

Social Dynamics of Storytelling: Implications for Story-Base Design

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Abstract

Stories that are contributed to electronic story-bases designed for ongoing contributions are influenced by some of the same social dynamics that affect everyday storytelling. This paper summarizes how power, risk, and collaboration influence storytelling; describes methods used by professional story elicitors; and draws implications for story-base design.

Introduction

We are developing ways to use technology to increase the exchange of knowledge in a business context through storytelling. Storytelling is, fundamentally, a very social thing: In the everyday version, people tell stories to specific other people (who are usually present) and in particular social contexts (at dinner, in a meeting, etc.). Social factors influence who tells what stories to whom. In designing effective ways to collect and provide access to stories, we think it is important to attend to some of the basic social dynamics that affect everyday storytelling, such as reasons for telling stories, the tellers' knowledge of the audience, and the role the audience takes in the telling. Storytelling has been studied in a number of disciplines, including linguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, sociology, management science, and psychology. With some of that work as background we have interviewed individuals who elicit stories from others as part of their work -- broadcast journalists, documentary film makers, and counselors. This paper summarizes what we have learned about the dynamics of telling and eliciting stories and implications for the design of technologies that support their exchange.

Storytellers Exercise Power

Storytellers exercise power in several respects. Telling a story involves holding the floor for a relatively long conversational turn (Toolan, 1988). Individuals who do not feel empowered in a particular setting often defer the storytelling to those who do; individuals of higher status in a given context tell more stories than individuals of lower

status in a given context tell more stories than individuals of lower status.

Framing events

Storytellers also exercise power in the sense that stories define and frame events. Any series of events can be narrated in an enormous variety of ways. Storytellers include certain things and exclude others. Stories also identify the agents and events at varying levels of specificity. For example, a story about a consulting project with a company could refer to the whole company as an agent (*'Mars Candy Co.'*); or it could refer to department(s) (*'Human Resources'*); and/or it could refer to specific individuals, by role or by name. By identifying agents in a particular manner, storytellers attribute responsibility for outcomes.

Aristotle (1997) proposed that stories present events as causally connected. Outcomes must seem necessary in some sense. The causal implications of an event may not (and often should not) be obvious when the event occurs in the story, but subsequent events should seem inevitable once they happen. By framing events in a certain way, stories make strong statements about their causes. In this sense also, storytellers exercise power.

Storytelling Rights

The 'rights' to tell a story can be complex, especially when participants in the events are present or known to people in the audience. Storytelling rights are often deferred to the more powerful persons present. Individuals feel more empowered when more powerful people are not present, and often there are implicit or explicit agreements about what will or will not be repeated outside a particular group. In everyday storytelling, tellers select their audiences. A software developer may have a story to tell about a project but also recognize that that story is different from the story that upper management might tell or may already be telling. The developer might tell his or her story to other developers on the project, or to other developers in the organization, or to various team members on a project, but not to upper management, etc.

Implications for Story-Bases

Story-bases that attempt to increase the exchange of knowledge through stories need to attend to the fact that not all individuals feel equally empowered to tell stories. Methods for eliciting stories may have to overcome the natural reluctance of many individuals to act as storytellers; the role may seem incommensurate with many people's own perceived power and status.

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Human story elicitors, such as interviewers for mass media and counselors, can be very effective in getting rich, informative stories. Typically, their interviewees have knowledge of events that are of interest to others. Often, however, they have not framed the events as a story per se. In addition, they may not consider what they know to be of interest or value to others. Before getting a story, elicitors attempt to establish both the value of the person's knowledge and good reasons for communicating it. They often begin by asking general questions about the person's experience and showing interest in their answers. They attempt to in effect demonstrate the extent and value of the person's own knowledge.

Elicitors also recognize that storytellers need a reason to tell a story. If they do not already have one, elicitors try to provide one. In some cases, interviewees are persuaded to tell a story because the journalist 'needs it by five o'clock'; in other cases, interviewees might be motivated to help others in similar situations. In any event, before eliciting a story, elicitors make sure that the person has an adequate reason to tell it.

