

Chapter 21

Storytelling for the Faceless: A Tool for Communicating Sustainability and Circular Economy in the Public Sector

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling is a strategic tool for communicating sustainability and the circular economy (CE). So far, its effects have been analyzed mainly in the private sector, and its opportunities for application in the public sphere should be addressed. However, exploring its potential in the context of public communication can provide valuable suggestions for setting up an engaging narrative that can reach a broad audience and convey to society those principles that can activate the adoption of sustainable behaviour in line with CE principles. In this chapter, starting from explorative qualitative research on some Italian regional public administrations, best practices, peculiarities, barriers, and potentials of storytelling are illustrated. This analysis can lead to advancing knowledge and identifying functional managerial implications for communication experts and policymakers in the public sphere.

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is a narrative strategy particularly suitable for addressing sustainability issues (Fischer et al., 2020). By drawing on archetypal models for transmitting knowledge, storytelling can provoke emotions that sharpen interest and understanding and make otherwise complex and abstract concepts tangible through examples (Wilson, 2005; Melia et al., 2013). The effect of storytelling on engagement has been

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demonstrated in the development of narrative marketing and storytelling management actions aimed at enhancing product awareness and brand knowledge (Bertetti, 2017; Godin, 2015; Salmon, 2014).

Empirical studies in political communication have shown that involvement makes attitude changes more likely (e.g., Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Guo et al., 2018; Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006). Research has also long theorized that narratives have an advantage over expository texts when it comes to memory and comprehension (Bruner, 2017; Graesser et al., 1991), and a meta-analysis (Mar et al., 2021) confirmed the superiority of narrative text compared to an expository text for content comprehension and recall (as cited in Sundermann, 2022).

Conveying the content and improving comprehensibility by activating motivational aspects (Dahlstrom, 2014), the narrative structure provides interpretive frameworks that facilitate reframing and spreading shared understanding (Black, 2013).

This chapter will analyze the role of storytelling in communicating sustainability and circularity issues, focusing on perspectives developed by public sector communicators. Despite the importance of the public sector in promoting a culture of sustainability, the literature and the empirical research have so far mainly focused on the private sector, in particular on companies' sustainability strategies (Ghisellini et al., 2016), performance associated with the adoption of circular models (Mazzucchelli et al., 2022) and industrial symbiosis (Branca et al., 2020).

However, the public sector represents a relevant field of study since it acts as a “regulator of norms” and formulates strategic policies. Furthermore, it is also responsible for disseminating knowledge and creating awareness of issues that impact the common good.

As the visual dimension emerges, public communication has also started to draw on modalities from both corporate and political communication (Fontana, 2013; Scolari, 2017). An increased interest in storytelling accompanies the growth of the visual dimension, i.e., the adoption of narrative techniques that are influenced by contaminations from corporate communication and political communication (Ducci et al., 2019) to convey functional and normative communication topics (Mancini, 2002).

An example of this is the Community of Practice, which can be found on a dedicated platform of the Reflow project (<https://reflowproject.eu/best-practices/>). Reflow is an EU H2020-funded project that aims to “understand and transform urban material flows, jointly develop and test regenerative solutions at the level of businesses, administrations, and citizens to create a resilient circular economy.” Administrations share their experience of engaging stakeholders (citizens, businesses, institutions, and different actors) in the process of circular transformation of cities (Klein et al., 2020). Reflow highlights the growing importance of storytelling for public organizations and the role of digital technologies as enablers for institutional communication and engagement around sustainability and the circular economy (Antoniazzi, 2021; Nham, 2022).

During the pandemic, mainly, the tendency in communication towards synchronization was detected in the public administration (Faccioli et al., 2020). Synchronization means using innovative and increasingly visual communication strategies aimed to achieve emotional engagement, such as storytelling (Antonioni & Ducci, 2016). However, such actions remain isolated cases and deserve to be explored to understand how storytelling can facilitate the communication of sustainability and circular economy models. The latter is referred to in the literature as *SusTelling* (Fischer et al., 2020).

Through case analyses based on in-depth interviews, the study will delve into some critical areas of investigation. First of all, it focuses on how storytelling is used in public administration concerning purposes, themes, and tools. Secondly, whether and how citizen engagement models are used to com-

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