

The challenges of communicating policy & how stories rescue us

Using storytelling techniques can help to get policies heard and understood

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- **The problem:** It's often not easy to explain what 'policy' is and why it matters.
- **Why it matters:** To participate in policy decision-making – the foundation of any democracy – citizens need to understand what's at play.
- **The solution:** Explaining policy via storytelling to help citizens understand where we are, where we need to go, and their role in the journey, enabling informed decision-making.

At a friend's wedding recently, someone asked me what I do. "I work at a think tank – a policy research organisation called the Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (CSTEP)." I looked at the slightly impressed but confused faces around and took a deep breath.

"We look at government policies; for example, why we need to increase the deployment of rooftop solar or how we can cut pollution – we conduct scientific research – a lot of our staff are engineers and scientists and we look at new technology and developments in science, and how it can help us achieve these goals," I elaborated.

Over the last five years of working as a communication officer in a science and technology think tank, there's one thing I've realised. It is not easy to explain what 'policy' is.

But if that's the case, how do we begin conversations on policies, let alone empower citizens to participate in policy decision-making – the foundation of any democracy.

If you think about it, when it comes down to it, all of us resort to some kind of storytelling.

To explain policy, I often use an example, say renewable energy.

We might introduce the characters involved – the government, solar energy (maybe rooftop photovoltaics), and fossil fuel (the villain in this story). We talk about the plot (what is the context, where are we right now), the twists in the story, or the obstacles that the hero/heroine – solar energy – faces (energy storage, rare earth materials). What is the government (which can be seen either as a mighty wizard working to help the hero in the background or the hero's supportive best friend) doing? This story could be an open-ended one – will India meet its ambitious goals? Or, how will the heroine of the story overcome the villain? Stay tuned, one might say.

Stories are at the centre of our decision-making process

The human brain is wired for stories. In fact, we are addicted to them. Stories have been present since the very beginning of human cognitive evolution. Stories help hold attention – a scarce resource in today's age of information abundance.

Research has shown that story-telling synchronises the storyteller's and the listener's brain activities, both in basic language processing areas and in high-level networks involved in understanding meaning.

Stories serve as a “collective sensemaking process,” this [article](#) quotes Liz Neeley, former executive director of [Story Colliders](#), as saying, “Stories are the ways in which we knit together events, that we postulate about causality, that we resolve ambiguity. We identify who the heroes are and who the villains are.”

Businesses have already identified and are taking advantage of stories to build brand identity, visibility and to influence consumer behaviour. Now, there is growing research that supports narrative building and story-telling as key influencers in policymaking as well. In fact, in 2020, the United National University's International Institute of Global Health included 'The Art of Story-telling for Influencing Policy' in an early career professional workshop, exploring the power of narrative in influencing policymaking audiences.

According to Cast from Clay, a UK-based communication organisation working with think tanks, social media has empowered citizens and given people a voice and agency. Thus, for 21st-century requirements, think tanks need a [new model of communication](#) – one that puts the story at the beginning of communicating policy.

The climate crisis, the urgent need to cut down fossil fuels; the many aspects to be considered in deploying renewable energy; air pollution and its health impacts; and the need for transformative ideas and innovation to help build resilience, has brought the focus onto storytelling as the yet untapped magical wand at our disposal.

Telling a good story

There are good stories and bad stories, but this is a subjective experience too. In my experience, what makes a compelling, memorable story and what makes a story 'sell' are the following elements:

People: Citizens are at the centre of any public policy. When communicating policy (especially science and technology-related policy) we need to bring them to the forefront and ensure that we are able to communicate with them. Identifying a person who will be affected by the lack of clear-cut policies and telling his or her story can help establish the relevance of a policy and its impact. Using story-telling techniques, we can also garner support and cooperative action towards or against a particular policy.

The plot: But, in order to do this, scientists have to take a step back from their hypotheses, methodologies, surveys, and data and take a moment to observe life.

This can be the most challenging aspect of communicating science - taking our eyes away from the tree to look at the forest. But this is critical in setting the context and helping the reader understand where we are, where we need to go, and their role in this journey.

Once you have thought this out, describe what you see. Now, you have the beginning of a story.