

NARRATIVE
TO
CHANG

By Elisabeth Mansfeld

We at the Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft advocate for social and economic progress, and consider the processes of social, political, and technological transformation that shape our day-to-day lives. Our mission is to contribute to change in a responsible manner.

We ask ourselves: How can Europe strengthen the development of a liberal democracy and social market economy so that sustainable progress can be made? How can we shape change and answer the questions of our time responsibly? This ambitious priority is at the heart of our mission: 'We think change'.

HOW DO WE EXPERIENCE CHANGE TODAY?

Change is a fundamental aspect of life and can be experienced in many ways - physically, emotionally, mentally, and socially - depending on the context and the individual's perspective. In general, experiencing change can be challenging, as it can disrupt our sense of stability and predictability. However, it can also be an exciting opportunity for growth, learning, and self-discovery.

Currently, there is a sense of crisis and uncertainty impacting all European citizens. The war in Ukraine, the subsequent energy shortage, the recent Covid Pandemic, inflation and economic recession, and the impending climate crisis all contribute to an unprecedented, game-changing social and political landscape. These events trigger social unrest, political polarization, discussions about the role and significance of states, and debates about the (re)scaling of

governance mechanisms. At the same time there is increasing awareness that the way we currently live and act will not sustain prosperity and economic growth as we know it, let alone the global climate conditions we have come to take for granted. This is especially true in countries with a high standard of living.

These multiple external shocks, their foreseeable consequences and the resulting awareness require and lead to fundamental changes. This extent of change, which we now coin as 'transformation', calls for reflection and re-evaluation of the very principles, paradigms and narratives that shape our current collective and individual action. Strong and universally framed narratives of change support this transition process. They bring to light new perspectives that support a confident vision of the future and spark change processes in the way we think and act.

WHAT ARE NARRATIVES OF CHANGE?

Narratives of change are stories that describe how things are transformed over time, whether it be on an individual or societal scale. These narratives can take many forms, from personal testimonials to epic sagas. They serve to highlight the experiences of individuals and communities in the face of significant challenges, such as social upheaval, personal growth, or political transformation. Narratives of change are essential to understanding how societies and individuals adapt and evolve.

Fundamentally all narratives of change consist of a rationale, a problem description, and a projected or desired outcome. Narratives of change reveal why the world needs to adjust, what it needs to adjust to, who has the power to do so and, ideally, what actions need to be taken to achieve this. Narratives of change create a shared sense of belonging, community, and identity that structure actions and meaning based on a common outlook on the status quo and a desired future.¹

¹Pfotenhauer, S & Jasanoff, S. (2017): Panacea or Diagnosen? Imaginaries of innovation and the 'MIT model' in three political cultures, *Social Studies of Science*, 47 (6) pp. 783-810

THE POWER OF NARRATIVES OF CHANGE

The power of narratives of change lies in their ability to educate, inspire, and motivate. They can provide a sense of hope and optimism in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

When we talk about change, we must keep in mind that humans are creatures of habit, preferring the status quo over the prospect of transition or modification. Humans are generally content and satisfied, and it is in their nature to reject change and the unknown - even if it is ultimately for the better.² Only through reiteration and gradual strengthening of a narrative of change can a modification of habit be permanently manifested.

For example, the Black Lives Matter movement, which originated in the United States, has also had an impact on European narratives surrounding race and identity. As people of color have shared their experiences of discrimination and racism, Europe has been forced to confront its own history of colonialism, slavery, and racism, and to grapple with how to address these legacies. This narrative motivated individuals and communities to act and advocate for their rights.

Narratives of change also help to shape our understanding of history. They provide a lens through which we can view the past and help us make sense of the world around us. One instance of this is the Post-World War II reconciliation. Through the creation of institutions like the European Union, Europe sought to promote peace,

democracy, and economic cooperation, thus transforming the region's political and economic landscape.

However, not all narratives of change are positive. There are also stories of individuals and communities that have experienced setbacks and tragedies, including war, famine, and natural disasters. These narratives are just as important as the stories of triumph and success, as they remind us of the fragility of human life and the importance of resilience and adaptation.

Another example is the refugee crisis of the past decade which has challenged dominant narratives around migration, identity, and belonging in Europe. As millions of people have fled conflict and persecution, Europe has grappled with how to respond, with some countries welcoming refugees and others violently enforcing their borders or even closing them entirely.

This has led to new debates around what it means to be European and who is included in that identity. Throughout history, Europe has grappled with issues such as discrimination, inequality, and human rights abuses. The ongoing fight for gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and racial justice represent important themes in the contemporary European narrative of change.

²Mendelsohn, AI. (2019): Creatures of Habit: The Neuroscience of Habit and Purposeful Behavior, *Biol Psychiatry*, Jun 1;85 (11): p49-p51.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF NARRATIVES?

When sharing our stories, we do not list facts. Rather, we use plot, characters, and morals to communicate.³

In the communication in the public sphere, narratives (i.e. discursive or visual representations) of Europe are constantly circulating and changing, thus decisively shaping the opinion of Europe. Using today's wide range of media channels, any individual can reproduce and re-interpret narratives. They create their own "WE-groups".

