Storytelling – a catalyst for social change through social media

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling is the art of sharing stories, with an aim to entertain, educate and share cultural values. It has evolved from traditional oral storytelling, to bulletin boards, to creating online stories on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat etc. Storytelling on social media platforms has become a common trend these days, where we find people sharing an experience from their daily lives with a post, image or a video. It is also very easy for passionate users to shoot a short sequence on their phone or camera and upload it on their personal social media profiles. The purpose of this study is to determine if storytelling can serve as a catalyst to bring about a change in the society. The research will aim to provide descriptions of how stories can inspire audiences and influence positive behavior. This will be supplemented with textual analysis of posts and comments of participants from online communities. The study will explore the narrative text of inspiring stories from television shows, public events and films. Media has always played a key role in mobilizing people's reactions towards social issues. Today's technology enthusiastic generation is going beyond traditional media forms and are using their new media literacy skills to create content in the form of memes or vlogs (video blog or video log). Similarly, we all can use social media networks to build a participatory culture, help audiences voice their opinions, create relatable stories that can empower people to create awareness about social problems and try to find solutions to them.

Keywords

Storytelling, social media, online communities, participatory culture, new media.

1. Introduction

An act of conveying ideas through art, writings, verbal stories, posting images or videos on social media can be referred as storytelling. Depending on different regions and traditions, stories serve purposes like entertainment, education, preserving culture and inculcating moral values. Great story telling can create a journey from the 'known' to the 'unknown'.

In an article by Brian Peters (Peters, 2018), he mentions that every story must have a structure, purpose and a character that the audience can relate to, so that the story can fascinate the audience emotionally. In her book 'The World of Storytelling (1990)', Anne Pellowski says, "Storytelling can help explain and express strong emotions and experiences in memorable, long-lasting ways through the intricate use of rhythm, rhyme, and repetition".

1.1. Different practices of storytelling around the world

In an article published by Amy S. Choi (Choi, TED, 2015) it is said that a story transforms itself depending on the culture and language of a particular region. This has led to different practices and traditions of storytelling, some of which are listed below:

- Hula: a dance form of Hawaiian's which portrays mythological stories
- Chinese shadow puppetry: folk stories, moral lessons and local customs are shared
- Zajal: a form of rap battle or poetry slam in Arabic language
- Cunto: The cuntisti (Sicilian storytellers) tell stories of epic heroes
- Rakugo: A hanashika (Japanese storyteller or comedian) performs a monologue
- Griot: traditional keepers of society's history from West Africa play kora (an instrument similar to lute) and sing about cultural histories
- Bharatanatyam: originated in Tamil Nadu (South India), this dance form tells stories of deities like Krishna and Shiva
- Calypso (from Trinidad): describes daily life and shares local news

Archaeologists believe that writing on the rock was an ancient and primitive form of sharing ideas and then progressed to verbal rendition of stories with gestures and expressions for a more dramatic effect. Storytelling has hence evolved from depicting stories on barks of trees, to paintings on cave walls, carving on wood and clay tablets, painting or printing on parchments and fabrics, traditional oral storytelling among small groups and finally using new media to store and broadcast them. With the advent of technology, today we can film or record stories and store them in digital form forever.

1.2. Social media

"There is always a pleasure in making stories of one's own life because the material is readily accessible, authentic and endearing; and the experience of narrating with multimodal means is new, exciting and inspirational. This is the power of storytelling coupled with the appeal of digital technology" (Nguyen, 2011)

Stories can be told through photographs, letters, recorded conversations, poems, performances, different forms of media (like radio, television, films) etc. Nowadays, storytellers use digital tools to combine the narrative text with images, interactive elements, audio and video files and share it on their websites or social media platforms.

The unique feature of adding 'stories' on social media began in 2011 when Snapchat was launched and it allowed a user to upload an image or video for a day. Similarly, Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook followed suit from 2016. At times, a user uploads a series of consecutive images or textual posts to form one big story. This is how a narrative is formed in a digital story.

