

Digital Workplace Impact



with Paul Miller



Episode 65

The Rise of Storytelling in the Digital World of Work

Transcript



“People look to stories as a way to explain to them what’s going on and to make some sort of sense of it.”

– Michael Kowalski, Tortoise

Stories ignite both sides of the brain, which means that they can engage our logic and emotions. What’s more, neuroscience has proved that emotion is more important than logic when it comes to driving a decision, making organizational storytelling a highly effective way to communicate, internally and externally.

Our guests are passionate storytellers, **Harriet Patience-Davies**, a Storytelling Coach from Accenture, and **Michael Kowalski**, Head of Product at Tortoise, a London-based slow news startup. Together they discuss the shift from corporate speak to storytelling, share how COVID has brought new stories to the surface, and explain how technology has enhanced and amplified storytelling.

Paul

Today's episode is something a little bit different again. It's all around the importance of storytelling in work and life.

I think organizations in these days of COVID have been having to tell a lot of stories to themselves to keep the organization ticking over – and a lot of leaders have had to spend a lot more time communicating. What are they communicating about? They're communicating about the stories of what the organization's doing, what it's making happen. So I'm really pleased to be having this conversation.

I'm delighted to be joined by **Harriet Patience-Davis**. Harriet is a former screenwriter – I think probably the first former screenwriter we've had on the podcast – and a current digital consultant for Accenture. In 2019 she became the UK storytelling coach for Accenture UK and she's responsible for internal training and coaching, with the aim of widespread adoption of storytelling skills across the business. I think it's fascinating that an organization like Accenture has somebody who comes in to help them with storytelling. So we're going to get into that.

My other guest is **Michael Kowalski**. Michael is currently Head of Product at Tortoise, a London-based slow news startup that is pioneering a new approach to journalism and, let's face it, we all want new approaches to journalism, because so much of the journalism we currently consume, if that's the right word, is so, kind of, demeaning and depressing. It's not that these things haven't happened but is it the *only* thing that's happened in our world that day? Sometimes I wonder about it. Anyway, Michael's also spent the past 20 years designing media products, founding a couple of startups along the way, and he curates the annual storytelling conference Confluence, held at Google's Academy in London. So, great to have you here Harriet and Michael.

Michael Good to be here.

Paul. So, just to start off – because you've both got job descriptions that, if you like, need a little bit of explanation – can I start off with you, Harriet? Can you describe your work and also tell us how you got into storytelling at a huge consulting and technology company like Accenture?

Harriet Absolutely. So I think it's important to state that Accenture didn't recruit me as a storytelling consultant. Accenture brought me in as a digital product person about five years ago, when the Accenture digital brand was really strong. Part of the nature of these big consultancies is, which I will admit I didn't know when I joined, is it's a little bit like it's a recruitment consultancy – once you've joined into the consultancy as a client-facing person, you're responsible for finding the jobs that you do, which clients you want to work on and how you want to develop your career. So I'd been at Accenture for five years doing project and product work, and digital delivery work, and then there was this opportunity that came up last year for a storytelling coach... which I guess means I should go a little bit further back in my career, which is that when I was at university I fell head over heels in love with screenwriting and really wanted to pursue that as a career. I got a Masters degree in it and got some shorts made and even a feature, but I just *could not* break through. I was trying to do a full-time job to pay the rent along with doing screenwriting in the mornings and on the weekends – and I will admit I burnt out a bit in my late 20s, getting up at 4:00 a.m. to do a couple of hours writing before work, working a full day, then coming home and writing again in the evening. It all got too much and I had to make a call at that point to go with the career that was going to pay for my rent and put food on the table.

I still write for fun, I still challenge myself to produce fiction and I'm still a very amateur part of that world. That being said, when I realized that Accenture actually had an interest in storytelling and they were looking to develop this skill internally, I was really eager to take on the role and I've been doing it now for a little under a year. I have to say it's been my favourite job since I've been there. It is a lot of fun.

Paul So, how does an organization like Accenture decide that they want somebody to teach them and help them with storytelling? And when they did that, did you just internally apply for it?

