

# Chapter 13

## Digital Storytelling and Public Relations: An Analysis Through Case Studies

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### ABSTRACT

*The human experience consists of stories. We tell and listen to millions of stories throughout our lives. Not only humans but also organization use stories to explain their values and create meanings for their constituents. With the increased competition, stories became inevitable in order for organizations to form and to maintain relations. The main purpose of this chapter is to explain through cases analysis what “digital storytelling” means and why it has become essential in the public relations field. Firstly, the concept of “digital storytelling” will be discussed. Secondly, the reason why storytelling has become vital for organizations will be emphasized. Finally, three digital storytelling campaigns (Airbnb’s “Breaking Down Walls,” Land Rover’s “The Vanishing Game,” and UNICEF’s “The Worst Soap Opera”) will be analyzed through multiple case study method. The aim is to examine how different companies are using storytelling for different purposes, and to find out the similarities and differences between the campaigns.*

### INTRODUCTION

How much is a small “craft doll” or a “rabbit candle” worth? Five dollars? Maybe \$10? What if that doll sold for \$50 and the rabbit candle for \$112.50? To be clear, neither object is in any way special. They are not even brand-name goods. How about if a powerful story were attached to these objects? What if the doll was made by a powerful grandmother who died from a stroke and sold by her grandson to spread her strength? His grandmother was a wonderful woman who lived a difficult life full of poverty, disease, and disaster, including the loss of a child.. Still, she never gave up smiling, let alone living. Now she is dead and her grandson has the strength to move on. He says, “I can’t think of anything better than sharing Grandma’s strength and endurance with someone who needs it more than I do”. What if the rabbit candle was bought by a man in a church yard sale? When he sees the rabbit, he thinks about the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3201-0.ch013

“fingernails of dozens of children who must have touched it”. The rabbit evokes his childhood and his youthful dreams. Suppose the doll and candle are auctioned E-bay. It means, objects have new meanings with the stories. The craft doll is about strength and rabbit candle is about youth dreams. Now how much are they worth? These are not true stories. They are part of a 2009 storytelling experiment by Rob Walker and Joshua Glenn called “Significant Objects”. In the experiment, 200 writers made up stories for thrift-stores items that Walker and Glenn bought for \$1.25 apiece. They sold \$128.74 worth objects for \$3,612.51, approximately 2,500 times more than their worth (“Significant Objects,” 2009). This experiment reveals the significance of storytelling. The stories add “new meanings” to these objects whose value grew in the eyes of buyers.

For sure, public relations is not about deceiving shareholders; there are industry-established ethical standards (PRSA, IPRA, TÜHİD, etc.) that forbid sharing false information. Still, organizations can use or create true stories about themselves to form or maintain bonds with their shareholders. Muriel Rukeyser said, “The universe is made of stories, not atoms”. This idea can be applied to organizations as well. All organizations are made of stories. “Organizational goals, histories, heroes, and informational and persuasive communication, are often communicated via myths and stories. “Organizational messages often take the form of stories” (Kent, 2015, pp. 480). Stories are vital tools to communicate values with both internal and external individuals and organizations. Therefore, it can be said that stories have great importance in public relations.

Public relations uses stories to build a positive image of the organization and strengthen corporate identity. Stories are also an important symbolic activity through which organizations generate collective meaning with the collaboration of its stakeholders (Sayımer, 2008). In the wake of new media platforms, a new concept called “digital storytelling” has emerged. Many organizations have started to use the internet and social media platforms to share stories with their stakeholders. The main difference between digital storytelling and other forms of storytelling is “interactivity”. Traditional media platforms cannot support back-and-forth communications between the audience and the organization. Although not every digital tool is interactive, most allow the user varying degrees of choice and control (Miller, 2013). Digital media is an essential specialty for public relations practices; much research (Grunig & Dozier, 2003; Kent and Taylor, 2002; Wright and Hinson, 2008) has emphasized the importance of two-way communication in public relations. Digital storytelling creates new possibilities for public relations to form symmetrical communication with the public. With this new opportunity, both parties share organization’s stories, listen stories of the public, and include these in the organization’s storytelling process. In other words, collaborative stories may emerge that can lead relationship building between organization and the public.

## **DIGITAL STORYTELLING**

Stories have compromised a huge part of the human experience since the beginning of history. Ancient ancestors of homo sapiens use body language, sound and draw paintings on the cave walls to narrate themselves. With the development of civilization, the ways of storytelling diversified. The widespread way of storytelling is oral activity (Hurlburt & Voas, 2011, pp. 4). Oral stories were vital for ancient tribes not only because it forms a bond among a tribe but also for survival of the tribe. Tribe members came together around a fire and shared their stories. Hunters explained how they successfully captured an animal to provide meat for the tribe. Mothers share their birthing experience with their daughters and give tactics about childcare (Lambert, 2013, pp. 7). Later, language became something that could

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