During the COVID-19 crisis, disinformation, such as divided perspectives on healthcare information and how to handle the pandemic and resulting conspiracy myths, endangered our democratic values. This divide within European society has been successfully exploited by populists to give voice to their beliefs and attract supporters. These negative and conflict inducing narratives are passed on via the filter of a "reality" constructed by the media and streamlined to target audiences through social media – a classic example of self-affirmation bias. This has led to the support of anti-democratic parties, as well as other social groups with harsh beliefs on issues we believe we had previously overcome.

Narratives of change can also be used to justify and perpetuate existing power structures. Those in power often use narratives of change to maintain the status quo, even if it means suppressing the voices of those who seek change. For example, during the Cold War, the United States government used the narrative of the „American Dream“ to promote a capitalist agenda and suppress dissenting voices.

Most recently, the aggressive pro-Kremlin disinformation and war propaganda built on Putin's imperialistic narrative has accompanied Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. Shortly before, narratives regarding the Covid pandemic were framed in China through division rather than through unity with the overcoming Covid collectively. We need to realize that a fundamental feature of these narratives is the separation between "us" and "them" and that creating solely positive narratives, and breaking down these walls, is most challenging. Mass media are discursive systems of observation, while the world community presupposes interaction and dialogue between living environments.⁴

The complexity of information through media increases the insecurity. Especially in times of crisis, such media sources enforce the anxiety paradox. On the one hand, the anxiety paradox inhibits change, because humans tend to attach themselves to constructs (narratives) that provide a sense of temporal continuity, or certainty.

On the other hand, the anxiety surrounding crises opens the possibility of a narrative of agency in the process of constructing the future.⁵ Crises and their narration can be a very powerful means for seeking legitimacy or advocating for certain policies or changing narratives.

Irrespective of whether these futures can be realized, the narration of futures can open and reshape scope for action and policy options, so that these futures can be more efficiently and successfully enacted.

³Crow, D. & Jones, M. (2018): Narratives as tools for influencing policy change, *Policy & Politics*, 46 (2), pp. 217-34.

⁴Herdin, T., Hafez, K. & Grüne, A. (2022): Grundlagen der globalen Kommunikation. *Medien – Systeme – Lebenswelten, Publizistik*, 67, pp. 141-143.

⁵Berenskoetter, F. (2020): Anxiety, time and agency. *International Theory*, 12 (2), pp. 273-290.

WHY ARE NARRATIVES OF CHANGE AROUND THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU) IMPORTANT FOR THE FUTURE OF EUROPE?

Narratives of change around the European Union (EU) might have a significant impact in several ways:

1. VISION AND DIRECTION:

Narratives of change help to shape the vision and direction of the EU by providing a framework for understanding its past, present, and future. These narratives help to define what the EU stands for and what it hopes to achieve, guiding the decisions and actions of policymakers and citizens alike, e.g. EU as a peace project, as no borders/open borders, common set of democratic values, etc.

2. PUBLIC OPINION:

Narratives of change also have the potential to influence public opinion and attitudes towards the EU. By highlighting the positive impacts of the EU and its potential to bring about further positive change, these narratives can increase support and enthusiasm for European integration and inclusivity.

3. POLICY DECISIONS:

Narratives of change can also influence policy decisions by shaping the priorities and objectives of the EU. For instance, the narrative of environmentalism has led to a greater focus on sustainability in EU policy. Similarly, the narrative of democracy has led to a greater emphasis on protecting fundamental rights and the promotion of democratic values.

4. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS:

Narratives of change also have an impact on the EU's relations with other countries and regions. Through focusing on the positive changes brought about by European integration, these narratives can inspire other regions to pursue similar forms of integration and cooperation.

5. INSTITUTIONAL EVOLUTION:

Finally, narratives of change affect the evolution of EU institutions and governance structures. By providing a framework for understanding the EU's past and present, these narratives can help to shape the future development of the EU's institutions and governance arrangements.

A NARRATIVE OF CHANGE: HOW THE EU ESTABLISHED POSITIVE NARRATIVES?

Today, multiple existing narratives seek to build a common sense of the European Union, e.g., the Green Europe, Europe as a trade union, a union of common values, and a Europe for its citizens. The narrative of democracy has played a key role in promoting democracy and human rights in Europe. This narrative emphasizes the role of the EU in protecting fundamental rights and promoting democratic values.

A more recent narrative of change in the EU is the idea that the European Parliament has played a key role in promoting environmentalism and sustainability. This narrative emphasizes the role of the EU in setting standards for environmental protection and supporting green policies.

Framing the “twin transition” – the sustainable and digital transition of Europe – is an example of a positive narrative of change. It highlights the benefits of creating a green and sustainable Europe, becoming a pioneer of climate neutrality as a business opportunity, and catching up with digitalization. It comes across as a truly future oriented narrative, which was strategically positioned in communication and planning.

