Public Relations Review 41 (2015) 480–489

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Public Relations Review

The power of storytelling in public relations: Introducing the 20 master plots

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 4 January 2015
Received in revised form 22 April 2015
Accepted 18 May 2015

Keywords:
Public relations
Narrative
Storytelling
Master plots
Identification

ABSTRACT

Storytelling has been part of human activity for thousands of years. Stories have the power to inform, persuade, elicit emotional responses, build support for coalitions and initiatives, and build civil society. This essay describes the 20 master story plots used throughout history, as well as the rhetorical, persuasive, and message design skills used to create compelling stories. The master plots and narrative techniques are advanced as important communication and academic skills to teach storytelling to professionals, and to explain narrative theory to public relations scholars. Emplotment, narrative theory, and Burkean identification and form, are contextualized as narrative tools, along with "master plots" from the professional writing literature.

Storytelling is a staple of public relations, from crisis, to branding, to identity, to reputation (cf., Heath, 1992, 2000, 2006). As homo-narrans, or story telling animals (Vasquez, 1993; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001), public relations professionals would benefit from stronger story telling skills, and academics would find narrative theory a useful framework for understanding organizational communication.

Heath (1992) described the value of understanding and using stories or narratives in public relations decades ago noting, "One reason that perspectives become widely believed is because they are embedded into stories that are told over and over through interpersonal conversation and mass media" (p. 57). More recently, the power of the story has captured the attention of public relations professionals and tens of thousands of professionals now offer advice online for using stories in public relations.

Organizational goals, histories, heroes, and informational and persuasive communication, are often communicated via myths and stories. Reifying organizations, and organizational members, as trusted and beloved community members requires the use of subtle rhetorical principles and communicative tools designed to elicit identification, empathy, and memorable situations and experiences. Thus, organizational messages often take the form of stories. Unfortunately, knowing that storytelling is important and knowing how to create effective narratives is not the same thing.

This essay fills that gap for academics and professionals by drawing attention to some fundamental narrative, rhetorical, and persuasive principles, and tying them to organizational communication practice. The essay is divided into three sections. Section one provides a brief overview of storytelling and how it is talked about in public relations. Section two provides an overview of the rhetorical principles of storytelling, including emplotment (White, 1973), narrative theory (Fisher, 1984, 1985), identification (Burke, 1969a, 1969b), and form (Burke, 1968/1931). The third section of the essay introduces the "20 master plots" (Tobias, 1993) that have guided storytellers for thousands of years and explains how the plot *topoi* can be

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.05.011
0363-8111/

used by public relations professionals. Section three also elaborates in detail on five plot types that have great potential for creating compelling messages for both organizations and activists.

1. Telling compelling stories

Storytelling goes back tens of thousands of years and has its roots in oral traditions and ancient Greek and Roman philosophy where cultural knowledge, myth, superstition, religious, and cosmological beliefs were shared and passed down through speeches, anecdotes, and stories. Humans have evolved to respond to narratives from an early age, conditioned through children's stories, religious services, local myths (gossip, family histories, etc.), and liminal and preliminal ceremonies and rituals such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funeral rites (cf., Kent, 1997; Paxton, 1990).

Stories inform nearly every aspect of cultural life, from political ideology and party identification, to interpersonal perceptions of colleagues and friends. Stories shape how people perceive events and make sense of the world (Weick, 1995).

Woodside (2010) provides an apt summary of some of the key features that make stories so powerful, noting "human memory is story based" (p. 532; cf., also, Schank, 1990); memory retrieval is largely episodic, comprised of "stories that include inciting incidents, experiences, outcomes/evaluations, and summaries/nuances of person-to-person . . . relationships within specific contexts" (p. 533); and stories are cathartic, "Watching, retrieving, and telling stories enables . . . [people] to experience . . . archetypal myths" (p. 533) and feel a part of shared experiences that one might not initially have been a part of (cf. Brown, 2015; Jung, 1959/1916). Rhetors, or storytellers, draw upon shared emotional experiences, and interpersonal and group interactions as a means of informing, persuading, and socializing others (Aristotle, 1991; Bormann, 1972; Burke, 1966; Fisher, 1985).

Because of the ubiquity of storytelling (Fisher, 1984, 1985), their compelling structure (Burke, 1968/1931), and the usefulness of stories for creating and reinforcing identification and commitment (Burke, 1969a), stories permeate all social and economic levels of society. As Heath (2000) explained, "People identify with those they trust. They trust those with whom they identify. They also trust those who enact and advocate narratives that they accept and enact" (p. 81). We tell stories to our family members, partners and spouses, and children, our friends and co-workers, even strangers whom we have known for only a few minutes. Stories have also become a staple of advertising and marketing, as advertisers compete for brand loyalty and customer identification (cf., Woodside, 2010).

