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Debate: How to tell stories about government success

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Compelling stories about government success

Citizens, practitioners, and scholars excel in sharing stories about government failure. That is understandable because the mistakes of government have major consequences. Yet, as argued by Compton et al. (2021), if we are to identify and strengthen what works in the public sector, we must become equally good at sharing stories about government success.

A story is an account of the actions of specific people in a specific situation, with events presented in such a way to make a bigger point (Feldman et al., 2004). A story about a specific public sector success could highlight the characteristics of successful government overall. However, telling compelling stories about bureaucracies may be challenging.

Gabriel (2004) argues that a compelling story about organizations should meet three criteria:

- The story is credible.
- The story is relatable.
- The story has a broader message.

This article explores how these criteria can be met when recounting stories of government success.

Credible stories without happy endings

According to the classic philosophers, a story should consist of three parts: introduction, crisis, and resolution. The movie *Shrek* follows this structure perfectly: we are introduced to the ogre Shrek living merrily in his swamp. Then his life is thrown into turmoil by an evil prince. Yet Shrek resolves everything, gets his princess, and lives happily ever after.

To be credible, a story about government cannot have such a gratifying resolution. A movie celebrating the establishment of the welfare state would require a grim sequel about the bureaucratic nightmare it has become for some. Even if policies solve one problem, they often create new problems in turn (Wildavsky, 1979).

However, resolution does not necessarily mean a happy ending. Resolution is better understood as catharsis—the release of emotions—with sorrow as the most powerful emotion. Stories about government success can be about giving shape to sadness, such as the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

Great story-telling can also be about negating resolution. Sheherazade, the storyteller of *One Thousand and One*

Nights, held captive by a sultan, knew she would be killed if the sultan grew bored. She always left a part of her story unfinished to keep him engaged. The Dutch do the same in their story about the struggle against water. First the story was about the defence against the sea, then the story became about managing water while protecting ecosystems, and now the story has shifted to dealing with climate change. They celebrate their successes, but remain fascinated by what happens next.

Relatable stories without heroes

Aristotle argued that all stories need a hero. Central figures such as Superman and Wonder Woman give the listener someone to look up to. However, our monitory democracy so keenly scrutinizes officials that even the most perfect civil servant is bound to stumble.

Moreover, as government has become more complex, it may be difficult to put a face to the achievement from a multitude of actors. The near-eradication of polio, for example, is the product of a global effort involving many organizations. Anointing a single hero would make the story both unrealistic and unhelpful as it perpetuates a ‘strongman’ approach to government.

The heroes in modern government stories need to offer less inspiration (‘I want to be like that’) and more identification (‘I am just like that’). Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, is a weak figure in comparison to the wizards and elves around him. But Frodo gives the reader a relatable point of view in that wondrous world.

Relatable stories about government success might best be told from the perspective of the humble foot soldiers of success. For example, the Election Commission of India facilitates the largest democratic vote in the world. Its story may be better told from the perspective of the local official ensuring that a remote village in the Himalayas can vote, than from the viewpoint of the mighty Election Commissioner in New Delhi.

Relevant stories without grand narratives

Stories traditionally derive their relevance from the grand message about the world encapsulated in the tale. However, the appeal of grand narratives has eroded considerably. Lyotard (1984) marked an ‘end of grand narratives’, as ideologies such as socialism and capitalism proved imperfect. Such grand narratives have been further undermined by the fracturing media landscape and individuals citizens becoming their own story-tellers.

Scholars and practitioners could try to re-establish a grand narrative about the merits of government, yet Lyotard advocated replacing grand narratives with a lively exchange of small stories. There is rarely an all-dominant story about an organization but, rather, a whirlwind of narratives and counter-narratives which can act as a stimulant for innovation (Gabriel, 2004).

Stories about government success do not need to add up to a big narrative that illuminates everything, but can form a constellation of bright spots in the darkness. For example, rather than attempting to craft one grand account about the restoration of democracy, one could collect and share inspiring examples of democratic initiatives from Brazil to Bristol. Each story offers an insight in what worked in a specific context and serves as a reminder that democracy can be revitalized.

Sharing a different type of success story

The call to scholars and practitioners is to start sharing cases of government success while developing a different type of story. Stories that are credible because they are never finished, relatable because they talk of everyday heroism, and great because they focus on the small successes.

Lesson plan

A free lesson plan is available for writing success stories with student and practitioners. Please contact the author (s.c.douglas@uu.nl) for details.

Disclosure statement

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