Harriet I actually had been lobbying that we should be doing more around storytelling for about three years. I was sent on Design Thinking training for human-centered design, which I absolutely loved, and I recognized some of the techniques that we were using in Design Thinking as

techniques I had used in screenwriting and when I was studying for my Masters in screenwriting. There was lots of familiarity between customer journeys and a positive-to-negative mapping of how an audience feels watching a James Bond film, for example. And so I started talking to people then about it and making a little bit of a name for myself internally as this person who wouldn't shut up about how we should use Hollywood movies more with our clients.

As to why the company has decided to focus on this, I think it really comes down to the fact that we are a big technology company and, in my opinion, sometimes we're not brilliant at expressing ourselves because we can get very, very technical. So my understanding is that the company recognized that improving communication skills and enabling everybody to explain these highly technical, highly complex solutions and systems in the best way possible, meant that we were going to have to work on a wider set of communication skills. That led to the powers that be – and I don't know exactly who it was who made the high-level choice to bring it in – but over the past few years storytelling has become a really big focus in improving people's communication and presentation skills. A lot of what I teach within the company and a lot of the conversations I have with people do end up being very directly around presentations and speeches and pitches.

But there's a wider understanding that there are lessons we can take from storytelling, storytelling being, let's face it, one of the standard and basic ways that human beings have communicated for tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of years. We were telling stories around a campfire long before we were writing books – and certainly long before we were using technical language and drawing systems diagrams, and so I think there's a recognition that there are lessons we can take from that to make ourselves better communicators in every single way.

Paul

Yes, and I think it's one of the reasons why I really wanted to record this podcast with you both. I love storytelling and I love stories. I mean, I'm a CEO of a consulting company, with 120 people in it, and people often say – and this is not me patting myself on the back, it's just hopefully useful information – they often say I spend a lot of time telling stories and gathering examples, and one of the things that strikes me about stories in an information-dense world is that they provide a kind of way of understanding the world around us. I can quite see why in Accenture, where you've got so much brainpower happening and you've got pitches for X, Y and Z going on – it's the stories that cut through.

Is there an example that you could give me of where a story inside Accenture helped kind of unlock something that was stuck?

Harriet

I can give you some details without client names, because obviously we have many NDAs that I'm required to uphold. But I'm aware there was a pitch happening in Latin America where we responded to the RFP document – in detail, you know, every question that was asked, we responded to it, every requirement we responded to it – and the document we sent back was apparently 500 pages long... 500 pages! I mean, can you imagine that? A 500-page pitch document and the client in question came back to us and said: "We don't know what you're saying. We don't understand what you're trying to tell us" and I believe the pitch team at that point, who had already been working with some of our creative agencies that we work with and that we've acquired within the larger Accenture network, decided to basically throw out the pitch document and instead produce a seven-minute video showing it from the customer's side. This particular pitch was all about financing for car loans and, basically, in changing the focus from this massive 500-page response document into a seven-minute video, that said, you know what, it's not about all the details of this, it's about what we're going to be able to offer your customers. It completely restructured, completely changed the conversation, they were having – and the client was very happy. I believe we won the pitch and went forward and we're still working with them now. So yes, 500-page document versus seven-minute video. That's a hell of a turnaround!

Paul

Yes, and there was somebody in my company, one of our consultants, who was talking about a project his wife had been involved in. She works for a large pharmaceutical company, and what they had done was they created some TV adverts that were all based on what people inside the pharmaceutical company had been doing during COVID in terms of reusing skills they've got in the medical field, etc. – and capturing those stories. I watched it – it was up on YouTube – and it really kind of gave you tingles. And obviously what you're then thinking is what a great company and what great stories. I think that's sort of an example of trying to capture these stories and examples.

So Michael, can you just explain what Tortoise does and what a slow news organization does? But also how did you get involved with this annual storytelling conference, Confluence?

Michael

Yes, indeed. I've worked on the edge of journalism for quite a long time, working for businesses like The Guardian and News Corp. and so forth – but never as a journalist. I'm not a journalist. I've been involved on, you know, the media technology side of these businesses. Then later, in founding some of the startups I've worked on, these have been about building tools for telling stories.

So Tortoise is a journalism business in the sense that we have a bunch of journalists and we do produce stories. But what's different about it is

– actually a good way to look at it is where the impetus of founding Tortoise came from, which is really the events of 2016. If you think about Trump being elected in America, the Brexit vote happening here in the UK, I think a lot of people who work in the media felt they'd missed the story... how did they not see this coming? You know, there's a sense that everyone's caught up in a sort of media bubble, so I think the thing about journalism is: Who's telling the stories? What voices are being listened to?

