

Understanding the nature of narratives

*We will only learn to live with the constraints of the planet,
 if we have superior stories that enlighten collective and transformative actions, which,
 thematically accept the irrefutable evidence of the current socio-economic unsustainability.*

Most human beings make sense of their past and their future through narratives. However not all narratives are equal. The challenge facing many societies at the moment is an absence of **asuperior narrativesm that are transformational in nature**. This is particularly true if one accepts and acknowledges that the great philosophies that shaped the 20th century – namely, liberalism and socialism - have either ended or been corrupted.

Not all narratives are equal

As the diagram from Charles Tillyⁱ shows, humans almost always communicate through narratives.



Extracted from Charles Tilly, *Stories, Identities and Political Change*.
 Pub. Rowman & Butterfield 2002 at Loc 1030

In a world that is able to generate, collect, and present almost exponential amounts of data, **generated or standard stories** are used for explaining meaning. This sense-making focuses on explanations that are consistent with the information being interrogated. If it can be demonstrated that some information is absent, or that it could be modified in a substantive way with other data or assumptions, then the generated story is flawed and discarded. Thus much of human activity, in our mechanistic world, consists of filtering and then accepting or discarding stories. As a

consequence we lack the understanding that over time, this process hardwires assumptions and biases into our brains, regardless of whether or not they are valid

From time to time, as the well-known Indian story of the blind men and the elephant tells us, this process of filtering is helped if we can place these standard stories within a broader frame. Stories generated to assist with this level of explanation and understanding are known as **contextualised stories**. These contextual stories, however, extend only to a selected group of standard stories and often fail to draw systemic links with other contextual stories. A sense of context though is essential for creating patterns in our brains and it is these patterns that frame both our expectations and behaviours. It therefore follows that if we want to change anything then it is at a patterning level that challenge or disruption must occur.

The context contest

The problem is that the veracity or otherwise of many contextual stories is rarely tested. Of even more concern is that our sense of context is frequently 'repeatedly' through the articulation of apparently self-evident mantras. The reality though is that these mantras are, for the most part, unsubstantiated and often unfounded opinions. They are manifestations of almost unseen contests between competing, vested interests whose sole interest is to create 'monocultures of the mind'ⁱⁱ in their own mold. Phrases like; '*this is the market at work (premised on a view that supply and demand works as a theory)*' or '*to be a proper (insert name of nation state here) citizen you must act in this way and accept these values,*' or '*if we become more productive then we will create more jobs,* infect our media cycles, insinuate themselves into our subconscious and frame many of the ways we react to the issues of the moment.

The failure to engage with context in a way that encourages new patterns of thinking, means that too many of the core issues of sustainability including; renewables or not, control of carbon and the future of fossil fuels and climate change remain stuck in a contextual story wasteland where their acceptance, or otherwise, by the broader community depends on whose mantra holds sway. For example rarely do we see the context stated as crisply as Naomi Klein does when she opined:

Our economy is at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life.

What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity's use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion.

*Only one of these sets of rules can be changed and it's not the rules of nature."*ⁱⁱⁱ

But as powerful as Klein's advocacy is, still more is needed. Unless individuals and societies can see a way forward, from the challenges any sense of context might pose, people simply get overwhelmed by the urgency of the present and park the dilemmas and disquiets that emerge in the

'too hard zone' of learned helplessness. Rapid transitions from the steady state only occur under two conditions - crisis or belief in a better way. With crisis unless a better way is proposed our focus is on returning to the status quo. This better way requires the development of stories that rise above and integrate the sense of context. These **superior and normally transformational stories** are fuller and more adequate causal accounts, although they are not necessarily complete.

Superior stories have the following characteristics:

1. They include all the major actors (human and non human).
2. They create alternative but verifiable and systemically different cause and effect relations that make visible things that would be otherwise invisible.
3. They connect this story with other stories that are traditionally outside of the purview of the readers of the story.
4. They offer sense making that goes beyond the incremental, the linear and unspoken assumptions that frame current conditions (e.g. that the nation state is the answer to fundamentalism!!) and in this sense they are *transformative*.

Jeremy Rifkin's *Third Industrial Revolution*^{iv}, which has been adopted by the EU, China and a number of cities as the basis for the future design of their societies, is just one example of a superior story. There are many others.

What this paper contends is that almost every important debate in Australia including those on renewables, sustainable economic activity, adaption to climate change and the transition away from fossil fuels, is difficult to prosecute because there is an absence of stories of transformation that give power to those that can see the future and courage to act differently among those who know that the status quo is not tenable.

We live in a superior story free zone.

One of the great tragedies of our times is that too many organisations, whose intent and aspirations are future focused, limit their ability to prosecute their aspirations. This is because those that they are advocating to have no superior story within which to consider whatever is being argued. Further there is considerable evidence to suggest that without such stories, and the transformations they imply, there is a likelihood that value will be destroyed rather than created and humanity will go backwards rather than forwards, as a consequence. We suggest that organisations who see the need for transformation need to engage in the process of creating superior stories who order to better define create new contexts and the nature of the value that must be created and curated.

Our role is to assist in the facilitation and co-creation of organisations that understand this proposition. We wish to help transformational stories that will make a difference.

Mike McAllum is a Director of Hames McGregor, is a Futures Architect with the Global Foresight Network and was involved with the design of the NZ Foresight Project (in essence an extended conversation that helped frame a superior story for the future of New Zealand).

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References

- Klein, Naomi (2014), *This changes everything : capitalism vs. the climate* (First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition. edn.; New York: Simon & Schuster).
- Rifkin, J (2011), *The Third Industrial Revolution : How Lateral Power is Transforming Energy, the Economy, and the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Tilly, C (2002), *Stories, identities, and political change* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield).

Footnotes

ⁱ C Tilly, *Stories, Identities, and Political Change* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

ⁱⁱ The phrase has been taken from the title of a book by the critical 3rd world theorist. Vandana Shiva. Her seminal work can be accessed at http://www.trabal.org/ad_ict4d_reader/shivamono1993.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything : Capitalism Vs. The Climate* (First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition. edn.; New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014) at p.21.

^{iv} J Rifkin, *The Third Industrial Revolution : How Lateral Power Is Transforming Energy, the Economy, and the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).