



Change the Story, Change the World

People can't face facts if they're looking the wrong way. So first tell them a story that can change their point of view.

According to a Newsweek poll conducted in June 2007, one in five Americans still believed that the majority of hijackers involved in the 9/11 terrorist attacks came from Iraq. Even though *none* of the hijackers were Iraqi citizens, and this indisputable fact had been widely reported for nearly *six years*, the belief persisted among more people than can be written off as Fox News nation.

Why the widespread delusion? The answer provides an insight into how our minds work, and specifically the role that stories play in shaping our beliefs. After 9/11, the Bush Administration began feeding the American public a steady stream of stories implying a connection between Iraq and the terrorist attacks. Those who swallowed the stories whole had no appetite left for contradictory news nuggets served up by sources outside the administration.

In other words, they had a story in their heads that worked for them - *the President said it, so I believe it* - and no amount of evidence was going to dislodge that story. You may think of these people as willfully ignorant or just downright dumb, but your brain works exactly the same way. If you doubt it, think back to the last time you said something like "That's not *my* experience."



It happened to me very recently with my new iPhone 4. I got my phone the first day it was available (yes, my name is Andy and I'm an Appleholic), but I have yet to encounter the antenna problems that caused such an uproar. I don't care if Consumer Reports or other objective entities have conducted scientific studies, the problem hasn't happened *to me*.

August 2010

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How to win when your audience already has a story

Will Your Stories Work?

Join our online class starting September 2nd and be sure

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Presentation skills training September 15th and 17th



About Us

free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Lori Matsumoto. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit

I have a story in my head - the iPhone 4 works fine - and I'm sticking with it.

This tendency to stick by our stories has serious implications for any good cause hoping to change public opinion or behavior. Annette Simmons sums it up nicely in her book, *The Story Factor*, when she writes, "Facts don't have the power to change someone's story. Your goal is to introduce a new story that will let your facts in."

The Innocence Project followed this strategy in 1992, and in doing so changed public attitudes about the death penalty that had been entrenched for generations. Prior to 1992, those opposed to capital punishment had failed to muster sufficient public support to halt or slow down the pace of executions despite a variety of approaches.

Some contended that it was morally wrong for the state to kill people no matter how serious the crime. Others challenged capital punishment on constitutional grounds, saying it was "cruel and unusual punishment" and thereby a clear violation of the eighth amendment. And some pointed to statistics that showed capital punishment was not a deterrent to crime.



Argument after argument fell on deaf ears, however, because an overwhelming majority of Americans had a story in their head that made the death penalty acceptable. It was a story with Biblical roots, a story about "an eye for an eye." Statistical evidence, legal interpretations and even moral arguments could not get past this story and its deeply rooted sense of fairness. But in 1992, Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld, co-founders of the Innocence Project, found a way.

Scheck and Neufeld began to tell stories about people who had been sentenced to death and executed but were later proven innocent by DNA evidence. They backed up their stories with research that showed wrongful convictions were more than an occasional mistake - they were a dangerous trend, and one that was still killing innocent people or consigning them to years in prison.

Over time, the Innocence Project's new story changed the debate around capital punishment. Instead of asking whether or not we should keep the death penalty, Scheck and Neufeld started asking for a moratorium on capital punishment until the causes of wrongful convictions could be fully studied and (hopefully) eliminated. Even those who still believed in "an eye for an eye" couldn't deny that delaying executions to save potentially innocent people was prudent. And as a result, seventeen lives have been saved so far.

"People will believe what they want to believe," said H.L. Mencken. The examples above tell me that people rely on the stories in their head to tell them what to believe. So if you're in the business of changing beliefs (and the behavior that follows), it's worth asking two questions about your audience: What story is already in their heads, and is your story strong enough to replace it?

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Will Your Stories Work?

Join our most popular online class starting September 2nd and ensure that they do.

Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative returns in September to help you relocate your inner storyteller. In four hours (spread over four successive weeks), we'll focus on the structure and qualities of good stories and explain how you can apply them in advocacy, fundraising, recruiting and other aspects of your work. And, as just discussed above, you can evaluate your stories against those your audience may already believe to ensure yours are strong enough to carry the day.



Classes will be held on September 2, 9, 16 and 23 from 9-10a PT each day. Tuition is \$500 per student and discounts are available to organizations registering 3 or more. To find out more and reserve your space, [click here](#).

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Be More Presentable

Brush up your presentation and PowerPoint skills September 15th and 17th.

Based on unprecedented research and incorporating the advice of twenty highly regarded public-speaking experts, **Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes** is a two-hour online class designed to help presenters at all levels, from newbies to seasoned veterans. Curriculum in this course includes:

- The five most commonly made mistakes in presenting and how to avoid them
- How to structure presentations to ensure your audience learns more
- Why PowerPoint should never be used as a presentation and a handout
- Techniques to help you deliver talks with greater confidence



Classes will be held on September 15th and 17th from 11a-12n Pacific each day (2-3p Eastern), and tuition is \$250 per student. (Group discounts are available.) To learn more and register online, [click here](#).

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