acknowledgment, of the mythical, the comical, the collaborative, the dialogue, the individual, the affective, the symbolic, against the saturation, rationality, superficial experiences, standardization and lack of references and meanings.

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