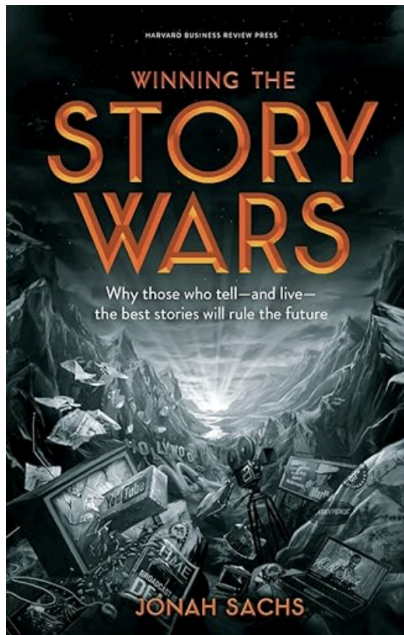


# Encoding Your Message With Story

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The most common and enduring means of cultural transmission in human societies is the story.

Think about it – did you read [The Stern Review Report](#) (700 pages) on climate change, one of the seminal policy documents yet released on the issue of climate change?

Or have you seen (or at least know about) Al Gore’s Academy Award winning documentary [‘An Inconvenient Truth’](#)?

This applies to any story – one example I found recently that illustrates this point was to ask the question: ‘who remembers how much JK Rowling was paid for the Harry Potter series?’. You’d probably have to Google the answer.

Try asking another question: ‘who knows the story about where and why JK Rowling wrote her books?’, and see how many more people can tell you about it. People remember the ‘rags to riches’ story – that she was a single mum, writing her books longhand in the local coffee shop, baby in the pram beside her, so she could stay warm and not have to put her heating on at home.

Most sustainability communications rely heavily on data and ‘selling’ an understanding of a situation, to which a reasoned ‘rational’ response must surely be expected. But graphs, data, spreadsheets and logic-based approaches touch comparatively small numbers of people; they simply do not resonate with the vast majority.

Stories are what resonate, and what have the potential to shift hearts and minds (note that ‘heart’ comes before ‘mind’) – over centuries, we’ve expanded our storytelling spheres from around the campfire, to books and newspapers, radio and TV, to cinema and now to the internet and social media.

*To know a society’s stories is to know where it intends to go. New stories lead to new values, new identity and a new roadmap to the future.*

Jonah Sachs, Creative Director, Free Range Studios

[Free Range Studios](#) is the creative agency behind such viral internet sensations ‘[The Story of Stuff](#)’ and ‘[The Meatrix](#)’ (about our take-make-waste society and factory farming, respectively).

This [presentation](#) by Free Range Studio’s Creative Director Jonah Sachs gives insights into the studio’s modus operandi, which is further detailed in his book, ‘[Winning the Story Wars](#).’

Sach’s presentation is a must-see for all change-makers and communicators, and includes some key questions for story-tellers:

- is the story that I’m telling a **myth**? Is it big enough to change the core stories that people carry with them wherever they go, and help define their lives – not just grab their attention, but actually make them think about a new way forward?
- is my story **interesting** enough to survive in this age of information overload? Is it encoded in a way that it can grab short attention spans and hold them, and get people to forward these stories along?

## The Power of Myth

Sachs also speaks of the role of myth, which is a package of:

- explanation (how the world came to be)
- meaning (what this means for how we should live our lives) and
- story (connects the invisible world to the visible world)

He examines the role of religion, science and entertainment in creating our cultural stories. He believes there is a 'Myth Gap' – that religion has traditionally fulfilled the role of societal myth-maker; but as science has begun to challenge that story, religion has become more literal and less comfortable with being cast as 'story-tellers' or 'myth makers'; science is good with explanation and literal interpretations of the truth, but it does not want to be responsible for meaning, or (like religion) characterised as 'storytelling'; and entertainment is good for story, but not always explanation or meaning.

Into this 'Myth Gap' breach have stepped the marketers, product designers and the advertisers, who have utilised all three elements – new products create new explanations of the ways we should live; branding brings meaning; and they tell stories that we don't literally need to believe in to think this is a new way to live life. However, this same power is available to all, including those working for sustainability and social change, if they develop the skills to use it. Are we offering new models of **explanation** – this is how the world works – in a way that people can grasp, see, feel?

Are we questioning patterns of **meaning**, to give new meaning to people's lives?

Are we encoding it in a **story**?

### **Making Your Story Interesting – Freaks, Cheats, Familiars**

Stories are changing, from the 'captive audiences' of broadcast days, where it was enough to have character, conflict and plot, to an era of short attention spans, and millions of stories competing for attention.

Sachs's investigations into evolutionary biology, patterns of ancient storytelling and how stories work with the human brain, in order to unearth what makes something 'resonant', have led to his development of a new set of storytelling criteria – freaks, cheats, and familiars:

People love **freaks** – a human who breaks our expectations of how human beings should look and behave (eg. anthropomorphic animals; animals that have human characteristics); this is both where the most danger and the most social opportunity lies.

People love **cheats** – people who break the rules or challenge social norms; there are two kinds of cheats – those who break beloved cultural norms, the villains who should be punished; and those who challenge hated cultural norms, the rebels who we want to succeed.

People love **familiars** – existing cultural references from 'within the tribe'; start where people are already having their conversation, with the audience's passions.

Sachs's takeaway message from his talk speaks to us all, as change agents for sustainability:

*There's still a big space in the Myth Gap for stories about a better world; the marketers of consumption have not completely closed that gap – people still want to be called to something higher, and as Joseph Campbell said, the next great myth is going to be about how we can all co-exist on this planet, so I encourage you all to use your passions to write those myths and make a better world.*

Why aren't we availing ourselves of the techniques that marketers and designers have successfully used for decades? In part, it is resistance to the idea itself – the notion that telling stories is 'fluffy', not the 'serious' business of change, that 'myths' are something only certain societies are beholden to, not those with market economies, the scientific method and the ability to print endless amounts of factual information that changes very little.

Perhaps those resistant to this approach should consider that the multi-billion dollar movie making industry, and the multi-billion dollar marketing industry know otherwise – they know that story, and in particular, myth, is what works.

Think about your organisation's communications approaches – how well, if at all, do they use story as the approach?

What barriers are there to using a story approach in your work – are storytelling skills not sufficiently developed, or is there a lack of knowledge or acceptance of the approach?