

Thumbnail Image:



"Nation of Storytellers": Ireland's Public Diplomacy Success Centers on Storytelling


[1]

We associate Ireland with Guinness, yet it isn't the world's beer capital. We associate Ireland with Jameson, yet it isn't the world's whiskey capital. We also associate Ireland with St. Patrick, yet it isn't the only country with a famous patron saint. We credit Ireland for its robust entertainment sector—boasting Irish actors like Cillian Murphy, Saoirse Ronan, Liam Neeson, or Caitríona Mary Balfe—yet the global cinema industry is based in Hollywood. What does Ireland have that has shaped this iconic and influential national brand?

I explored this question in recent articles for *Public Relations Review* and *Public Relations Inquiry*. The answer I came up with? The Irish are great storytellers.

In attending the U.S. Advisory Council on Public Diplomacy's launch of its 2023 annual report, I was struck by the 166 times the report mentioned "stories" or "narratives." Yet, we rarely look at storytelling as a vital competency or theoretical framework for public diplomacy. Scholarship often talks of discourse, but this does not elucidate what makes storytelling unique.

Elevating Organizational Storytelling

Based in narrative theory , psychology tells us that people are homo-narrans, or story-loving creatures. We make sense of complex information, like international affairs and foreign policy, through simplified story form. But what do stories have that other forms of discourse do not? Aesthetics. Storytelling presents arguments in creative, literary form with recognizable sequence and plot arcs. They achieve narrative persuasion, i.e., attitudinal and behavioral influence, by contextualizing information within narratives that communicate emotion, imagination, and impact. Stories are compelling and they are relatable, and this inspirational context motivates us to think and act in ways other forms of discourse do not.

Value propositions are one way to understand storytelling's motivational components, including "what", "how," and why," statements. This parallels the issue, system, and identity categories of strategic narratives. Issue narratives articulate *what* an organization does, i.e., specific behaviors or activities. System narratives articulate *how* an organization does what it does, i.e., with whom the organization collaborates or competes. Most importantly, identity narratives articulate *why* an organization does what it does, i.e., what values or beliefs drive organizational behavior.

As narratives build off and complement each other, it is uncommon to see one isolated from the other two. The stronger the internal continuity of a set of narratives, the more the story will persuade.

Another factor relating value propositions and strategic narratives as storytelling tools within public diplomacy is their capacity to outperform competing narratives. Information ecosystems

are saturated with content, such that information never exists in isolation. Rather, countries seek influence among a field of competing narratives. This reflects the framework of opinion formation in competitive elite environments.

The Irish have found their not-so hidden talent, storytelling, and are leveraging it to not only level the global playing field, but to win hearts and minds in Ireland's favor.

Ireland's Equalizing Resource


To understand how Ireland's storytelling out-competes elite competition, I compared Canada, Ireland, and Norway's campaigns to be elected to the U.N. Security Council.

Relative to its Canadian and Norwegian counterparts, Ireland presented the strongest stories, following an effective value creation approach to articulate *what* Irish foreign policy sought to do (issue narratives), *how* Ireland sought to achieve it (system narratives), and *why* the Irish were motivated to do it (identity narratives). This holistic approach created a unique and authentic synergy with the nation's identity as the "nation of storytellers."

By exemplifying this cultural quality, Ireland supplemented its thorough value creation with genuineness and authenticity, engaging stakeholders more meaningfully in the relationship-building process. This led to stronger relationships between Irish and UN delegates, translating to greater trust and respect in the Irish government and greater buy-in to Ireland serving on the council.

A New Focus on Irish Public Diplomacy

Led by a young, energetic Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, Ireland is on an upward swing and making waves in international affairs. Much of this competitive edge has leveraged the marriage of Ireland's soft power with a creative and narrative cultural identity. This national renaissance is happening before our eyes, and is a masterclass in whole-of-government public diplomacy buy-in and programming.

While the Security Council campaign was a collaborative effort, much of the storytelling focus is thanks to John Concannon, the former Director General for Global Ireland, and mastermind behind The Gathering Ireland 2013 , Ireland's 1916 and Me / 2016 and Us commemoration, and Creative Ireland. As a recently appointed ambassador to Canada, Concannon is an experienced communications practitioner who not just sees the importance of public diplomacy but understands how to deliver on telling Ireland's story.

Likewise, Madeline Boughton of Dublin City University is another practitioner to keep your eye on. She brings 25 years of experience in arts and cultural relations to her educational role in public relations. Focusing on the formation of nation brand strategy, her research explores how governments promote citizen engagement and ownership in the formation of national narratives. Boughton is pursuing her Ph.D. and promises to be an authority on Irish public diplomacy and nation branding.

The Irish have found their not-so hidden talent, storytelling, and are leveraging it to not only level the global playing field, but to win hearts and minds in Ireland's favor.
