Storytelling and narrative construction as PR-tool

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Abstract. - This essay examines one of the modern socio-linguistic theories – narrative paradigm and the special technologies of a storytelling as the tools of PR-communications. Shows interdisciplinary views on the narrative, discusses different approaches to the structure of narratives and the typology. Describes the role of the narratives in the human communication. And finding out the opportunity to use storytelling in PR-activities, especially in the crisis communications.

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The term narrative derives from the Latin verb “narrare”, which means “to recount”. Narratives have been studied by many different disciplines: literary theory, clinical, cognitive and developmental psychology, folklore, anthropology, sociology and linguistics. In the traditional meaning a narrative is a story that is created in a constructive format. W. Labov defines a narrative as a bounded unit in discourse in which is identities of constituent units are revealed through syntactic and semantic qualities [1]. The American researcher Deborah Schiffrin makes a supposition that narrative is more than just a text, it’s a discourse units that have been studied apart form their context, they are not independent of their personal, social and cultural meaning at both local and global levels [2]. When we tell a story, we are always doing more than just reporting what was happened: we are recounting an experience, something that has happened with us and has significance for us. Telling a story is the way we make a “point” about ourselves, our society and our culture. But it’s just the point of events for the speaker and for his/her reasons of retelling the story. The distinction between referential (what happened) and evaluative (why it matter) as well as difference between semantics (constant meaning) and pragmatics (contextual meanings). Besides stories are a special transport for our social experience. The save, imaginary world of a story may be a kind of a training ground, where we can practice interacting with others and learn the customs and rules of society. And stories have a unique power to persuade and motivate, because they appeal to our emotions and capacity for empathy.

W.R. Fisher defines narrative as “a theory of symbolic actions (words and/or deeds) that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, and interpret them [3]. He supposes that people are “homo narrans” or storytelling animals. Besides people use narrative in everyday life to make meaning of every situation. According to E. Taylor, journalists are the first historians, social historians [4]. News writers are the first who documented the events that shape our world. Modern philosopher F. Jamison said that narration, in fact, creates reality [5]. In addition the storytelling and narration are ideal methods for conveyance of symbols, and therefore meaning. It’s one of the most important characteristics for the PR-experts.

A narration can have 2 aims: to represent reality or to construct it [6]. We think that storytelling is based on the context of a personal life experience, and on the personal point of view. Therefore making a story about an exact occurrence creates a new event relative to this person. In witness of this point we can demonstrate the psychological “Rashomon effect” [7]. Akira Kurosawa’s film “Rashomon” (1950, based on Rinoske Akutagava’s novel “The Rashomon’s Gates”) presents four different accounts of a contested event—the murder of a Japanese nobleman and the rape of his wife. As the events are retold from four different points of view, the viewer is left wondering which of the four witnesses was telling the truth and whether a single “truth” really exists. The film makes clear that there are different truths for these characters, for they are not simply lying to protect themselves; rather, they have deceived themselves to believe the version they have told.

According to W. Labov the narrative’s structure consists of a few elements [8], such as: (1) Abstract (the summarize of a story), (2) Orientation (a place, a time, a situation, the participants of a story), (3) Complication (sequence of the events), (4) Evaluation (the meaning and value of the events for the person), (5) Resolution (the end of a story), (6) Coda (the link with a present moment). In comparison with the technique of making a press release we can find a great similarity. Press releases are created according to the rule of the “5 W’s & 1 H” [9]: W1) Who has the problem? W2) What does the problem seem to be? W3) When does the problem occur? W4) Where does the problem occur? W5) Why does the problem occur? What is root cause? H1) How does the problem occur? How can the problem be solved?

We can make a conclusion that a press release is a special type of a narrative, which presents the organization’s point of view to the public.

Then we will analyze the narrative’s typology. By E.I. Sheigal there are 3 types of a narrative [10]: (1) personal narrative, (2) ideological narrative and (3) event’s narrative. The personal narrative is often used in politics. A modern politician can be successful only with a clear and persuasive personal story, which explains his goals to the people. The last year American President’s campaign was a battle between 2 main histories: Obama’s story of race and inheritance (He was the new American half-blood prince,) and Mac Cane’s story of a generous soldier. According to Reich the most effective narrative is based on the stereotype’s American stories [11], e.g. “The Triumphant individual”, “The Benevolent Community” – about the collaborative work with neighbors, “The Mob at the Gates” – the main role of the USA in the spreading democracy in the world, “The Rot at the Top” – the elites
are the enemy of people. As well as narratives of military conflicts are based on the war narrative. There are combinations of an ideological and event narrative.

The American researcher Christopher Caldiero suggests another typology of a narrative. He singles out the 5 one’s types [12]:

1. Individual/collective narratives: Individual narratives refer to stories told about specific individuals or small groups. Collective narratives refer to stories about larger groups, such as organizations, companies, or classifications of people.

2. Scapegoating narrative: refers to stories with a general topic of blame. Kennet Burke argued that man, as a symbol-using animal, creates his life script with a narrative. As such, life is basically a tragedy – a story with a scapegoat, which supplies a catharsis. E.g. the bankers are one big scapegoat in the modern credit crisis. Nowadays we can find in the “youtube.com” many examples of an explaining video clips, which create an understanding of the different socio-economic processes.

3. Prevention narrative. Prevention narrative refers to a story where the deterrence or avoidance are discussed. In other words, these passages discuss how the event “could have” or “should have” been avoided and perhaps how other future crises could be prevented.

4. Imaging future narrative. Basically, imagined futures define narratives that discuss how the future may occur with specific reference to the crisis at hand.

5. Reflection narrative. This type of a narrative define the stories where discussed how individuals, groups, or society, deal with the aftermath and exiting conditions after the crisis.

Finally we ought to note the high practical value of a narration in public relations. Nowadays PR-experts are the great professional storytellers. Making the positioning of a person, a good or a service, a large corporation or a small business, PR-man creates a unique story and presents it to the public. In the emotion-centered world marketing stories become a greater part of our life. When we choose shoes, a lap-top or a car, we oriented on a story that we want to join. The whole our life becomes an endless story.

References