In a book called 'Digital Storytelling – Capturing Lives, Creating Community' by Joe Lambert (executive director of Centre of Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, USA) states that social media paves the way for ordinary users to put up their stories as well as for celebrities who have many followers. Thus, unlimited number of people can be involved in a communication process on a social media platform. (Lambert, 2002).

1.3. Online communities

A virtual community where members interact with each other using the internet is called an online community. People post content and comment through social networking sites, forums, chat rooms, discussion groups or virtual worlds. Online communities, social media platforms and web applications provide innovative ways for creators and users to communicate with each other.

In an interview, Brandon Stanton (founder of 'Humans of New York' – a photoblog, where the subject's story is captured through an interview) believes that once the storyteller creates an intimate culture and the listener does not judge or criticize, a supportive atmosphere is created and this leads to generation of good stories. (Choi, TED, 2015) He states that, if the audience participates actively and does not interrupt or interrupts kindly, the storyteller becomes more comfortable and the experience becomes enjoyable.

1.4. Storytelling as a catalyst

Stories are effective educational tools because the narrative has a value of entertainment; it makes the audience an active participant and helps them to remember the story for a long time. When audiences listen to a story, they interpret it on the basis of some prior knowledge or the kind of culture they have grown up with. In an interview, Dave Isay (founder of 'StoryCorps' – a storybooth, an organization that collects stories through audio files, preserves and shares them) stated that stories are universal and they bridge linguistic and cultural divides, due to which most audiences relate to it easily. Thus, storytelling can be used as a mode to teach ethical, cultural, moral and social values.

"Stories gain in credibility as they are retold and as they are assimilated into our actions and beliefs." (Mandelbaum, 1991). "Stories can engage our minds, challenge our beliefs and ignite old memories to the extent that we want to hear it retold again and again. Words are combined and delivered in such a way that they construct a picture in the mind of the listener and drawing the listener into the story deeper and deeper with each phrase" (Garrety, 2008)

Stories are pools of reflection in which we see ourselves through the prism of the imagination" (Momaday, 1997) and storytelling as such opens up new ways for communities to formulate their visions and develop. According to Fisher, a narrative paradigm best explains human communication, since storytelling initiates conversations that can mobilize a community (Fisher, 2009).

2. Aim of the study

The basic aim of the study is to determine if storytelling can serve as a catalyst to bring about a change in the society.

3. Methodology

Textual analysis was used to describe and interpret information from the viewed content. The purpose of textual analysis is to describe the content, structure and functions of the messages contained in texts. The important considerations in textual analysis include selecting the types of texts to be studied, acquiring appropriate texts and determining which particular approach to employ in analyzing them. In this study, outputs of communication (messages produced by communicators) instead of communication transcripts were used for analysis. In order to understand the form storytellers use to influence audiences, the following content was viewed and analyzed: (The narrative description of each of them is given below)

▪ Shows

i) Taarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah: With its original release in 2008, it is one of India's longest running sitcoms. Produced by Neela Tele Films, created by Asit Kumar Modi and telecasted on Sab TV, the show is primarily based on a column called 'Duniya Ne Undha Chasma' by Indian columnist, humorist and writer – Taarak Mehta. The show is based in Mumbai in a society called Gokuldham, where the residents face common real-life situations. Although the show is

comical, the plot revolves around a lot of social issues and the cast is known to solve those problems with a moral message in the end. (IMDb, 2008)

ii) Raja, Rasoi Aur Anya Kahaniyaan: Released in 2014 on an infotainment channel 'Epic', produced by Rangrez Media Pvt. Ltd., the show has a non-fiction narrative format, where the history behind the Indian royal cuisine is explored. It features dishes that hold historical importance, how they were discovered and gives information about how these recipes influenced culinary practices throughout the country. The show also features food historian and critic - Mr. Pushpesh Pant, food writers and enthusiasts from around the country. In 2017, the show shifted from a documentary format to a cookery show hosted by celebrity chef Ranveer Brar and is now called as 'Raja Rasoi Aur Andaz Anokha'. (IMDb)