At Tortoise we're trying to find a way to sort of burst that bubble and listen to a wider range of voices, so a lot of what we do is really about organized listening. We're a membership organization; we don't rely on any advertising. Our members effectively come into our newsroom and tell us about their experiences and their opinions, and help us find leads for stories to follow up, and we hope out of that we produce a kind of a deeper, more reflective, journalism – you know, where it takes as long as it takes to get to the story.

Paul Yes, and what about the Confluence conference... how did you get involved with a conference about storytelling?

Michael Well, as I said, I've been doing various startups around the edge of this space and working with publishers. A good friend of mine, Justine Solomons, runs a networking organization for people in the book industry in the UK, and she asked me if I could step in and curate this conference for her when she had the idea of doing it. It's fantastic. We get a wide range of people talking about storytelling in all types of contexts – business as much as screenplays or novels or gaming. You know, this is what's interesting about storytelling as a technique, it's the *wide* scope of areas you can apply it to.

Paul Yes. So, we're recording this in July... Harriet, what stories have you been telling, or what stories are getting told inside Accenture in the days of COVID?

Harriet Well, we've definitely been telling stories about adopting remote working. We adapted to remote working really very quickly. We shut down all of our offices, I believe in advance of the UK government's lockdown – and we've got offices all around the world. We've had people who have been working in call centres – for example, I have colleagues I've spoken to in Malaysia who weren't necessarily as set up for remote working as we were in the UK – and there's had to be this, well, Herculean effort to shift *everybody* to remote working. So we've been telling a lot of those internal success stories and ensuring that everybody is safe and that everybody is OK to work. But we've also been helping out various clients go through the same journey because not everybody was set up for remote working. Often you had

organizations where, you know, only a certain proportion of the staff would have laptops and everybody else would have a desktop machine – and, you know, desktops are transportable but they're not exactly easily adaptable for remote working, so there's been lots going on with that.

I believe that we're one of the biggest users in the world of Microsoft Teams. I seem to recall, now I might not have the statistic quite correct, but I seem to recall that we went from 100 hundred million minutes of Microsoft Teams a day to 300 million minutes a day. You know, I would have to look that up, I can't quite remember what the story was there.

Paul

I think you're right and I think you probably are the largest ever user of Teams and I think the number is certainly in the several hundred million minutes.

And Michael, you're involved in storytelling with Tortoise – has that changed during COVID?

Michael

Yes, absolutely. In a weird way it's kind of been good for us. We were in the past running loads of events on our premises, in our newsroom. Actually, I should give you a better idea of this. What we do is, once or twice a day, sometimes even three times a day, we bring in a group of people to our newsroom and we'll discuss a topic with them, we explore some question. Normally we'll have some invited guests who've got specialties – a special expertise in the subject – but also we want to hear from our members as well; what they have to say and what they think.

Paul

Could you give me an example of something that you did this process with?

Michael

Oh, there's a wide range of issues – things from culture and technology, a lot of politics, sometimes exploring specific stories about cases that are active.

In lockdown, obviously we had to bring this all online and that has turned out to be absolutely great. We get bigger audiences, we get more diverse audiences, we get audiences from other countries, we get audiences who are capable of coming to one of our events without having to be in London on a specific day at a specific time – so, from that point of view, it's been really good and, of course, we've also done a lot of journalism about COVID, you know, trying to go deeper than what's happening on any one day. Also, a lot of work with data looking at how various data sets have changed over the course of the pandemic and what the impact of that might be going forward.

Paul And when we're thinking about leaders and managers, and the power of stories in work, how do you take somebody in a leadership or a management role, Harriet, and turn them from somebody who potentially might produce an 800-page document, or whatever, into somebody who's thinking in terms of stories? What's the kind of process you go through?

Harriet Well, there's definitely a mindset shift required. I can't pretend that's an easy journey. We have some really good internal training, which is focused on developing our next generation of leaders, and when I say that, I don't just mean looking at the 20-somethings or 30-somethings, I mean we have training going through every stage of your career, which is all about developing your leadership skills – and storytelling is a really big part of at least two of those trainings that I'm aware of. In fact, under one of them, we define storytelling as the ability to “articulate an inspiring vision” – so bringing people in and convincing them that they can look beyond the 500-page document to find the story, and I believe the company has had a widespread view on this for quite a long time in terms of developing its internal resource.