Recognition of the power of the narrative form has attracted a lot of attention in public relations. A Google phrase search for "storytelling and 'public relations"' returns 1.5 million results. Clearly, the importance of storytelling in public relations in all its myriad forms (feature stories, histories, social media, backgrounders, annual reports), as part of marketing and branding, and in crisis communication is already well established. Yet, when we examine what some of the 1.5-million organizations and professionals are saying, we see problems. Many professionals have oversimplified views of persuasion and narrative theory, and how to use stories on behalf of stakeholders, publics, and clients. Perhaps the most common treatments of narrative among professionals are the lists of heuristics about how to use storytelling, some that show no awareness of the rhetorical situatedness of information and persuasion. Almost universally, story telling is treated asymmetrically, as a tool of information dissemination, rather than as a rhetorical strategy that has the power to move people.

Consider some of the claims made by major public relations organizations, many of which have nothing to do with storytelling. From Edelman, "The world's largest public relations firm" (www.edelman.com), on its "Global Features" instructional page, suggests storytelling involves (1) putting a human face on topics; (2) using graphics to reach employees in multiple languages; (3) verbally explaining complex or technical concepts; (4) using gamification; and (5), leveraging content to start conversations" (2013, www.edelman.com/post/five-storytelling-tools-for-communicating-strategy-to-employees). Edelman's list actually seems to be missing any features of storytelling.

Elsewhere, Edelman suggests: "Brands Must Master Short-Form Storytelling . . . [and] be more concerned about their ability (or lack thereof) to tell engaging stories about their brands in seconds" (2013, www.edelman.com/post/brands-must-master-short-form-storytelling)." And again, "Great storytelling today requires a more intimate relationship with our audience, supporting analytics and a strategy that drives the brand narrative" (2013, www.edelman.com/post/how-a-journalist-does-real-time-marketing). From what Edelman suggests, storytelling is just a branding tool that seems not to require any explanation.

We see similar lists on other web pages, with many organizations treating storytelling as something quite simple that everyone already knows how to do well. SocialMediaToday, for example, "an independent, online community for professionals in public relations" (www.socialmediatoday.com/about), on their "Fun Fact Fridays: 16 Ways to Be a Better Storyteller" page tautologically explains, "PR people are natural storytellers. And the reason is simple: Storytelling is PR; it essentially boils down to connecting organizations and people through a story" (2013, www.socialmediatoday.com/content/fun-fact-fridays-16-ways-be-better-storyteller). Indeed, the idea that public relations and storytelling are part of the same skill set is a common claim among professional communicators in public relations, where the power and value of storytelling are seen as obvious, but insight into how to conduct storytelling is rarely addressed.

I could continue for thousands of more professional sites, but what they reveal is an oversimplification and in many cases a genuine lack of understanding of storytelling in general, and the rhetorical skills involved in effective storytelling in particular—a topic that has been studied since ancient Greece. Being a skilled storyteller is not simple, but it is a skill that can be learned and taught.

Public relations is much more than branding, sales, and customer contact. Building relationships in public relations—the actual goal of public relations in most modern definitions (cf. Botan & Taylor, 2004; Heath & Coombs, 2006)—takes more than creative writing skills. Moreover, the curriculum in public relations textbooks mention very little about how to use narrative. If storytelling is a "natural" activity, then why are there college majors in Professional Writing, English, and Literature at universities, and why do novelists struggle for years, sometimes decades to find a voice, an outlet for their craft, and achieve success? Clearly, storytelling is more sophisticated than the industry professionals would have us believe.

The remainder of the essay deals with explaining the features of effective storytelling and how they can be used in public relations. No single essay or list of tips is sufficient for teaching about all of the skills needed to become an exceptional storyteller. Becoming a skilled storyteller requires years of practice and an understanding of an assortment of rhetorical and persuasive techniques. This essay tells only the beginning of the story.

2. Once upon a time: the components of a good story

A compelling story contains several expected parts. All stories have a recognizable structure: a beginning, middle, and an end (or continuation point). Additionally, stories need a clear plot, characters that an audience can identify with, action, a compelling or interesting setting, some sort of climax, denouement, or resolution, and something has to change (the villain is defeated, the hero triumphs, good wins out over evil, etc.). One of the first components of telling a compelling story is emplotment.

2.1. Emplotment: the kind of story you are telling

All of the details of a compelling story take place as part of a larger narrative theme in a process called emplotment (White, 1973). Emplotment is basically the assembly of a series of events into a narrative with a plot. As White explains, "Providing the 'meaning' of a story by identifying the *kind of story* that has been told is called explanation by emplotment" (p. 7, White's emphasis). Nearly every person in the world has been conditioned by books, movies, and their social environment to understand and appreciate stories. Historians were among the earliest story tellers and made their living by taking events from people's everyday lived experience and crafting them into compelling explanations of larger events (cf., Hicks, 1972). The process is the same today in public relations, as it was in Caesar's day. Although public relations deals in truth and transparency, skilled communication professionals know that individuals are moved by different things. The same event holds many nuances of meaning, and the job of the professional communicator is to construct a narrative that resonates with an intended audience, as well as to curtail the tendency of individuals to search for their own meaning in organizational events. A good story resonates with the audience's lived experience, and tells the story that an organization or individual wants told.

The first step of the skilled storyteller is to decide on the meaning of the story that is being told, as well as the *kind* of story that will be told, or the plot (discussed below). From a rhetorical standpoint, the storyteller can generate whatever story s/he wants. Savvy communicators understand that they are writing for a specific kind of audience (stakeholders, stakeseekers, employees, the media), and within particular rhetorical genres (crisis, issues management, stakeholder relations, etc.). Thus, as White suggests, each plot or genre creates specific expectations in the minds of the audience, and the type of story told varies by situation and audience constraints (cf., Bitzer, 1968).