iii) The Storytellers in The Living Room: Broadcasted on Amazon Prime video (an initiative by Kommune, a collective venture by Roshan Abbas, Gaurav Kapur and Ankur Tiwari), this web series was hosted by Roshan Abbas. The 10 episode web series, featured few celebrities like Mini Mathur, Maria Goretti, Kausar Munir, Priya Malik and the show's director Tess Joseph who came up to the front of a living room and shared their personal stories. (IMDb, 2017) (Lobo, 2017) (Amazon Prime Video, 2017)

▪ Films

i) Pink: An Indian thriller, released in 2016, written by Shoojit Sircar and Ritesh Shah, starring Amitabh Bachchan, Taapsee Pannu, Angad Bedi etc. is a story of three women who are involved in a crime and a retired lawyer (Mr. Bachchan) helps them out. The lawyer criticizes the society who stereotype women living independently or those who come home late in the night and made a powerful statement that men and women should not be judged differently. The film ended with a strong message that was highly appreciated amongst audiences. (IMDb)

ii) Toilet - Ek Prem Katha: a 2017 comedy-drama film directed by Shree Narayan Singh and co-produced by Akshay Kumar and Neeraj Pandey. Starring Bhumi Pednekar and Akshay Kumar in the lead, the film supported the government's sanitation campaign, with a view to eliminate open defecation, specifically in rural areas. The lead pair battle the mind-sets and old traditions of the villagers, until one day, after a lot of struggle, the Chief Minister decides to permit construction of toilets in the village. (IMDb, 2017)

iii) Pad Man: a 2018 drama/comedy film written and directed by R. Balki, produced by Hope productions, starring Akshay Kumar, Radhika Apte and Sonam Kapoor in the lead roles. This story of 'The sanitary man of sacred land' (Arunachalam Muruganantham) was featured in Twinkle Khanna's book 'The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad'. The film was inspired by this entrepreneur from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu who introduced low cost sanitary pads. (IMDb, 2018)

▪ Events

i) Kommune: It is a community (called 'kommuneity') which features live art, theatre, storytelling and poetry performances. Their team features Roshan Abbas, Gaurav Kapur, Ankur Tewari, Tess Joseph and Hari Sankar. They invite people to share their story on their website, conduct workshops, collaborate with corporates and perform for them. This year the team is organizing road-trips under a festival called 'Spoken Fest 2019'. (Kommuneity) (Facebook) (YouTube) (Instagram) (Twitter)

ii) TED talks: TED is a non-profit organization which was formed in 1984 by Richard Saul Warman (TED Conferences). TED began as a conference where topics related to technology, entertainment and design were discussed, but today TED talks cover many other topics. It has become a global community and they conduct TEDx events all round the world, in over 100 languages. The sessions are held in the form of short talks, which aim to change attitudes and build a powerful community of inspiring thinkers and engaging, curious listeners.

▪ Website

Indian Storytelling Network (ISN): It was founded in December 2011 by Geeta Ramanujam (director - Kathalaya and its Academy of Storytelling, Bangalore) and Eric Miller (director - World Storytelling Institute, Chennai). The ISN is inspired by the International Storytelling Network (Spain), the USA National Storytelling Network and other similar organizations around the world. Their initiatives include setting up story spaces and conducting storytelling festivals around the country. (Indian Storytelling Network)

▪ Cafés

Off-late storytelling sessions have started in exclusive cafés around Pune, for example: Pagdandi (started in Baner in 2013), Gyaan Adab Centre (in Kalyani nagar, since 2014), Waari book café (in Kothrud, since 2016) and Raah (a literacy and cultural center in Kondhwa, started in 2017). These cafés also hold 'open mic' sessions, workshops or competitions in order to introduce new talent and give them a chance to perform or to select good presenters with fresh content. The winners of such sessions go on to perform in different parts of the country.

