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# Narrations of Sustainability

## How to Tell the Story of the Socio-Ecological Transformation

*The potential of stories to explain problems and to arouse emotions has attracted the interest of various scientific disciplines under the concept of storytelling. The conference Narrations of Sustainability brought together researchers and practitioners with a focus on sustainability-related storytelling.*

Daniel Fischer, Torsten Schäfer,  
Joachim Borner

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Sustainable development is a complex concept (Fischer and Storksdiel 2018): it is about meeting the needs of all those living today and in the future, while at the same time maintaining planetary boundaries. The perspective of sustainability thus focuses on dynamic interaction processes of natural and social systems that take place at different spatial and temporal reference

and coupling levels (Clark and Dickson 2003, Clark 2010). This creates complexity that makes sustainability sometimes difficult to communicate: what effects do actions here and now have on other places and at other times? How do we determine limits, be they minimum socio-economic standards or maximum tolerable ecological burdens? The value dimension inherent in the decisions to be made in this context does not make sustainability issues an exclusive occupation for science, but rather the subject of social negotiation processes.

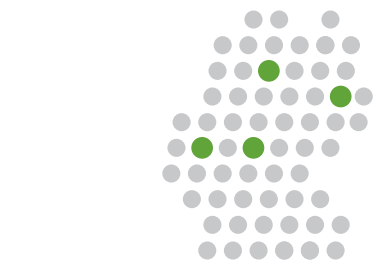
### Narrative Formats of Science Communication

Against this background, the transformation of society is often understood as a joint effort that requires the activation and participation of civil society to a large extent. What is required is an informed civil society whose members have the necessary knowledge, the corresponding readiness and the necessary skills to help shape the transformation towards a sustainable society. Effective sustainability communication is a necessary prerequisite for democratic majorities to be able to organize themselves for socio-political changes in the direction of sustainable development. As the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) described in detail in

its flagship report from 2011, this kind of mobilization requires new narratives of change. Creative forms of science communication are to be used to prepare these narratives in such a way that they promote comprehensibility and liveliness, thereby reducing fears of dynamic changes and encouraging people to overcome inertia and to help shape a transformation towards a sustainable society (WBGU 2011). Narrative structures, or stories, are considered to provide concrete examples of otherwise abstract and inaccessible facts. The potential of stories to convey information, to explain problems and to arouse emotions has awakened interest of various scientific disciplines under the concept of storytelling and has experienced a broad response in various fields of practice from journalism and science communication to corporate public relations.

### Conference Narrations of Sustainability

The conference *Narrations of Sustainability*, organized as a cooperation project of the Schader Foundation, Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences, Partner Network Media, Leuphana University of Lüneburg and the Collegium for the Management and Design of Sustainable Development (KMGNE), brought together researchers and practitioners for the first time with a



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focus on sustainability-related storytelling (figure 1). From 30 to 31 January 2018, it offered the emerging inter- and transdisciplinary research field of sustainability narratives a place for exchange, mutual learning and consolidation for two days in the

in the US and Great Britain. Through a broad, new social urge for nature, nature writing is enjoying great success on the book market and in the media, especially in Great Britain. Authors such as Robert Macfarlane, Roger Deakin and Helen Mac-

ings in German, the edition *Naturkunden* published by Matthes & Seitz as the leading publisher, and successful authors such as Peter Wohlleben, a forestry manager who has published several bestsellers and writes vividly and even psychologically about trees

*Nature writing is associated with the chances of creating new ways of communicating nature and the environment. A main motif is the notion of reuniting man with nature and understanding himself as nature – motivations that the Zeitgeist is creating as counter-reactions to development patterns such as economization, reification, acceleration and mechanization.*

Schader Forum in Darmstadt. The conference was accompanied by an editorial team of journalism students from Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences, who reported on the conference in multimedia format<sup>1</sup>. The program included key notes from various disciplines and presentations of practical projects as well as workshops for an in-depth exchange<sup>2</sup>. The conference revealed that dealing with narrative forms of sustainability communication can draw on a variety of established fields (such as ethnology, literary studies, media and culture studies), but against the background of the normative content of the idea of sustainability also requires new forms of dealing with values and norms. Thus, controversial discussions were held about the intentionality and purpose with which narrative forms could be developed and which opportunities and risks narrative representations, often geared to the experience of individual protagonists, bear. The multitude of perspectives and approaches can be illustrated by three examples of narrative forms, formats and effects, which were intensively discussed at the conference.