We've had a focus on winning them over to the value and power of storytelling, and obviously there are facts and figures you can use for that. There's a lot of science out there about how well an audience responds to storytelling. For example, a fact wrapped in a story is 22 times more memorable than the fact alone. So, you are able to say, if you include a story in your presentation wrapped around this fact, then people are going to remember it a lot better.

We've also got scientific studies saying that in brain scans of people who have been telling stories the brain lights up in far more places. The brain is engaged and there have also been studies that have shown that, when a story is told well and the speaker's brain lights up in all of these different places, the audience's brain will also light up in these different places. It's referred to as neural coupling.

So we literally have the science to back up the idea that including storytelling in engaging your presentations, engaging with clients, is a really good way of delivering your message in an effective and compelling way. We have quite a technical audience, so of course we use the science to prove the value!

Paul And has the organization embedded this kind of way of approaching conversations, would you say, or is it still a kind of added-on feature? How far has it become part of the culture?

Harriet I'd say it's a journey that we're on. I mean, I can't speak on behalf of Accenture and their goals here, because I am simply one small cog in

the massive machine but, you know, we've started the journey and I think a lot of people are starting to recognize the value. Obviously we've still got quite a way to go. Nothing changes overnight in these big organizations, does it?

Paul No, and when you're starting off trying to bring stories to a group of consultants, managers, do you start off with a story?

Harriet I like to use TED talks, because I think a lot of people recognize that TED talks are about the highest level of professional presentations that we see widely – so I tend to bring in a lot of TED talks and get people talking about why this worked or why that worked. There isn't, I think, unfortunately, one story we can tell that will win everybody over, so – as we actually advise people on our storytelling training – you have to tailor to your audience and look for what their needs and interests are... and luckily there are thousands and thousands of TED talks.

Paul Yes, indeed. And Michael, what role does this play in the output from Tortoise? Do you come from more of a narrative storytelling approach or is it more kind of factually based? And how do you try to amplify the story aspect?

Michael I think it's a mix of those things. As I said, I'm not a journalist but I think even if you're working in product... product is all about triangulating user needs, business requirements, technology – and a lot of the time you're in the middle there, communicating between these groups of people, stakeholders who don't necessarily all understand each other. So it can be really powerful to develop a sort of common narrative that everybody can get behind – they can understand that story and where it's going, so it's certainly a big part of how I approach the work I'm doing.

Paul Yes, and I've noticed that stories do seem to kind of capture people in a particular way. I have some favourite stories (not, hopefully, ones I tell interminably!) but because, a bit like the Accenture consultants, I'm running a management consulting company, so there's a lot of client interaction, and so on – and there's a story I tell about Neil Barnett, who's in charge of all the digital workplace at Heathrow Airport. The story I tell is about him deciding to go down to the runway at night with some of the people who work fixing snags in the runway and he really wants to find out what their actual experience is of being on the frontline and what extra tools and services they need in order to get their job done. And what he discovers is that, actually, they don't need anything else to get their work done but what would be really useful – and what he then introduced – was the ability to be able to change their shifts and rotas with their colleagues. So, if there's something happening in their own personal lives, they can adapt their shifts and what they're doing.

The story behind it is really that once you start to get into the nuts and bolts of what people are doing and actually observe that, you might get some very surprising results.

I suppose I've kind of noticed that this will then spark in people listening to it: "Well, actually, that's just like here at IKEA"... or at Wells Fargo or HSBC. And I don't know whether you've noticed this, but I've found that, during COVID, there have been a lot more stories coming to the surface. I mean, in a way, there have been so many in the societies, the communities, we're part of... but also stories in work – you know, people are telling me stories about how the senior management in Cleveland got all the kit for homeworking and were going round to people's homes and plugging things in and how the leadership loved getting their sleeves rolled up. What I've noticed is that this kind of crisis seems to have brought out stories – and I just wonder, do you have any views on why that might be?

Harriet

I think that we're in a global pandemic situation and that people have been a little bit desperate for good news. I know in the early days of COVID, when it felt like every single news alert was just a climbing ladder of numbers – 10,000 dead here and 20,000 infected there – I had to detach from the news a little bit for my own mental health, and I've certainly seen a rise in people sharing uplifting stories and stories of amazing things: stories about people rescuing animals, stories about communities coming together to help out their most vulnerable members.

