

Why we need better storytellers for the new narratives in our dangerous world

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Explain this...

Journalists tell stories so it's not surprising we think in terms of 'narratives' with even the most complex issues. For me narrative has become an almost [redundant cliché](#) over used by politicians and marketeers. But it's still useful to describe how stories – incidents, issues, organisations, individuals etc – can be woven into a developing thread. And then sometimes that narrative changes.

I remember back in the early 2000s seeing some video on a newswire of a farm protest in China. It was all a bit out of context – just images of villagers attacking Chinese police. Perhaps someone died but it hardly made the papers. Something made me take it to our diplomatic editor, who also sensed that this was more than a one-off. We led the bulletin on it that night as a part of a new narrative about how the Chinese monolith might be cracking. Now these kinds of grassroots protests catalysed

by social media are recognised as a vital part of the emerging new dispensation in state capitalist China.



...or this.

So it is with [Mali](#) and the [sectarian attacks](#) on Shia Muslims in Pakistan. I am not an expert, but it feels like we've moved on again from the delusory simplicities of the so-called War on Terror and the Clash of Civilisations. I realise that this is hardly news, but with Iraq now a bitter memory and Afghanistan a tattered retreat, it's a good time to seek out the new narratives.

One could well be the ideological battle(s) for Africa. Not just Muslim extremism but also the role of China and the search for a post-post-colonialist politics from Tunisia to South Africa.

The other will be the divisions within Islam itself. Christianity did a good job for at least a thousand years in using religion as proxy, catalyst or cause for conflict amongst itself. Perhaps Muslims might, too.

How can we understand these forces – some novel, some merely ancient factors surfacing in different ways – without narrative?

Some people feel that narrative itself is in crisis. [This piece](#) by a creative writing academic argues that the Internet is a 'hive of distraction' and appears to blame Modernism or perhaps Post-Modernism, though it's fair enough to say that historically each generation thinks storytelling is broken.

I think there is truth in this. You only have to look at the complexity – not just of the issues that surround us – but the way that they reach you. Think of the multiple sources that avail themselves through the different screens or surfaces that offer mediation of your world.

Yet, I feel it's also an age where superficially, at least, there is more coherence around certain narratives. Think of how the media swarmed around Haiti's earthquake or how Twitter orders itself by 'trending topics'.

Of course, that's the mechanics rather than the meaning. We still look for seers. Books that offer metaphors to capture complexity such as Taleb's *Black Swan* are popular for precisely this reason. The world is a complicated, changing mess of issues but the appetite for serious narrative is still there – and growing. Journalism should take

note.

I'd be really interested in any journalists or outlets that you think are helping to find and tell these new narratives.

Here are a couple of ideas sent in to me via email:

On Pakistan: [Touristani](#)

On media development for diversity: [the MDI is doing interesting work](#)

You can access a paper I wrote on [Globalisation, Media and UK Communities here](#). It explores how to tell stories in ways that connect people in different countries and the opportunities and limitations provided by new media.

And you can access another paper I wrote on [Connecting The World](#) on how international campaigners can connect to the public through understanding how media has changed and how online advocacy is changing political communications.

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