When stories are solicited for a story-base, providing a human elicitor for at least some stories can expand the breath and depth of the corpus. Tellers tend to relate more story-enlivening detail when they have an elicitor as a live, and interested, audience. Elicitors can also encourage contributions by simply relieving tellers of some of the work of preparing stories for the story-base. It also makes sense for story-bases in organizations to allow tellers to flexibly determine what group or groups have access their stories.

Storytelling Involves Risk

Storytellers take a risk in that a story may not be accepted as relevant or newsworthy. When relating a story, the teller makes the audience an implicit promise that there will be some pay-off; they will be entertained, amused, amazed, or enlightened, etc. If the story is not sufficiently compelling, the response may be '*So what?*' or '*What's the point?*' (Labov & Fanschel, 1977; Polanyi, 1979). In group settings, storytellers limit their risk by deferring to

the more powerful individuals present, who have greater protection from potential loss of face. Labov notes that storytellers also often limit their risk by including an explicit 'evaluation' within the story, i.e., a comment illustrating how the story is notable or newsworthy (e.g., '*I finally understood what he'd been saying all along,*' or '*I'll never do THAT again.*'). Storytellers also temper risk by attempting to elicit group endorsement of a story they propose to tell, before launching into the story ('*Did you hear what happened to Oscar?*') (Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Toolan, 1988).

Implications for Story-Bases

If stories are not elicited in a group context, tellers must judge the relevance and noteworthiness of a story in a semi-vacuum. What's sufficiently interesting, important, etc., to warrant a story? Who wants/needs to know? There can be a reluctance to speak in the absence of social cues from the target group. Story-bases can provide some of the same ways of moderating risk that individuals use in conversation. An approach we have used is to derive topics from interviews, have group members rate the value of those topics, and then request stories on the more valued topics. The teller has advance buy-in, which reduces the need for immediate audience feedback.

Storytelling is Often Collaborative

Often, stories are not monologues; multiple people jump in with additions, questions, corrections, comments, protests, etc. (Blum-Kulka, 1993; Norrick, 1997; Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, & Smith, 1992; Sacks, 1974). Group storytelling can be a collective activity of sense-building, with various individuals contributing their own recollections and interpretations (Boje, 1991; Ochs et al, 1992; Sacks, 1974). Though collective sense-building is constructive for the group, collaborative contributions are not always appreciated by the person who initiated the telling ('*Who's telling this story anyway?*'). Differing points of view are often in effect challenges to the other storyteller(s).

Implications for Story-Bases

Group sense-building is a valuable function of storytelling, and electronic story-bases can simulate it by providing facilities for comments, re-tellings, etc. But even in face-to-face communication, 'collaborative' contributions are often disquieting. In electronic communication, where social cues are reduced, group storytelling becomes even more delicate, and respect and etiquette are important.

People use Stories to Enhance Face

Individuals' presentation of self is enhanced when others endorse the line they present by accepting and positively evaluating their stories (Goffman, 1981). Related to face enhancement is Schank's notion of me-goals (Schank,

1990). People often tell stories to demonstrate something they want to say about themselves (e.g., *'I'm funny'*).

Unfortunately, some of the most interesting and useful stories in business and other contexts are about mistakes. But telling stories about one's own mistakes runs the risk of loss of face. Mistake stories can also be face-enhancing, of course, if the storyteller implies that they learned something, or if they managed to make things turn out all right in the end, or if they are offering their mistake to help others.

Some mistake stories carry much higher risk than others. The easier ones to tell are about events that were not recent, where nothing was really lost, and which involve mistakes that can be avoided in the future. People often tell stories about something dumb they did on their first day on a job, due to a simple lack of information. Higher risk mistake stories, which might be of even more value to a group, would be stories involving mistakes that are more recent, that may have entailed some real cost (such as losing a customer), and that may be repeated. (Mistakes such as 'failing to hear the customer' can be easily repeated in ever new ways.) Higher risk mistake stories may be of particular value, since they deal with the real difficulties of an endeavor.

