

The Golden Age of Storytelling: Why Is Story Exploding? What Does It Mean for Practitioners?

A Worldwide Story Work Teleseminar hosted by Kathy Hansen: Sept. 9, 4 pm EDT

Why are people creating blogs at a rate of 175,000 a day according to Technorati, the site that tracks blogs? Why is organizational storytelling becoming an increasingly crucial business tool? Why are more and more social-media and other Web sites creating amazing new multimedia tools to help us tell our stories, prompting Kelliher, Manalek, and Davenport (2003) to comment that "today's digitally networked society provides a fertile environment for the exploration of narrative forms in new and diverse ways"?

Indeed, a Twitterer recently tweeted, "storytelling seems to be the new catchphrase like 'social' was a few months ago and 'web 2.0' was before that," while a branding company notes on its Web site, "Embracing the current shift toward online storytelling seems clear."

We hunger to tell our stories and hear the stories of others. **But why now?** Several interviewees on the blog *A Storied Career* have shared their theories. Let's discuss your speculations. **Are we in fact in the Golden Age of Storytelling? As "early adopters" who embraced storytelling before it was on the cultural radar, what do we make of the current explosion, and what does it mean for our practices?**



Speculations from Practitioners

For the past year in the Q&A series on my blog, *A Storied Career*, I have asked story practitioners:

"The storytelling movement seems to be growing explosively. Why now? What is it about this moment in human history and culture that makes storytelling so resonant with so many people right now?" Here's what they said:

- Savvy media gurus have come to realize that storytelling is the quickest and most relevant way to share information... everything is speeding up... In today's faster paced time, storytelling is essential because captures the listener. – *Annie Hart*
- As storytelling is already deeply anchored into each of us, it's a relatively low-cost solution to engage [in the] sense[-making] quest. – *Stephane Dangel*
- With the advent of so many electronic communications, people are just growing more aware of their need for deeper communication and connectedness. – *Sean Buvala*
- Now that we have such powerful communications tools, [storytelling] is still as important, but more massive that we can digest. So, we find those areas that we can relate to. – *Katie Snapp*
- It's about finding ways to connect. – *Whitney Quesenbery*
- In our world of 24/7 news feeds, social media, etc., we are trying to drink from a firehose of information, and we're finding ourselves bowled over yet still thirsty. ... The storytelling movement is about restoring — "re-story-ing" if you will — a more authentic means of learning from each other and drawing meaning from our own experiences. – *Sarah White*
- The one thing that everyone can do regardless of where or how they work is create and tell stories. – *David Vanadia*
- We've taken process improvement about as far as it can go. ... it is time to seek new tools. And narrative is a perfect tool to help shed light on complex questions. – *John Caddell*
- As a planet, we are in a place we never imagined and we yearn for comfort, understanding, reason, and most of all HOPE. Stories give us all of that and more, allowing us to reflect on the past, imagine the future, and accept the changes brought about by the challenges of today. – *Susan Luke*
- Families are spread across the country; we communicate via email, text messaging, and quick hellos as we pass in halls, shops, or even the home because of busy schedules. All very impersonal, yet as humans we crave and, according to some studies, thrive on contact and interaction with others. Stories connect us and ground us. – *Carol Mon*
- The implications of Web 2.0 and technological innovation on humankind are staggering. As I like to describe it, "the means of story production have become democratized". ... In a complex, interdependent world where worldviews and value systems collide, we naturally turn to storytelling as our most basic coping mechanism for making sense and meaning of everything around us. – *Michael Margolis*
- I think that our feelings of alienation from core human experiences arise from too much "virtual" reality and not enough real reality ... Story reintroduces intimacy and emotions to communications between people. ... The business interest in storytelling is riding this "crave wave" as well as a parallel realization that designing messages that create emotions like desire, craving, and/or trust toward a product requires that the message tells a story. – *Annette Simmons*
- Connections between people [have been] breaking down, and their souls [have been] suffering. I think people are hungry to rebuild this sense of connection, and we are doing this through the medium of stories, whether oral or written. – *Sharon Lippincott*
- The development of technologies like PowerPoint has inadvertently pushed the effort to bring back more stories. What seemed like a great communication tool has been overused and abused. – *Carol Mon*

Speculations from Practitioners (continued)

- People are inundated with information. ... The very good leaders will help people make sense of the information, and story can help them do that. ... [Gen Y] ... really wants to be inspired, challenged, and motivated and again it is through story you can achieve this ... – *Gabrielle Dolan*
- Mostly I think the reason is the control people are exercising over selecting what information they spend their time with. There are more choices than ever before, people are busier with limited time, so why would they choose to spend that time on things that don't meet their needs? The more personalized and relevant information is to the person presented with it, the more engagement is possible. Storytelling is in our genes. – *Ardath Albee*
- Story has the wonderful ability to capture [the] great complexity [of 21st century life] into a simple form, allowing listeners to take in the concepts, ideas, challenges, without feeling overwhelmed. ... One could also say that story resonates because there has been a confluence of authors (Annette Simmons, Steve Denning, Rick Stone) and others (Karen Dietz, Seth Kahan, Victoria Ward) who have begun to articulate the power of story, offering ways and means of using story. – *Madelyn Blair*
- Leaders are looking for new ways to understand what's really happening in their organization. They are looking for better ways to engage and better ways motivate people. Stories are integral to the new ways of working in complex environments. – *Shawn Callahan*
- Given the unfathomable sea of information afforded us through the Internet, storytelling is an invaluable resource as it provides the means for delivering substance and meaning in a form that can be readily grasped by the masses. – *Jon Hansen*
- I remember sitting in a class and hearing Dr. Joseph Sobol say, "Anthropologists say storytellers arise when the society has lost its way." Wow, that resonated in every part of my body. – *Molly Catron*

**Guiding Questions/
Food for Thought for Teleseminar**

Please think about these questions. We probably won't have time to discuss all of them. Which ones interest you most, and what other questions do you have?

- Are we, in fact, in a Golden Age of Storytelling?
- Or are we, as story practitioners and "fans" just much more attuned to storytelling than others are?
- For those who've been involved in storytelling for a significant period – do you feel that you are hearing more now about storytelling than you were a few years ago?
- Can you identify any single event, publication, person, etc., that seemed to trigger greater interest in storytelling?
- Do you hear more about people who are starting story-related businesses/practices?
- Could the perceived explosion in storytelling be because people are more broadly (too broadly?) defining "storytelling?"
- In April, I asked the question referenced in the left-hand column of this handout in a different way: "Are we in the Golden Age of Storytelling? Why or why not?" The respondents answered that we are not (yet) in a golden age – or we don't yet know if we are (see <http://astoriedcareer.com/2009/04/survey-says-were-not-in-the-go.html>). The comment that most struck me was from Michael Margolis: "To debate when we might enter a so-called 'golden age,' is just another attempt to separate and fragment ourselves from the wholeness that already exists, if we just open our eyes to it. Instead of waiting for some moment to arrive, why not step into that larger story right now?" Your thoughts?
- To what extent do you think social media contributes to an explosion in storytelling?

Kathy's Speculations (these will be explained during the teleseminar)





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