Storytelling and narrative are synonymous concepts, and much has been written about narrative theory. The field of communication had been interested in narrative theory for decades, going back to the work of Bormann (1972) and Fisher (1984, 1985).

2.2. Narrative theory: telling a story

The idea behind narrative theory is twofold. First, narrative starts from the assumption that humans are storytelling animals and our words have meaning and the ability to influence the actions of other people, called symbolic action (Burke, 1966). And second, as Fisher (1984) argues, narrative is a natural and normal part our everyday lived experience as actors on the stage of life (cf. also, Burke, 1969a, 1969b).

The idea of language as symbolic action dates back to Kenneth Burke (1966) who argued that humans were the "symbol making, symbol using, and symbol misusing animals." For Burke, and thousands of other scholars, philosophers, and professional communicators throughout history, language is action, and words have meaning (Bitzer, 1968; Bitzer & Black, 1971). The "stories" told by organizational communicators are not fictions, such as a novelist creates, but narrative expressions of lived experience held together by a compelling story structure. As Fisher (1984) explains:

> By "narration," I refer to a theory of symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. The narrative perspective, therefore, has relevance to real as well as fictive worlds, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination. (1984, p. 2)

Just as words and stories have meaning, so to do the stories public relations professionals tell. The actions that we take as professional communicators create reality for ourselves, and others, and help create civil society (Taylor, 2013).

Fisher argues that experts (public relations and communication professionals) act as counselors of public moral argument (pp. 12–13). And as Heath (2000) has suggested, public relations professionals have an important role to play on behalf of organizations, beyond the overly simplistic narrative snippets used by advertisers and marketers.

Public relations professionals help shape important moral issues, and provide context to organizational actions. Moreover, professional communicators who work for non-profit, activist, and social cause groups, will find narratives to be powerful persuasion and identification tools. Stories, or narratives, are rhetorical tools whose logic is grounded in language and rhetoric (ethos, pathos, and logos, metaphors, archetypes, syllogisms, and enthymemes). Stories that resonate with people are difficult to argue with and can persist over an individual's lifetime if constructed properly.

According to Fisher, effective and compelling stories share three characteristics: "narrative rationality, . . . narrative probability . . . and narrative fidelity" (1985, p. 349 ff.). Stories need to be rational, or make sense, and should be believable, or resonate with an audience's beliefs. Two other concepts make up what might be seen as the basics of storytelling: Identification (Burke, 1969a), and Form (Burke, 1968).

2.3. Identification: making a connection with an audience

The concept of Identification is a Burkean concept. Burke is one of the fathers of modern rhetorical public relations and one of the first scholars to point out how our language "symbolically constructs" reality. Identification happens when people believe they have something in common with someone or something else, or believe they are unlike someone or something else. Identification is simultaneously what we are and what we are not.

Because of principles like identification and other Burkean concepts, recent theorists in public relations have begun talking about the role of public relations professionals in building civil society, contributing to democracy, and influencing how people think about the world around them (Gelders & Ihlen, 2010; Kent, 2013; Taylor, 2013). As Heath (2006) in his Fully Functioning Society Theory explained,

> Society consists of multiple collectivities, people living and working in groups with varying degrees of agreement, permeability, trust, power, and interdependence . . . An essential quality of such collectivities is the reality that people require shared views of reality and identification to coordinate their activities. (p. 96)

Storytelling and identification go hand-in-hand. Burke argued that there were three kinds of identification: by sympathy, by antithesis, and by unawareness. All three are relevant here. Identification by Sympathy refers to creating a sense of identification with someone else through the use of empathetic language: "I know how you feel. I have also struggled with that. . ." Identification by antithesis is less subtle, and involves making explicit references to something shared in common with an audience, or pointing out a shared enemy. For example, in Mario Cuomo's famous 1984 Democratic National Convention Keynote Address, Cuomo talks about what the democrats believe verses what the republicans believe:

> The Republicans believe that the wagon train will not make it to the frontier unless some of the old, some of the young, some of the weak are left behind by the side of the trail. "The strong"—"The strong," they tell us, "will inherit the land."
>
> We Democrats believe in something else. We democrats believe that we can make it all the way with the whole family intact, and we have more than once. (ia600201.us.archive.org/8/items/100-Best–Speeches/MC_19840716_64kb.mp3)

Identification by antithesis is also one of the easiest and most commonly used rhetorical strategies. The last form of identification, by unawareness, is the most subtle and difficult to master. Identification by unawareness invokes imagery, symbols, people, ideas, etc. that resonate with audience members, but are not explicitly spelled out, as they are in sympathy and antithesis. When a communicator uses words like "family," "democracy," or mentions local, state, or national "pride," s/he is trying to generate subconscious identification by using concepts and principles that audience members are often not consciously aware of (cf., McGee, 1980; McGee & Martin, 1983).