I mean, have you seen the John Krasinski web show, called "Some Good News"? I think he made it to three episodes before it actually got bought by one of the major television channels in the States – but basically, John Krasinski, the actor and director, had been, I suppose, going through the internet looking for positive news stories that he edited into this little show that he was delivering from behind his desk and, you know, because he's a Hollywood actor and director and he had some good connections, obviously, he also managed to get things like the entire Broadway cast of "Hamilton" to come online and sing one of the songs from the show –and it was incredibly uplifting to watch this. It just kind of made you smile, and I think in these dark days that we're all living through something that makes you smile has been very valuable. I think a lot of stories are the way people have found that.

Paul

Yeah, it's interesting. And it reminds me of what David Byrne from Talking Heads has done with a site called "Reasons to be Cheerful" and also my partner subscribes to a magazine called "Positive News" – and it's not fluff! It's stuff that's happening which is actually really encouraging and positive. I actually started off as a journalist and then

was a city editor at Reuters – but I left because I just kind of got tired of, you know, if somebody had died or something bad had happened, we'd be there. And I think one of the things we're discovering in 2020 is that the world is a lot more complex and varied than we thought and actually, the example you've just mentioned there – the reasons to be cheerful, I think even “The Daily Telegraph” has started publishing positive news.

I wonder, Michael, do you have a kind of remit within your organization to kind of select for a more – I don't know if you'd call it more balanced or just a more varied – set of what we call news?

Michael

Well, that's a tricky one. I mean, a lot of the news currents recently have been negative and we can't pretend that none of that is happening. We ran a project though called “Letters from Lockdown”, where we asked people to send in kind of short audio stories about what they've been doing under lockdown and, you know, a lot of those were really uplifting and not entirely what I necessarily would have expected.

But I think the reason that storytelling is so prevalent at the moment partly is because stories are about change. You know, if nothing changes in the story, it's not a story – and we're in this time of such change on so many fronts, that people look to story as a way to explain to them what's going on and to make some sort of sense of it.

Paul

Yes, I think that's certainly true and, in a way, both within the workplace and outside, what I've noticed is that those two worlds are blurring a lot. I mean we had a number of conversations and meetings postponed or cancelled with particular clients because they were out on “Black Lives Matter” protests in the States and they were being really open about that and talking about it – and this never used to happen. I think there's a real blurring between inside and outside as people are trying to understand what's happening in the world around us.

You mentioned 2016 earlier – and that was what brought me to Charles Eisenstein, who's coming on “DWG24”, which is our 24-hour programme in September. He's sort of, I call him an ecological philosopher, but he got known for talking about us being between stories, that one story of the world around us, certainly for our dominant civilization – and this is going back several years now – was struggling but the other, new story hadn't yet come into clear relief, so we are in between. We're in that sort of transitional space and I then translated his ideas. I did a talk at the IMF in Washington called “Working Between Stories” and people really liked it. I was kind of saying: “Look, if you've got more questions than answers at the moment, don't be surprised; we're between stories.” And they were, as an organization saying: “Well, you know, we were founded in 1947 after the Second World War,

and we kind of were there to build financial resilience but now financial resilience means environmental resilience, so should we now be more about climate change than financial stability and, if so, how?" – and they were kind of open about it. And people have talked about are we in a sort of period like after the Second World War? You know, what kind of world do we want to create for ourselves?

And I just wonder, Harriet, do you feel that organizations have stories? That they know their own stories? So, I mean, I mentioned IKEA, that's probably an organization that's got quite a good, clear story; you sort of understand the founders, but if we think of somebody like, maybe, GlaxoSmithKline, do they have a story that isn't just "We're a large pharmaceutical company"? I just wonder how prevalent or absent this is in the world of organizations and work?

Harriet

That's a really interesting question, Paul, because you can look at that from one point of view as story being equivalent to brand, right? And obviously there are stories that are told about companies and stories that are mythologized about companies. I mean, it's interesting to me sometimes to look at some of the biopics that have come out of Hollywood in the past decade or so, with "The Social Network" and two different Steve Jobs movies, kind of mythologizing how companies launched or relaunched or how it all came together. I think story is a key part of how humans self-identify. We all tell ourselves stories of the kind of people we want to be and how we would like to be seen by others and, to that extent, it would make sense that companies would also be telling themselves stories of the way they want to be seen, both in terms of marketing and brand, but also in terms of, you know, the kind of work they want to do and the kind of world they want to inherit.

