

chapter 6

building
the
narrative

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When setting out to craft their narratives, storytellers have a huge task at hand. Stories, depending on how they are crafted, can literally change the way people think. “Journalists create the world for people,” Jelena Dzekseneva, the anthropologist in Lyon, said. “They imagine the world from what they see and hear in the media, and approach people they meet in the streets based on this.” Indeed, it is hard to underestimate the power of narratives. The philosopher Michel Foucault, in

his writings on power, spoke about how discourse defines and produces knowledge, an important form of power, and impacts the way we act and think. Our stories and how we narrate them, therefore, are real manifestations of power.

Many participants spoke about the process of crafting stories: how it may be done in damaging ways, but also for the better. Laure Makarem from ARM in Lebanon said that the fact that someone writes well and has a track record of covering an issue does not necessarily mean that their approach is good: “It doesn’t mean that they intend to transfer power to the people they meet. There has to be some sharing of power, otherwise ethics and trainings don’t matter.” Makarem remembered a journalist who photographed one of ARM’s members in a particularly good way. “It was not like, ‘I want this to be a dark portrait’ but rather asking the person: ‘How do you want to portray yourself?’ Such small things make a difference,”

Makarem said. Rayan Sukkar from Campji also recalled an example that she liked, a video she saw about a girl living as a refugee in Lebanon. “She took us on a visit to where she lives. She spoke about problems in her life – lack of water, other things. But it showed the girl’s strength. I think even when she grows up, she will feel proud about this video.” Sukkar said.

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Storytellers make many decisions when building their narratives. They select what angles and orientation to take, which details to bring to light or omit, and how to describe people and places. Therefore, even if they are invisible in the story itself, storytellers remain at the center of the narrative process. Fatima Alhaji, the journalist in Berlin, said that she acknowledges her privileged position. “I know that I am powerful in this position and that I have to keep an eye on myself all the time. Because it can be tempting as a journalist to use your privilege, to just ‘go and get the best story and that’s it,’” she said. Sukkar, the journalist from Campji, agreed with Alhaji: “The person writing an article should think one thousand times about what kind of a link or connection they create with their story,” she said.

Stories may serve to enrich our understanding of certain topics – or do the opposite, reinforce stereotypes and narrow ideas. Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in a widely viewed TED Talk¹⁰ from 2009, describes how the fact that we only have ‘single stories’ about certain issues and places in the world limits our understanding. ‘Single stories’ lack nuance and complexity, and convey only one type of image from a particular place, over and over again. When this happens, when one singular story gets told over and over again, we will think that this is the full and only truth.

Dzekseneva, the anthropologist, described a film she watched about an Italian island where many migrants arrived: “It was a nice movie and I really liked it,” she said. “But we only got to know the Europeans in the movie. We came with them into the kitchen, we went on someone’s boat, we saw someone’s son playing. The migrants in the movie were only shown as a group of people, and we didn’t get to know any of them.” If people who are migrants or refugees are portrayed in the media like this, only as members of anonymous groups and without showing their own trajectories, it leads to othering and xenophobia in society. “The media plays a huge role in reproducing a discourse of ‘us’ and ‘them’, especially in Europe,” Simone Spera, the PhD student from Italy, said. “It reproduces the idea that migrants are people who arrive in boats, even though in Europe most migration happens between European countries.”

10 | www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda Ngozi Adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

Nudrat Kamal, a writer and lecturer of comparative literature in Karachi, Pakistan, spoke in a [podcast episode](#)¹¹ about the need to dismantle the hegemony of ‘single stories.’ “If you have more stories it becomes like a kaleidoscope. Instead of one view it’s like many, many images and stories, and all of them are in conversation with one another, perhaps contradicting and complicating one another.” In every way, Kamal said, this is a question of power: “If we want to, like I want to, make the world more equitable in power, we need more stories. We need less stories from people who are already in power and more stories from people who are different and don’t necessarily have that global power.”

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All of this is contingent on how storytellers narrate stories. It is the result of choices that may be unconscious, but can be brought to attention with self-inquiry and reflection. Doha Adi from Sawa for Development and Aid said that they changed the way they tell stories through experience: “Organisations like us, which started as grassroots organisations, learned about ethical standards along the way. We used to share posts on social media with children crying and people receiving aid. But people told us, ‘I don’t want to be portrayed like that, I was going through a bad phase and that is not who I am.’” Now, Sawa for Development and Aid has another way of working. “We have created standards and now keep them in check. At first, we drew bullet points and then kept developing them. This document is now fifteen pages long,” Adi said.