Identification is a fundamental technique in storytelling. All stories that resonate with audiences draw upon heroes, villains, places, ideas, and other concepts that an audience identifies with. If a story does not resonate, or has no fidelity to use Fisher's terminology, the story falls short. The last narrative concept discussed is "the rhetoric of form" (Burke, 1968/1931).

2.4. Form: structuring a good story

The principle of form comes from Burke's (1968/1931) first book, *Counter-Statement*, written almost a century ago. As Burke explains, form "is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the [audience] . . ., and the adequate satisfying of that appetite" (p. 31). Burke contrasts the concepts of information and form, talking about how form influences how we make sense of journalism, music, novels, art, theater, television, and the Internet, while information is content rather than style. Once we learn or know something we rarely forget it, but facts only have meaning in context. Thus, few people follow the unrelated entries that come up in a web search, we find what we are looking for and move on. There is no intrinsic aesthetic or rhetorical payoff for memorizing random information. Not so with artistic forms such as music, stories, novels, television/movies, etc. People listen to the same music over and over, thousands of times, watch the same movies dozens of times, literally, over their entire lives. Indeed, the young readers of this article will discover in about thirty years that they

are still listening to the same music then, as they are now. That is the power of Form. Although the words and imagery that are invoked never change, because of their form, music and art stand the test of time. This is the reason why story plots are so compelling. People recognize the forms from other contexts and are moved by them.

2.5. Once upon a time: moving from theory to practice

Although some stories contain elements of several plot types, each of the narrative plots are mutually exclusive and unique. Moreover, the narrative plots are genre or context independent. Just as public relations researchers have drawn upon heuristics like Ware and Linkugel (1973) as a means of studying apologia (Hearit, 2001), crisis and renewal (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007), and other areas. The master plots serve as a means for organizations to tell their own story, build identification, and connect with others. Indeed, for organizations to change or evolve in the aftermath of a crisis requires a new vision, a new purpose, a new perspective on the world (Ulmer et al., 2007; Veil & Kent, 2008), and a reassessment of organizational heroes and villains. Many organizations, including activist organizations also have need for longer-term stories that are grounded in ethical practices and serve as examples for others.

An excellent example of the use of narrative in public relations are the ubiquitous organizational histories found on organizational web sites. Tens of millions of these historical narratives exist and although most are not very compelling, focusing on rudimentary organizational facts, all of them should be. The most strategic organizations take advantage of the opportunity to construct their organizational mythos. The Dick's Sporting Goods history, for example, tells how Dick Stack founded the company in 1948 after a disagreement with his boss—a classic underdog story:

> Dick's grandmother asked how much it would cost to build the store himself. Dick said it would cost $300. His grandmother then went to the cookie jar where she kept her life savings and gave him $300 and told him "do it yourself." Dick used that money and his relentless work-ethic to open a bait-and-tackle shop in Binghamton. (www.dickssportinggoods.com/corp/index.jsp?page=aboutUs)

In light of the rhetorical principles described above, the reader should see that storytelling has an assortment of common and predictable structural features, as well as a number of key rhetorical features. Telling a compelling story involves creating convincing characters, utilizing enticing and enthralling plotlines, and understanding one's audience. Stories resonate with audiences because they have narrative fidelity, generate points of identification, and have a recognizable story structure: a beginning, middle, and end.

Understanding the master plots and learning how to use them in public relations to tell an organization's story, is the same process as learning to use various organizational strategies in a speech (chronological, spatial, temporal, problem–solution, etc.). Communicators first become aware of the various plots and how they are used, and then learn how to use multiple plots to tell the same, or slightly different, story. The next section describes the "master plots," focusing in detail on five that are useful in public relations and in for-profit or activist organizations. The master plots described below, can be used to explain almost every story ever told, and most have existed for thousands of years (cf., Tobias, 1993).

3. The master plots

As explained above, stories have both structural features as well as rhetorical features. A plot is the story equivalent of a premise in an argument. A plot refers to the main events of a novel, movie, play, etc., and is arranged in a particular way by a writer. Thus, a plot in not about a single event, or a "scene," but a series of interrelated and coherent events.

There are 20 master plots (see Table 1). The plots include: (1) Quest, (2) Adventure, (3) Pursuit, (4) Rescue, (5) Escape, (6) Revenge, (7) Riddle/Mystery, (8) Rivalry, (9) Underdog, (10) Temptation, (11) Metamorphosis, (12) Transformation, (13) Maturation, (14) Love, (15) Forbidden Love, (16) Sacrifice, (17) Discovery, (18) Wretched Excess, and (19 & 20) Rise & Fall (Tobias, 1993).

The commonly agreed upon master plots constitute a canon. Like any canon, the *actual* "master plots" that everyone agree upon is a matter of opinion (Tobias, 1993). What is important is not how different people label the plots, but that professional communicators understand the possibilities.

From the standpoint of the professional communicator, five plots stand out as especially useful: Quest, Adventure, Rivalry, Underdog, and Wretched Excess, and will be described in detail below. The other fifteen master plots can be reviewed in more detail from other sources, and will also be of use to skilled communicators, but space constraints in this one article preclude discussing all of the plots in detail here.

