

Nov 04, 2016 by [R.S. Zaharna](#)

Culture Posts: Oscar Lessons in the Persuasive Power of Stories and Storytelling ^[1]

When Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi took the stage to accept the Oscar for *A Separation*, he spoke of his film as a counter narrative to talk of war and offer a view of Iran “through her glorious culture, a rich and ancient culture that has been hidden under the heavy dust of politics.” During times of escalating political rhetoric, films can help shape and, as Farhadi hopes, reshape national images. For public diplomacy, the Oscars offer lessons not only in culture, but in the persuasive power of storytelling.

In past Culture Posts I talked about the inherent features of art that capture the imagination and serve as a bridge between people. Storytelling is another universally shared communication vehicle that can be used in public diplomacy. Narrative devices can be particularly effective with resistive audiences.

Narrative strategies are likely to become increasingly important in public diplomacy as social media tools proliferate and transform the global village. Often overlooked in storytelling are the persuasive elements.

The Narrative Paradigm of Persuasion

Several decades ago Walter Fisher proposed the “narrative paradigm.” The dominant model at the time was based on Aristotle’s strategies of rhetoric. Persuasion is through marshalling facts and evidence into carefully crafted messages and building a strong argument. The more resistant the audience, the stronger the facts, evidence and argument must be. Debate skills were critical to developing counter arguments to defeat an opponent.

Fisher argued that storytelling could be just as persuasive if not more persuasive. The effectiveness of stories lay in their naturalness. While rhetoric relied on experts with formal training to craft messages, people were natural storytellers. Fisher called people “homo narran” because of their affinity for narration.

Indeed, we begin learning about life and society at an early age through “children’s stories.” We keep up with life and our surroundings through “news stories.” We escape from life’s pressures by getting lost in a novel or movie.

Fisher suggested that stories have their own internal logic. People can tell when stories “ring

true” and echo with life experiences.

Over the years a growing body of research from different disciplines has helped expose the persuasive elements of storytelling. It seems on many levels Fisher was right.

Overcoming Audience Resistance and Enhancing Memory

One of the major hurdles rhetorical strategies face is “persuasion resistance.” When people sense someone is trying to persuade them, or have a hidden agenda, they often put up their defenses. If the audience dislikes or distrusts the source, overcoming their skepticism can be particularly difficult.


Narration works through another dynamic. The power of narration is in its ability to overcome, or really sneak undetected past people’s persuasion radar. Storytelling can engage people before they realize they are being influenced. Amazingly, even if audiences are forewarned of the intent to persuade – “you are not going to believe this” – they may still be persuaded. Why?

Research on entertainment education (use of storytelling in health and social communication) has highlighted two prime features of storytelling and why audiences can be persuaded.

One is the idea of “transportation.” When there is a great story line or plot, the audience feels transported. Transportation is what happens when you get lost in the movie or carried away by a good book. What a good story teller does is take the audience to an alternate reality, new way of thinking, seeing, or experiencing life. This shift can translate into shifts in attitudes and behaviors.

A second element is “identification.” Identification is when we identify or relate to characters in the story. We understand and even empathize with their struggle. Their pain becomes our pain. We celebrate their joy with a knowing smile. Our heart leaps when they triumph! YES! Through identification their lessons become our lessons. Without realizing we were being taught, we learn new attitudes and behaviors.

Through transportation and identification, storytellers can introduce new information to an audience despite their initial resistance. A ready example to highlight the differences in the two approaches would be a campaign about the dangers of underage drinking and driving. A rhetorical approach would revolve around gathering information on teen driving and drinking habits, and the number of deaths or persons affected and craft persuasive messages. In contrast, the narrative approach might be a series of videos of teens telling their stories of what happened when either they or one of their friends got behind the wheel drunk.

As one might guess, the “inform and influence” model of facts and arguments, no matter how well designed and delivered, is often no match for compelling, vivid stories. What’s more is that people tend to remember stories better than statistics. As Robert McKee  argues, if you want people to remember, throw out the Powerpoint slides and tell people a story. “Stories are how we remember,” he says, “we tend to forget lists and bullet points.”

Public Diplomacy Implications and Applications

The above elements are only a few of the persuasive elements of stories or narrative

strategies. Stories and storytelling have several implications and applications for public diplomacy.

Cultural Diplomacy

The use of film as a cultural art form has been widely used in cultural diplomacy by governments. Film has also been used as a political tool deliberately designed to create negative images of the enemy and positive, inspirational images of the home front, especially during wartime or during conflict. Hollywood was a player during World War I and II.

National Images

Independent of government cultural diplomacy programs, films and even the film industry of a country can influence perceptions of a country as well as feelings toward the people of that country. The Oscar-nominated “Slum Dog Millionaire,” produced by Western filmmakers, generated interest and goodwill toward India. While India’s “Bollywood” has garnered international attention, other countries such as Nigeria and Egypt are vying for recognition.


Nation Branding

Strategic stories have also been the foundation of nation branding campaigns. Mark Leonard and Andrew Small suggested that Norway could tackle its “invisible” image problem by sharing “unheard” stories about Norway with the world. One of the four stories Norway needed to tell was Norway as a humanitarian superpower: “Norway might be only the 115th in the world in terms of its size, but it is leading the world as a humanitarian power.” Perhaps not coincidental of the success of the former U.S. Information Agency was its motto: “Telling America’s Story.”

Soft Power: “Whose story wins?”

In the battle over hearts and minds, Joseph Nye suggested, it’s about “whose story wins.” The growing prominence of narrative strategies in the U.S. military offense against terrorism is evident in the ever-expanding list of related resources on defense and security websites. Just this past November the RAND Corporation partnered with the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy to hold a day-long conference on “Narratives and Strategic Communication in Foreign Policy.” Narrative strategies are being used to design persuasive winning stories, analyze the stories of others, develop counter narratives, and most importantly -- gauge whose story is winning.

Social Media, the Story Circle and the Global Village

Prior to the advent of mass media entertainment, people entertained each other by sitting around telling stories. With the proliferation of new media technologies that enable people to not just consume but produce media content, people are back to doing what they do best: telling stories. Storytelling is ideally suited for the social media. Stories are spontaneous, authentic, timely, real and yes, very, very social. Al-Jazeera’s new feature “Storify” walks users through a step-by-step process of creating and sharing their stories. Governments are adopting social media tools, such as Facebook and Twitter. However, as Ali Fisher noted , the challenge is not securing a Twitter account, but knowing how to join the conversation, or

perhaps more crucially, how to join the storytelling circle.

The persuasive power of storytelling is not just for winning Oscar films. The communication dynamics of the international arena are ripe for a gradual shift for the narrative paradigm to become the dominant persuasive paradigm. Public diplomacy practitioners and scholars will need to be ahead of this shift because it is likely to be very fast and very global. That is, unless, it hasn't already happened.