Representations in the media have real implications. Several participants described how negative images of migrants and refugees “create a world,” like Dzekseneva said, that reflects such negativity. Adi mentioned the media’s focus on portraying families in camps. “There are a lot of refugees who don’t live in camps, who are students and employees. We rely on them for the human resources for agriculture and industries for our basic needs.” When journalists fail to capture that, “refugees feel useless and lose their self esteem,” Adi said. “If you are constantly told that you are worthless, you will be convinced of that.” Samih Mahmoud from Campji said that the mainstream media continues to show refugees in Lebanon in bad light: “When a Syrian person for example does something wrong, they broadcast their nationality. Even if it has nothing to do with the person being Syrian.”

¹¹ | www.soundcloud.com/user-968223567/unlocked-bonus-episode-49



This – details and cliché descriptions, references to nationality, race or gender – is how narratives play a role in shaping our understanding of migration. Throughout the last few years of reporting on refugees and migration, many major outlets have used expressions like ‘waves’ or people ‘flowing’ across borders: words fit to describe natural emergencies, not the movement of human beings. David Cameron, the former prime minister of the U.K., was [quoted](#)¹² saying that a “swarm of people” was coming to the island. Even the BBC, the British public service broadcaster, [spoke](#)¹³ of people who are migrants as a ‘flood’ and ‘stream’ in their reporting (and illustrated the same article with a photograph where migrants are portrayed in a group, without introducing anyone by name).

Adi said that her NGO thinks carefully about what words to use in their documentation and communication. “We don’t use the word ‘beneficiary’ for instance, we say ‘community member’ or ‘participant,’” she said. Once, Sawa for Development and Aid did a video about the community kitchen they put up each Ramadan. “But the subtitles said, ‘we are feeding 10,000 people.’ That was wrong, we don’t use that language. We are not feeding people, as if they are passive recipients of aid,” Adi said.

Sukkar, the journalist from Campji, also spoke about the importance of choosing words. “After I travelled abroad and saw perspective there, I realised that giving importance to the veil, for instance, can lead to Islamophobia.” For her, describing someone as veiled in a story had never had particular meaning – it was just a description like any other. “But if we want a common message, one that does not evoke hatred or generate stereotypes, we should think about words like these,” she said. For Adi, again, a seemingly insignificant choice between ‘war’ and ‘crisis’ has real consequences. “Many journalists say ‘the Syrian crisis’ even though it is a war. This lessens what people go through. If we use the word ‘war’ we remember that these people are not safe in their country,” she said.

“It is really beautiful to sit in front of someone who tells you all about their life.”

When writing about migration, very small and simple measures can contribute to shifting per-

¹² | www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jul/30/david-cameron-migrant-swarm-language-condemned

¹³ | www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33204681

spectives. There is a difference for instance between introducing someone as ‘a migrant’ and ‘a person who is a migrant’: in the first case, we have reduced their identity to only being a migrant, while the second option allows for them to retain all their other identities as well. Migration narratives may be internalised as well. In one of our workshops, two Syrian journalists in Germany applied and were accepted as participants. Later on, they said that they had taken for granted that they were selected to take part in the workshop only as ‘migrants’, not for their professional backgrounds as journalists, which was really the case.



Moving away from the dominance of ‘single stories’ requires not only a diverse content of stories, but also an increase in their numbers. Spera, the Italian PhD student, said that more stories are needed. “Policymakers operate with large-scale data, so if we present many narratives they cannot say, ‘Oh but that’s just one case so it doesn’t make a difference.’ It is our task to produce enough stories for them to realise that they need to do differently,” he said.

Crafting new, diverse and alternative narratives is not necessarily easy. Few of us – no one in fact – are able to free ourselves from preconceptions and conventional ideas about the world. Still, there are ways to try. Mustelin, the writer from Germany, mentioned one way that we often introduce in the workshops: to imagine replacing the protagonist in a story with someone else. “If we do this with ourselves, it shows stereotypes we might have about gender or other identities,” Mustelin said. Nour Ghoussaini, the journalist from Lebanon, suggested that we constantly challenge the brain in order to recognise diversity. “Just like everything else in life, we have to train the brain,” she said.

Questions in this chapter

How can storytellers craft migration stories that are more equal and diverse?

What kind of impact do word choices and the way we describe people have?

How can storytellers move away from reproducing ‘single stories’?