I think that there's been a big and necessary push towards corporate social responsibility and it's grown in power over the past, well, couple of decades, since we turned into this millennium. Corporate social responsibility has just become a bigger and bigger part, and I know I've read statistics saying that people who are graduating from university now and have graduated from university in the past five years, want to work for companies which are giving something back, even if that's not necessarily taking the step of actually going to work for a charity. They don't actually want to work for a faceless corporate organization which is out to destroy the world – which I think might have been the prevalent story that was going on for a while with some of the mega brands we have. You can see it in oil and gas, right? You can see how some of the oil and gas companies are trying to rebrand themselves, looking into energy alternatives. And it feels like you now have to try and set your own story, I suppose, as a company, because otherwise the story will be set for you.

- Paul Yes, that's a good way of putting it and I wonder how the digital tools inside organizations can be used to share stories? I suppose one thing that occurs to me is that there's been quite a lot of examples of CEOs using different technologies to livestream, to connect, to communicate with people inside their organization, because they've discovered everyone's at home. I think Julie Sweet, who's the CEO of Accenture, has been doing that and I've seen her interviewed, frankly telling good stories. Are there particular technologies you think lend themselves to powerful, strong storytelling in work?
- Harriet I think the growth of video-calling platforms, like Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, have enabled us to have a more personal connection with leadership figures, who, in some large organizations, would before just have existed as – kind of in the same way as Hollywood actors – static faces on a screen far away. But now we have all these amazing virtual tools and you can literally join a virtual Q&A session with your CEO and ask them a question and have them answer it looking at you over a video feed in the same way as you're looking at them. So, all the kind of video-calling tools have just really increased the possibility for that sort of personal storytelling, which is just wonderful.
- Paul Yes, and I've talked about how, as a company, we used to have offices in London and New York until seven years ago, but then when we got rid of them, it actually brought the company closer together because everybody was in the same sort of shared digital environment. And then one of the other stories I tell is that, twice a year, I mean pre-COVID, the DWG management team used to hire a house and live together for a week. So I said: “We don't work together, but occasionally we live together” – and, you know, that became kind of a popular story.
- And Michael, are there particular organizations or even nations that you think this year have been telling compelling stories?
- Michael As a New Zealander, I have a simple answer on that one! But Jacinda aside, you know, I'm with Eisenstein. I think he's absolutely right that the end of history seems a long time ago now. That's in a business context; that whole Californian VC startup narrative is, you know, looking a bit tired. It feels like we are in-between things and we're not really sure where we're going next.
- We ran a piece, actually we've done a couple of big pieces of journalism this year, called “Tech Nations”, looking at the shift of power towards corporates, and talking about the big tech companies as if they were nations – that they've got their own foreign policies and domestic policies and so on, which is kind of a really interesting way to frame it and gives it a nice kind of narrative to hang a lot of data around as well.

- Paul I think of stories that I've been telling – I mean, I got asked a question by somebody I was having lunch with in January, when I was talking about this whole thing about being between stories, and the person I was having lunch said: “Well, where's the leadership going to come from?” and I said: “My own view is that we're moving into an era of *collective* leadership rather than individual leadership” – and that's not to say that individuals don't have an important role to play but I think that, increasingly, it's the collective that's been leading and, in a way, COVID has been a really powerful example. If I think about the best things that have happened in the UK during COVID, I don't particularly think about the government, I think about fellow citizens and the collective effort that people have put in, sort of self-leadership in a way.
- So just to bring things to a close, one thing I'm wondering is, in this year of incredible stories, Michael, what's the story that's most captured you? What's the story of 2020 that's really hit home for you?
- And while Michael's been put on the spot for that one, Harriet, you can think of your own answer too!
- Michael That's a tough one. It feels like we're so in the middle of it still and we don't know what the ending is.
- Paul That's quite good. That's sort of like, we're still in the middle of the book!
- Michael This probably doesn't actually quite fit here, but from a kind of narrow product perspective, one thing I think has been super-interesting about the pandemic is virtual reality. That it didn't happen. That it is a dog that didn't bark. That, if it wasn't going to be now, then when? I say this because it's something I'm super-interested in. When I run the storytelling conference, I always programme a reasonable bit of immersive stuff, and it felt like over the last two months while everyone's stuck at home, it would have been the perfect moment for some of this stuff to really see some uptake – and it simply hasn't happened.
- Paul And why do you think that is?
- Michael It's interesting, isn't it? I'm not entirely sure, Paul. On the augmented reality stuff, the technology isn't ready. On virtual reality, it's a bit more puzzling. I'm still trying to understand that.
- Paul Maybe it's to do with what's essential and, you know, it strikes me that when you're in crisis, you find out what's essential. We find out who the essential workers are. That's a story, isn't it? You know, we now know who in our society is actually essential and it wasn't ...