In spite of what is implied by the aforementioned 1.5 million websites providing advice on using narrative in public relations, storytelling and the use of story plots does not come intuitively to most professionals. Indeed, there are fewer well-known organizational stories than we might expect to find for something that is so "natural." Mythic stories like the Phil Knight Nike story, Ray Kroc and McDonald's, Steve Jobs and Apple, Bill Gates and Microsoft, Lee Iacocca and Chrysler, and Johnson & Johnson's famous Tylenol activities are the exception not the rule. But they do not have to be. Any thoughtful and skilled communicator could construct a compelling narrative, once s/he understands the process.

A good story stands alone. Indeed, the coupling of visual imagery with storytelling by some professionals is probably a manifestation of a lack of understanding how to tell an effective story. Public relations is not marketing or advertising, and our interest in storytelling goes much deeper than 30-second anecdotes in commercials of cute cats or personified computers.

Table 1
Brief plot descriptions.

Adventure	In an adventure story our attention is on the journey. Often, adventures take the characters to exotic locations, dangerous and unexpected places. Adventure is used to tell stories of Olympic athletes, new space technology, automotive innovations, a war correspondent, or the exciting experiences of a visionary CEO or leader. Adventure stories are useful as frames for important speeches, television interviews, historical documents, and other venues like the Internet and social media.
Discovery	Discovery is a character based plot. Discovery is a plot about people and their quest to understand who they are and the world around them: "Who am I?" "How did I get here?" "Why am I here?" "What does this all mean?" Discovery answers life's questions using characters and situations that seem real and concrete. Discovery plots fit well with activists (GLBTQ, animal protection/rights, outdoors people, protest leaders), as well as individuals and leaders in other contexts.
Escape	The escape plot is literal, someone is being held against his/he will and wants to escape. Consider Edward Snowden who fled the US and his lengthy confinement to the Russian airport transit zone, the Swiss Hostage who recently escaped from Islamist terrorists (www.cnn.com/2014/12/06/world/asia/philippines-swiss-escapes), etc. In the escape plot, the victim is his/her own hero. Often the victim is portrayed as having been wrongly accused or falsely imprisoned. In the escape plot, instead of waiting patiently to be rescued, the victim often frees him/herself. Escape plots often revolve around unfair imprisonment.
Forbidden Love	This story takes many forms: older man and younger women, younger man and older woman, couple united across racial, ethnic, or class boundaries, etc. Forbidden love often ends badly. The lovers are forced to conform to society, and face disillusionment, death, mutilation, etc. Social convention usually wins. Forbidden love stories are used by politicians, activist organizations, and members of racial and ethic groups working for social harmony.
Love	The common story is of two lovers who find each other in the beginning of the story, but circumstances separate them. They spend the remainder of the story trying to get back together. Love stories may be used in an assortment of contexts including animal welfare organizations, environmental activists, organizations supporting partner benefits, etc.
Maturation	Maturation is a coming of age story. The focus of the story is on the protagonist's moral and psychological growth. Consider children subjected to cyber-bullying or dealing with terminal or potentially fatal diseases. Activists and immigrant organizations tell maturation stories. The prodigal son, and the "local boy/girl does good" story are forms of maturation.
Metamorphosis	The metamorphosis plot is about literal change from one form to another (lycanthrope, vampire, robot, transgender). Public relations, stories about metamorphosis are becoming increasingly real as technology allows us to create more-realistic computers and robots/androids, sentient computer viruses and operating systems, transplant heads on to new bodies, etc. Similarly, activist organizations (health and GLBTQ) often deal with physical and emotional transformation. This plot will also be reified as DARPA robots eventually take to the battlefields or streets, or evolve into "personal helpers/pets," etc.
Pursuit	The pursuit story is essentially a hide-and-seek, where one person, organization, or group pursues another. Consider the search for subatomic particles like the Higgs boson, a scientist defecting from another country, international computer hackers, "deadbeat dads" hiding from the law, or soldiers on the trail of a captured comrade. A pursuit story might be used to frame a feature story, or used in supplementary material on the Internet, social media, and annual report, internal documents used to socialize new employees, as narrative frames for organizational videos, etc.
Quest	The quest is the "search for a person, place, or thing, tangible or intangible." The protagonist hopes that their life will be changed if they find the object of their quest. The quest could be for a disease cure, a new automotive technology, a rewarding career, a college major or job, or the place for a perfect vacation. The quest story is suitable for organizational histories, social media and blogs, annual reports, etc.
Rescue	Typically, the hero(ine) of the rescue plot has to venture out into the cruel world searching for someone or something. Rescue is a physical plot, depending heavily on action. Another genre of rescue pits the protagonist against a powerful enemy in an effort to save the business, farm, etc. Thus, the "victim," in this case could be the "truth," "freedom," etc. embodied in a publication, public building, trial, park, etc. The rescue plot is used by activist groups, to sell KickStarter campaigns, to warrant supporting petitions and action alerts, and of course, for organizations like NASA, trying to get kids interested in science and technology.
Revenge	The revenge story is about taking the law into one's own hands when the powers that be fail to do what is right. The protagonist does not want to have to break the law, but is forced into it by circumstances. The protagonist of the revenge story is generally a good person forced to take vengeance into his/her own hands. The revenge story often pits the little guy against the big corporation or a corrupt governmental agency or police department. Revenge has been used to describe hacking activities, governmental actions in other countries, employee (and company) mistreatment stories, etc.
Riddle/Mystery	The riddle challenges the audience to figure out what happened by means of enigmatic clues and bits of seemingly trivial information. Some riddles have existed for ages (such as mathematics, physics, and cryptology questions), while others have just emerged as the physical, social, and economic environment has changed with climate change, finance, crime, etc. Science and governmental organizations often draw upon mystery.
Rise/Fall	This is the rise and fall story so common among politicians, entertainers, celebrities, etc. Indeed, the fall or descent story often follows from the "wretched excess" plot. The story can recount either the rise, or the fall, or both. Rise and fall stories have been used extensively for propaganda purposes, and for marketing and reputation building activities.
Rivalry	Rivalry pits two competing characters that are working for the same goal against each other. Famous examples include the Tesla/Edison rivalry surrounding AC vs. DC current, and the more modern rivalries among space exploration companies competing to be the first to create space tourism and reusable rockets. Rivalry is a perfect plot for competing scientists, researchers, and activists. Rivalry is a plot about human nature and morality. Rivalry can be a competitive story, in which each character wants to be the first to reach a particular goal (make it to the top of the mountain, reach the North Pole, sequence human DNA, cure cancer), or a historical story.
Sacrifice	Sacrifice often takes the form of one person making a sacrifice that is out of character for him/her and comes with a stiff price tag. The story needs to lead up to the point where s/he is ready and willing to make the sacrifice but to be believable this process needs to be built up. Often the person making the sacrifice is seemingly without morals. Explorers, activists, test pilots, single parents, war heroes, scientists working in remote or dangerous locations, people working for racial, religious, economic, or political rights, and other dynamic figures are perfect for telling sacrifice stories.
Temptation/Greed	The temptation story is about a person rather than the object of their temptation. What is the character being tempted with? What is the price to be paid for giving in? The temptation story emerges every few years as a new ponzi scheme emerges, or surrounding greed in the banking industry. Activist and politicians use it to frame legal reform. Consider the story of Major General Smedley Butler for an excellent example.

