

## Editor's introduction

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The use of narrative as a cultural determinant and as a means for communicating otherwise complex ideas is one of the basic evolutionary advantages of the human race. We learnt early on to store knowledge in the external environment, breaking the dependency that other animals have on genetic evolution and imitation of parents. The earliest form of that external knowledge, and the one that still prevails is that of story. While we have always used story, and at least from Aristotle onwards studied it, the use for structured intervention and diagnosis in the context of organizational development is comparatively recent. Gary Oliver with some assistance from myself summarized this history recently (Oliver & Snowden, 2005).

The growing popularity of narrative in organizations carries with it the twin problems of trivialization and exploitation. Some of the trivialization is evident in the plethora of recipe-based books that claim to provide executives with the ability to achieve more or less anything. Journalists, traditional storytellers, script writers and the like all have skills that are useful, but which have taken years to acquire and cannot be transferred in a one or two day course whatever the claims. Consultancy firms will also seize on any fad and exploit it for as long as it lasts. This type of trivialization has been with us not only in narrative, but also in other areas of organizational studies for several decades. The only real danger is guilt by association and I with others increasingly make a distinction between 'story' and 'narrative' to avoid such links.

Exploitation is a more serious issue. Propaganda techniques, the use of myths and the ubiquitous phrase spin doctoring all represent the dark side of narrative. One of the features of markets from the South Sea Bubble to Enron and beyond has been their ability to sustain a series of beliefs, to the point of catastrophic failure, through stories.

The sustained academic work in this field building on the pioneering work of Boje, Douglas, Gabriel, Shanks, Weick and others, all be it from very different perspectives has thankfully formed a base on which practice can be built. Something that contrasts well with Knowledge Management where academic work followed practice and missed an opportunity to provide some necessary early vigor. However, the opportunities and the dangers remain.

It is also generally true of organizational theory that it has lacked a basis in the physical sciences. One of the reasons to be excited about complexity is that it provides a link between the physical and organizational sciences. Add in the flood of new insight coming from the cognitive sciences and we are entering an exciting period, and one to which the study and practice of narrative is a key.

The role that narrative plays in society - its fragmented and evolutionary nature - has provided an easy bridge to complexity science for those interested in human systems, but as yet there is not a sustained body of work that examines narrative and its interaction with people and the environment as a complex adaptive system. There are of course controversies, the debate between modernists and postmodernists, differences on the role and function of experts (my own *Frontiers* piece and the Appendix to Taptiklis's article will give readers some insight into one controversy); the role of genre, the place of myth, fragments or fully constructed stories - a healthy and continuing expansion of controversy.

In this special edition Ken Baskin and David Boje have assembled a series of articles, which will substantially contribute, to understanding both narrative and complexity. I am sure it is a theme to which this journal will return in the not too distant future and which will hopefully stimulate contributions to both the academic and practitioner sections of *E:CO*.

### Reference

Oliver, G. R. and Snowden, D. J. (2005). "Patterns of narrative in organizational knowledge sharing: Refolding the envelope of art-Luddism and techno-fabulism," in G. Schreyögg and J. Koch (eds.), *Narratives and knowledge management: Exploring the links between organizational storytelling and knowledge management*, Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, ISBN 3503090290, pp. 15-72.