The EU commission’s highest priority is developing “a Europe for the digital age” as a strategy for economic growth, in addition to also calling a “green and sustainable Europe” to action in several speeches. In September 2020, Ursula von der Leyen, upon her appointment as President of the Commission said, “the next decade

should be Europe’s “digital decade””. As narratives of change also require a meaningful plan of action to be successful, this vision has been accompanied by funding totaling 750 billion Euros. As a result, a digital education action plan 2021-2027 has been launched by the European commission.⁶

One facet of the action plan will ensure that 70% of 16 to 74 year old’s have at least basic digital skills by 2025. This shall be supported through Erasmus programmes, Digital Education Learning Hub and better cross-cooperation. The activities aim to support Europe’s goals of empowering businesses and people in a human-centered, sustainable, and more prosperous digital future.

These narratives of change, established by the European Commission and its acting democratic supporters, commonly provide positive visions of the future: to overcome doubts, to identify challenges, to collaborate in achieving goals, to overcome injustice, and to secure the future of the next generation. This is particularly crucial because times of insecurity provide a breeding ground for negative and counterproductive narratives that lower the faith in democratic values and institutions. Furthermore, the complexity of diverging information dissemination, such as via social media, blurs the “mutual sense” of understanding. To break these downward spirals, positive orientation is key.

⁶deap-communication-sept2020_en-pdf (europa.eu)

Visual ideas, symbols, or pictures about “The European Union” reinforce positive narratives through constant and repeated reporting and communication in the media.

To provide an example, the latest proposal to create a “made in Europe” brand is a reaction to the United States’ Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and was devised to support the vision of Europe pioneering sustainability and digitalization solutions. This is a narrative that has the potential to strengthen European identity, but still creates a divide. The level to which we can create broader, and eventually even global, acceptance for our ideas, depends on finding the framing that impacts everyone in the same manner.

However, regarding narratives of change for Europe, we do not generate a collective idea about the European Union. There is no vision of a „common“ culture and history through representatively produced texts of the European Union such as treaties, legal texts, regulations, official declarations, etc.

It is not enough to envisage the European Union as a rationally and politically organized state structure and expect this to be the mortar that bonds. Successful narratives for Europe require an emotional foundation and a collective feeling

of common goals, values, identification and subsequently togetherness (the “us”).

The Conference of Europe in Spring 2022 was an attempt to involve European citizens in creating common narratives of the future of Europe. This was a bottom-up exercise that enabled people from across Europe to share their ideas and help shape our common future on the EU’s future policies and functioning. 49 proposals were presented, and included more than 300 measures by which such proposals might be achieved and developed.

This inclusive attempt has been overshadowed by the Ukraine war and seems to have lost its track. After a year, the web information can hardly be found on the continuation of the results. If we think ahead, the European elections will take place in 2024, and we should be aware that the future of Europe’s democracy is in the hands of today’s youth.

But in the more recent public debate, it was questioned if European politics had turned its back on its younger citizens.

WHAT IS IMPORTANT FOR THE ROAD AHEAD?

The Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft believes that specific parameters play an important role in helping us navigate change and create productive and beneficial narratives:

- Forward-facing ideas: build an image of a future that we want to become a part of, evoke imagination and, ideally, provide a guide for action.
- Self-efficacy: success in achieving change, if only in small steps –provide a roadmap, make us realize that our contribution counts – no matter how big or small.
- Open dialogue: talk, listen and discuss with others to get a feel for opposing positions. Integrating ideas and experiences into storytelling is a powerful tool to foster commitment and engagement in practice (practitioner recruitment).⁷
- Switching perspectives and include others: challenge dominant perspectives, evaluate daily news/information and put yourself in the position of ‘others’ to understand their opinion and increase the legitimacy of ideas of change.

Inspiring narratives come in different forms and formats, ranging from scientific literature and political discourse to arts and entertainment. Good narratives need to be easily adaptable in a pluralist media landscape and translate well into the “languages” of different societal groups.

In the world of social change, the stories that we tell can be an extremely powerful tool in shaping public opinion and influencing policy. Narratives, if framed in the right way, should and can be used to communicate with all audiences, spark change in their thinking, influence difficult conversation topics in a positive way to create more resilient and inclusive societies. Small shifts in mindset can trigger a cascade of changes so profound that they test the limits of what seems possible.

In conclusion, narratives of change are a crucial component of our understanding of history and society. They have the power to inspire and motivate but can also be used to perpetuate injustices and inequality. As we continue to navigate a rapidly changing world, it is important that we examine these narratives critically and thoughtfully, and work to use such narratives to create a more equitable and just society for all citizens.

⁷Wittmayer, J.M., Backhaus, J., Avelino, F., Pel, B., Strasser, T., Kunze, I. & Zijderwijk, L. (2019): Narratives of change: How social innovation initiatives construct societal transformation, Futures, vol. 112.

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IMPRESSUM

PUBLISHER

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Unter den Linden 13-15, 10117 Berlin
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