Table 1 (*Continued*)

Transformation	Transformation occurs when someone experiences a life-changing event like the loss of a loved one from cancer, an insurance company denies coverage for a life-threatening illness, a person contracts AIDS, etc. The transformation story can support new converts to causes, activism by previously passive supporters, etc. We see transformations as people switch political parties, shift their ideologies from conservative to liberal, suffer an illness and throw themselves into becoming more-healthy, etc. Transformation is useful in political public relations contexts, by activists, and in social media and blog content.
Underdog	The underdog is the little guy/gal against the big corporation, government, agency, etc. The underdog needs to appear motivated and realistic. Often the underdog is an-over-the top personality, but there is a reluctant underdog who struggles against petty tyranny. The underdog plot is used to frame activist messages (environmental, climate change, educational spending assistance for the homeless), fund-raising campaigns (AIDS, breast cancer) or other health/disease issue (medicinal marijuana, RU486, abortion).
Wretched Excess	The plot usually revolves around a single person, although a focus on a group of people and how they were changed is possible. The wretched excess plot is employed by activists, religious groups, and others, often to support issues management efforts, new legislation, increased taxes/regulation, CEO fraud or misbehavior, corporate misinformation, etc.

The use of the narrative styles described below is intended as a primer for what is possible. Images are of course a valuable tool in social media and public relations, but telling a compelling story does not require visual imagery but narrative imagery. As everyone who has ever stayed up late to finish a novel knows, the best stories are hard to put down.

The master plots are the tools that organizations can use in times of crisis and change, maturation, growth, and other monumental activities. Understanding how the plots are enacted should give insight into how to use them for organizational purposes.

Each plot has the potential to be used in public relations. Five are described below. Each description includes details about how the plot is used (in what public relations contexts), and how the story line is developed using each plot.

3.1. Quest

The quest is the search for a person, place, or thing, tangible or intangible. The quest could be for a disease cure, a new automotive technology, a more rewarding career, to be the first on the Moon, to climb Everest, or to find the place for a perfect vacation. The protagonist believes that his/her life will be changed if s/he finds the object of his/her quest. The quest story is suitable for organizational histories, online in websites, social media and blogs, in annual reports, etc.

The quest usually begins after the hero/heroine is compelled to act—s/he loses his/her job, gets dumped by a significant other, suffers a personal loss, etc. Usually, some major incident leads to a quest, shapes the path taken, and foreshadows the rest of the story: an early success/failure, a personal or family connection, etc.