Michael/Harriet It wasn't any of us (laughter)!

Paul But then my ex-wife went back into nursing and became one of the essential workers! So, that was interesting – I think when you get down to the *essential* part of it, you discover that what you want is that it's nice to be able to see each other, and it's nice to be able to hear each other and, aside from that, I don't really need that much. So it is interesting what you say, Michael, about virtual reality *yet again* disappointing us.

And Harriet, what's your story that's captured you in 2020?

Harriet I think we're definitely at that point of the famous quote about the French Revolution that "It's too early to tell." But I have loved hearing the stories of how people have come together to help out and stories such as even little stories that have come up: WhatsApp groups supporting so that younger residents can support older residents in the neighbourhood, stories that came around of people doing socially distanced aerobics at the end of their gardens every day. It's as we were mentioning earlier, there has been so much darkness this year that any story which shows that human beings are inherently social animals and that people want to help has been good.

There is a book called "A Paradise Made in Hell" which is all about how, when human beings face moments of crisis in great tragedy and in huge upheavals and earthquakes and hurricanes, that we have this prevailing narrative that we as a society will all turn upon each other and it will be horrendous and that the human beings are the worst monsters, right? In every single apocalypse story ever, the human beings are worse than the zombies, they're worse than the aliens, they're worse than this – and I never particularly wanted to live through an apocalypse scenario, but to be living through a global pandemic and see how people *have* come together when they've been given those opportunities is actually wonderful.

I will say, however, that this year does seem like it's gearing up for a big finale. We've had so many little cliff-hangers along the way. If this was a TV show or a Hollywood movie, I would be very concerned about the third act.

Paul (Laughs) That's a really good way of putting it. I've had a few interesting conversations with people, where it's like: "Will we go back to...?", you know, this whole thing of "Will we go back to normal?" – and that's a bit like, well, can you go back in history and live in a period that's now gone?

One of the things that I think for me is my main story is that we've had this global experiment in climate renewal and we've discovered that, if we travel less and consume and produce less, the climate will actually respond really quickly. I think that's a factual experiment that happened that we can't now have not happened. So we now know something about our ability to positively affect the environment that we didn't know last December – and that should really, really encourage us. That's been something that has stayed with me about 2020.

So just before we end, anything you'd like to say?

Harriet

I'm really enjoying how storytelling is having a bit of a resurgence at the moment. I think it was back in January – back in those halcyon early days before the global pandemic was global, and when we were just worried about Australia burning – there were various articles that said storytelling would be the hot trend of 2020. Obviously we all know that is no longer the case; remote working is the hot trend of 2020... but one of the things I remember somebody actually asked me was: "Why am I hearing about storytelling now? Why are we talking about it now?" – and I think that it's not new, it's been around for a very long time and none of the techniques and approaches I teach people are new. I teach people to use simple language. I teach people to make eye contact with their audience. I teach people to, you know, be conscious of where they have their hands when they're standing on stage or when they're presenting on a video call. None of these are new things and previously we might have called them good communication skills, or we might have called it executive presence or strong presentation ability, and if we are going to keep working in a remote world for the foreseeable future – because I don't see myself going back to an office for a while – then I think it's ever more important that we communicate better and, if storytelling is one way of doing that, then it will help us.

Paul

Yes, and I think storytelling becomes really important inside organizations and in work, because the stories that we, that organizations, tell themselves and recount inside the organization forms their culture.

Well, thank you both so much for your contributions and for your time today. I think storytelling's really having its resurgence moment because we want to find meaning – and we do that through stories and telling stories. So, thank you so much Michael and thank you Harriet.

Harriet

It's been really nice talking to you Paul.

Michael

Thank you.

Paul

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This is Paul Miller wishing you well until next time.

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