### Forms of Narration: Nature Writing

Nature writing is a literary and journalistic way to describe nature precisely, empathically and subjectively and to experience it in a new way. Environmental and scientific journalistic descriptions are mixed with essayistic reflection and poetic thoughts to form a style of their own, especially known

Donald are celebrated for their new way of describing nature, species or landscapes poetically and scientifically. This combination as well as the focus on nature conservation and environmental activism is a core element of the genre, which is also beginning to establish itself in Germany. Examples include a first prize for nature writ-

and forests. Nature writing is associated with the chances of creating new ways of communicating nature and the environment. A main motif is the notion of reuniting man with nature and understanding himself as nature – motivations that the Zeitgeist is creating as counter-reactions to development patterns such as economiza- >

1 <http://gruener-journalismus.de/zwei-nachhaltige-tage-in-darmstadt>

2 [www.schader-stiftung.de/veranstaltungen/archiv/artikel/narrationen-der-nachhaltigkeit](http://www.schader-stiftung.de/veranstaltungen/archiv/artikel/narrationen-der-nachhaltigkeit)

**FIGURE 1:** Panel discussion at the conference *Narrations of Sustainability* with Lars Rademacher, Jan C. Schmidt, Prof. Torsten Schäfer (all Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences), Prof. Beatrice Dernbach (Technische Hochschule Nürnberg) and Prof. Christian Schicha (Friedrich-Alexander Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg).



tion, reification, acceleration and mechanization. Numerous examples from the field of practice and initial research indicate that nature writing can make an important contribution to narrative sustainability communication (Schäfer 2017).

### Formats of Narration: Transmedia Storytelling

Today, sustainability communication takes place in various media. A challenge, but also an opportunity, consists in creating comprehensive narratives through the combination of media that transcend individual media and their boundaries. In the transmedia storytelling approach, for example, episodes are told that use different media and media formats (e.g., spot, podcast, animation or painting) and are serially linked – often using activating approaches (e.g., gamification elements, design fiction). All episodes taken together then tell a transmedia “great narration” about transformation processes to sustainability. For example, an international summer academy organized by the Climate Culture Communications Lab<sup>3</sup> has been experimenting with such approaches in intercultural contexts for several years. However, the well-developed forms of practice that have evolved over the past years have so far only been researched to some extent. This is where further potential for the scientific engagement with narrative sustainability communication lies.

### Effects of Narration: Impacts of Sustainability-Related Storytelling

In view of the various potentials, but also risks associated with sustainability-related storytelling, the project *SusTelling* (German: *Storytelling in der Nachhaltigkeitskommunikation*)<sup>4</sup> funded by the German Federal Environmental Foundation (DBU) has set itself the goal of systematically researching the effects of storytelling and making them fruitful for more effective sustainability communication. Initial results from a comprehensive systematic literature review across various research fields show that

there is empirical evidence that storytelling can attract attention, arouse interest and reach new target groups for complex topics, for example, in the field of risk communication. At the same time, however, there is also a lack of knowledge on the effectiveness of sustainability-related storytelling. This desideratum is to be countered in the course of the project through own experiments and investigations.

### A Field on the Move

The conference highlighted two things: on the one hand, the wealth and the potential for stimulation that already exists in various fields of research and practice for the design of narrative sustainability communication, and on the other hand, the urgent need for structured exchange, systematic synthesis and creative further developments that respond to new contexts, needs and challenges in communication in the context of sustainable development. The conference was thus a prelude to the consolidation and further institutionalization of the still young inter- and transdisciplinary field of research and practice of sustainability narratives, which – as all those present agreed – must be followed by further steps.

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