The quest is often undertaken with others: co-workers, sidekicks, close friends, a romantic interest, etc. The quester is often a true seeker whose conviction and honesty attracts other people to the cause as the story progresses. By the end of the first act of the story, the audience should be asking, "will she/he/they make it?" The next act of the story relates to the encounters with disappointment, wonder, and delays. The questers run into problems that they overcome and in the process become stronger, more worthy, and virtuous. The third act or part of the story is where the hero and his/her companions achieve their goal and complete the quest. Were the results of the quest everything that was dreamed, or do they lead to new questions, new goals, etc.? The Starbucks story about Howard Schultz (chairman, president, CEO) tells something of a quest story:

> [I]n 1983, Howard traveled to Italy and became captivated with Italian coffee bars and the romance of the coffee experience. He had a vision to bring the Italian coffeehouse tradition back to the United States. A place for conversation and a sense of community. A third place between work and home. He left Starbucks for a short period of time to start his own Il Giornale coffeehouses and returned in August 1987 to purchase Starbucks with the help of local investors. (www.starbucks.com/about-us/company-information)

From an organizational standpoint, a quest could be reified as a search for a new drug, safer building materials, renewable energy, etc., or for activists, a way to safeguard the environment, protect feed animals, prevent people from wearing fur, or protect woodlands. The quest story also provides an opportunity for an organization to evolve or transform itself post crisis (cf., Ulmer et al., 2007), or as part of an issues management goal (Heath, 2000). The second plot to be discussed is adventure.

3.2. Adventure

The difference between the quest and the adventure is that in the quest, our attention is on the person making the journey, while in the adventure, our attention is on the journey. Often the adventure takes the characters to exotic locations, dangerous and unexpected places. This is the sort of story we might use to talk about an epic adventure like a transcontinental race, an athlete's career, an invention or technological innovation, or the exciting life experiences of a visionary CEO, politician, corporate leader or university president. Adventure stories are useful as frames for important speeches, television interviews, historical documents, and other venues like the Internet and social media content.

The adventure begins by setting the scene and motivating the adventurer(s). Often the adventurer is eager to start on the journey. Variations on the adventure plot are the reluctant adventurer, or being forced on a journey by circumstances. The

story revolves around the journey, unexpected experiences, meeting unique people along the way, the difficulties faced by the adventurer(s), and the excitement of everything. Be sure to explain why the hero(ine) is willing to go into the heart of darkness and take such chances.

A classic adventure plot might be the well-known Steve Irwin (aka Crocodile Hunter) story that describes his life path leading up to his death in a 2006 freak accident. But the ability to tell a compelling story is not about the content but the storyteller. Skilled storytellers weave a narrative around salient points and frame the narrative in a way that will resonate with the audience. (www.crocodilehunter.com.au/crocodile_hunter/about_steve_terri/steve_biography.html)

The adventure concludes when the protagonist has arrived—made it to the moon, a penthouse suite, obtained the corner office, won several gold metals, faced down headhunters and crocodiles in the Amazon. Adventures often include romantic pairings and economic or intangible rewards for having completed the mission. The next plot to be described is the rivalry plot.

3.3. Rivalry

Rivalry pits two competing characters who are working for the same goal against each other. Famous examples include the Tesla/Edison rivalry surrounding AC vs. DC current, and the more modern rivalries among space exploration companies competing to be the first to create space tourism and reusable rockets.

Romance plots are based on rivalry, and it is a perfect plot for competing scientists, researchers, and activists. The rivals should have equal but complementary strengths. Put them into circumstances that test their moral, physical, and mental capabilities. Rivals need to be evenly matched so that they each win some and lose some skirmishes and the audience is never sure who will come out on top until the final scene.

Rivalry is a plot about human nature and morality. Make sure the audience understands what motivates the rivals. Why does each person want to win? What is their motivation: love, compassion, anger, jealousy, fear, revenge, ambition? Give the reader a sense of the depth of their real obsession, and where it comes from.

Rivalry can be a competitive story, in which each character wants to be the first to reach a particular goal (make it to the top of the mountain, reach the North Pole, sequence human DNA, develop a social media site, cure cancer). Stories of rivalry can also be historical, sharing stories from each rivals life and describing their achievements and failures. No one has to win in a rivalry, although Americans prefer stories where there is a clear winner, both rivals can win, neither can win, the competitors can join forces, etc. Rivalry stories are excellent to pitch to the news media as feature stories, and as exciting web and social media content. The fourth plot to be discussed is underdog.

3.4. Underdog

The underdog plot is the little guy/gal against the big corporation, government, agency, etc. The difficult part of this plot is making the underdog appear motivated and realistic. Often the underdog is an-over-the top personality, but there is the reluctant underdog who struggles against the tyranny of powerful elites.

The odds are always stacked against the underdog, hence the name. But the hero(ine) has to find a way to win either through intellect, courage, strength, endurance, luck, etc. The obstacles often just keep getting bigger and the audience should be rooting for the underdog the whole time. Be sure to make it clear how the underdog has struggled.

Act one: Show the crisis that has ripped apart the protagonist's life, and how s/he has been rendered powerless, oppressed, and overwhelmed. Show a bit about what his/her life was like before the incident when the protagonist was rendered powerless. Act two: Something happens to reverse the underdog's decline. The mild-mannered underdog meets someone new or asks for something (makes a wish, throws down the gauntlet, etc.) that leads to the tool, ally, information, etc. that empowers the underdog. Act two does not get underway until the struggle begins for the underdog. The story takes off as the underdog is challenged. Sometimes the underdog becomes a hero rather than a victim (Rosa Parks, Chuck Wepner—aka, Rocky Balboa). Act three: The struggle ensues. At each turn, the underdog is able to defeat the enemy and obtains recognition for his/her good deeds. The underdog plot is used to frame activist messages (environmental, climate change, educational spending, homeless assistance), fund-raising campaigns (AIDS, breast cancer) or other health/disease issue (medicinal marijuana, RU486, abortion). The fifth plot to be discussed is wretched excess.