Implications for Story-Bases

One way to encourage mistake stories in a story-base is through modeling. If respected persons provide high risk mistake stories, others might be encouraged to do so. In a story-base designed for ongoing contributions, the initial seed stories can be a powerful influence on the stories subsequently contributed.

Story Elicitor Guidelines

Professional story elicitors deal regularly with the social dynamics that influence people's willingness to tell stories and the kinds of stories they tell. Interviews with story elicitors in several different fields -- broadcast news, documentary film-making, and counseling -- found common guidelines for obtaining informative and interesting stories:

Warm-up. Elicitors find it important for both themselves and the storyteller to be relaxed. Before eliciting a story, they try to establish a comfortable tone. They might say something about themselves, to establish a sense of reciprocity and to give the interviewee a sense of the person they are talking to. The elicitor might chat, talk about how the interview will be used, answer questions, etc.

Empower the storyteller. As discussed above in connection with power, elicitors attempt to empower interviewees by conveying that the interviewee has valuable knowledge and giving them an adequate reason to tell their story.

Be a great audience. Elicitors listen closely and focus intently on the teller. They report that they elicit more authentic stories when they as audience are receptive and fully comprehending. They attempt to establish a strong one-to-one connection between themselves and the teller; some described an almost hypnotic bond that is temporarily created. Broadcast journalists must often elicit stories while other people, such as camera crews, are present. If the interviewee is distracted (e.g., by coughing from the crew), the one-to-one connection can be broken, and the story becomes more generic and less genuine.

Don't resist the story. Elicitors make it a practice not to reject what the interviewee offers. If the interviewee gets into topics that seem irrelevant or unproductive, the elicitor does not say, *'No, that's not what I want'* or even, *'No, what I meant was...'* Rather, they hear out what is offered and follow up with additional questions.

Observe an implicit contract of trust. There is one exception to the rule of never rejecting the narrative: If the interviewer feels at some point that the storyteller is not telling the truth, they might 'look askance' or otherwise convey that they question what they are hearing. In other words, they conduct the interview as though there were an implicit agreement in which the storyteller will share their knowledge openly and accurately, and the elicitor will accept it appreciatively. If that agreement is violated, the procedure must break down.

Conclusions: Summary of Implications for Story-Base Design

Provide Story Elicitors

Human elicitors can increase the breadth and depth of a story-base. Storytellers tell more interesting stories to a live audience, and elicitors obtain stories that otherwise would not be contributed. Since interviewees tend to adapt their telling to the elicitors' level of knowledge about the subject, elicitors' knowledge should match that of the intended audience of the story-base as much as possible.

Empower Storytellers

Either human elicitors and/or the story-base itself should convey respect for contributors' knowledge and provide adequate reason for telling stories.

Obtain Advance Buy-in for at Least Some Stories

Pre-endorsement of topics can be obtained in several ways: Story-bases can provide a facility for users to request stories on specific topics; requests can be obtained off-line; story-bases can also allow prospective storytellers to put out an 'offer' for a story on a particular topic and obtain an indication of audience interest before contributing the story.

Support a Range of Story Types

Seeding story-bases with various types of stories that can benefit a group (e.g., mistake stories) can spur others to contribute related stories. In face-to-face settings, one story is often followed by another story on the same theme (Sacks, 1974; Boje, 1991).

Provide for Collaborative Storytelling

Simply grouping stories on a particular topic partially simulates in-person collaboration. Story-bases can also provide ways for audiences to comment, discuss, debate, build combined stories, etc. Because of the potential volatility of electronic communications, standards of courtesy are important. An organizational story-base might benefit from having a human librarian who can not only monitor ethical standards but also set a tone of respect that contributors can emulate.

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