4. Results

Initially began as a comedy sitcom, Taarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah is now noted for the importance it gives to social issues like: child marriage, cancer awareness, scams like bank/internet frauds, tobacco/alcohol addiction, eve teasing, college admission through donations, etc. It also supported national campaigns like 'Save the girl child', 'Swachh Bharat Mission' and highlighted important events like 'The Armed Forces Flag Day' and demonetization. The characters of the show belong to different cultures, but live in peace and harmony. The celebration of all festivals and patriotic days gives us a true glimpse of unity in diversity. Some viewers consider the show to be a 'staple' for all households and the popularity of the show is mainly

because the characters and situations are relatable to most middle-class families. The show has also interested a group of researchers from MICA (Mudra Institute of Communications, Ahmedabad) who are now doing a case study on it.

Raja, Rasoi Aur Anya Kahaniyaan - a show with a unique content and capturing narration, takes the audience on a journey of India's cultural food heritage, historical aspect of diverse cuisines and scientific reasons of different foods according to culture, topography (for example: the unexplored distinct North-eastern cuisine) and festivals. The new version of the show titled 'Raja Rasoi Aur Andaz Anokha' also rediscovers lost/forgotten recipes, revives old classic recipes and ingredients with an enchanting experience.

Kommune with its website and show called 'Storytellers in the living room' brought out an old form of entertainment, i.e. storytelling. They highlighted confessional stories, substance abuse, rare diseases and also played a role in de-stigmatizing depression. The creators believed that, as opposed to stand-up comedy, the audience can really connect to the performer through storytelling. This relationship is interesting since, the audience respects the performer for sharing deep secrets and since all are strangers, no one judges or advices the storyteller, rather they end up becoming friends as they session ends.

Films like 'Pink', 'Toilet: Ek Prem Katha' and 'Pad Man' stirred a conversation of feminism – where women fought for their rights or to prove their innocence. Pink was solely based on 'consent', whereas 'Toilet….' highlighted the importance of hygiene, sanitation, not defecating in the open and 'Pad Man' abolished the taboo related to menstruation. These other forms of storytelling mentioned above also helped in increasing awareness, empowered women to voice out their opinions and discuss women problems and issues openly.

5. Discussion

The purpose of choosing the above mentioned content was that, they stimulated a lot of conversations on social media platforms, which led to the formation of discussion groups, and forums. The movies or café performances were actually offline events, but audiences started uploading content online, on their 'stories' (infographic feature) and started 'watch parties' (collective video viewing option) on their social media profiles. This created several online communities or pages on social media. It also helped to raise awareness about feminist movements and supported national initiatives like 'Swachh Bharat' and 'Darwaza Bandh' campaign (which was started to promote the use of toilet and prohibit open defecation).

Limitations:

- It is not always easy to achieve inclusive participation in storytelling, since the success of it depends on content and appropriate context
- Sometimes, stories can be a very strong catalyst and cause an unintended reaction (for example – misusing feminism to gain rights or win legal cases)
- If stories act like a weak catalyst, the intended reaction will not be accomplished or it will prevent the reaction (for example – proper awareness will not be generated or messages obtained from the story could be misunderstood or misinterpreted)

6. Conclusion

Stories and storytelling can be influential agents of change and with the power of social media, new opportunities can be created. Catalytic storytelling can be used as a means of raising questions in such a way that the community can mobilize stakeholders and authorities to work towards betterment of the society. Through this process, each member of an online/offline community will also realize their responsibility of shaping a good society and can contribute accordingly to achieve that goal.

Storytellers use social media to reach wider audiences, include audio-visual and interactive elements with their content, so as to increase interaction with the audience. When a storyteller connects to the audience on an emotional level, it builds a new avenue of thinking and strengthens his/her belief system. Great storytelling invokes active participation that leads to better acceptance, retention and recollection of information. Thus, it can be used as a catalyst for innovative problem solving, addressing issues that are considered taboo, de-stigmatizing and busting myths.

Acknowledgement

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