3.5. Wretched excess

All parts of the world see wretched excess played out on a daily basis. In the US, much has been made of the top 1% of income earners, but as Credit Suisse recently reported, just 110 people own 35% of the household wealth in Russia (a country of 144-million people), the highest level of income inequality in the world. Indeed, the richest 85 people in the world possess more wealth than the bottom 50% of the world (3.5 billion people). Those at the top in every country live a very different life. Witnessing wretched excess is an everyday part of millions of people's lives.

Many types of organizations have an interest in writing about wretched excess. Such stories make perfect activist and fund-raising tools for non-profit organizations and politicians working to raise the minimum wage, increase taxes, change income distributions, etc., and social cause organizations fighting oil companies, corporate farming, etc.

The wretched excess plot usually revolves around a single person, although a focus on a group of people and how they were changed is possible. For example, in 2002, Poetry Magazine received a $100-million gift from a deceased Eli Lilly heiress. The first thing the board did was to fire the humble editor who had run the magazine for many years for almost nothing, and began throwing money around, supporting various pet causes, etc. This sounds like a story about wretched excess does it not?

Act one: Tell the audience about what life was like before the change. Before the protagonist becomes obsessed and driven to extremes. Not too much backstory, just enough so that we understand the character and do not get bored. Introduce the catalyst or event that triggers the change in the life of the main character. Ultimately, the character will completely lose control. The speed of change and the main characters decline can vary. The change may be slow and subtle, excruciating to watch as the character slowly descends utterly into their obsession. Or the decline can be fast, as in the case of Poetry Magazine. Act two: Develop the obsession. How is the character changed? How does his/her behavior to family, friends, and colleagues change? Each complication takes him/her deeper into the abyss. There is a seemingly inescapable spiral into hell. Act three: The character loses control. This is the turning point. Nothing can get worse. Wretched excess often ends badly. Although the story does not have to end in tragedy, the protagonist may get help and start back down the road to healing. But something big needs to happen, good or bad, to resolve the excess one way or the other. As noted, the wretched excess plot is employed by activists, religious groups, and others, often to support issues management efforts, new legislation, increased taxes/regulation, CEO fraud or misbehavior, corporate misinformation, etc.

3.6. Using narrative plots in public relations

Public relations professionals can use rhetorical and narrative techniques in many types of messages. One of the most common uses of narrative is in speechmaking, where we see examples of speakers relating stories of underdogs, great adventures, transformations, sacrifice, rescues, and quests. But storytelling can be used with almost any type of written document. Contemporary examples are often found in the biographical and chronological stories told by organizations as part of "about us" histories online, that range from paragraph long anecdotes about heroic activities, to multipage stories describing organizational visions and entrepreneurial activities and practices (e.g., www.toms.com/blakes-bio; www.mcdonalds.com/us/en/our_story/our_history/the_ray_kroc_story.html).

The master plots and rhetorical techniques described here are used in social media, internal messages, advertising, annual reports, branding, crisis and renewal, feature writing, issues management, marketing, public speeches, etc. Almost any type of controlled message can be related loosely or tightly within a story context. Given the number of ways that communication professionals might use narratives on behalf of clients or organizations, understanding the master plots as well as other basic rhetorical principles like metaphors, archetypes, and logical fallacies makes sense (cf., Brown, 2015; Kent, 2001).

Many heuristics already exist for the construction of compelling arguments and messages, going all the way back to Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and his discussion of *topoi.* Ultimately the master plots serve as another rhetorical tool for understating how to craft a compelling story and to facilitate an understanding of how a compelling story is told. Just as communicators learn to draw upon structural heuristics and rhetorical tools to write compelling speeches and letters, the master plots provide new tools and structural frameworks for professionals.

4. Conclusion

Over the years, many areas of public relations have been informed by rhetorical principles including crisis, apologia, dialogue, issues management, and others. This essay has sought to add to that literature by elaborating on storytelling. No description of the master plots has appeared in public relations before. However, just as Hallahan's (1999) seminal essay on framing brought new ideas for theory and practice, this essay does the same with narrative/storytelling.

As Heath (2000) argued "Society has a narrative past that gives a sense of what is good about society and what needs change. Public relations adds values to the narrative of society as it carves out meaning and encourages others to adopt that meaning" (p. 85). And as Bormann (1972), Vasquez and Taylor (2001), and others have argued, the idea of humans as "homo narrans" or story telling animals is well established. As rhetorical communicators, telling, developing, and reinforcing, the stories and public images of clients and organizations, public relations professionals and scholars have an obligation to understand the range of possibilities and be conversant in an assortment of rhetorical techniques.

Humans make sense of their world through shared experiences, language, and symbolic action. Every hero or villain in the world exists because someone told his/her story. Individuals, corporations, for-profit and nonprofit organizations, and activists cannot achieve the mythic status accorded to only a handful of CEOs, companies, and leaders without someone there to tell their story. If public relations professionals are truly storytellers, as many argue, we should understand how to tell them.

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