

Generative Journalism and the Real Issues



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Tuesday, July 10, 2018 -- Peter Pula

After 15 years of producing stories that contributed to change after change for the better, people still come to us with the concern that all we do in Generative Journalism is publish positive stories at the expense of facing reality.

When we interview someone in the Generative Journalism way, we first shy away from institutionalized narratives. This in itself is an act of rebellion and generativity. As much as possible we speak to the grassroots.

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Here's why. The institutional narrative is generally sterilized and politicized. Its spokespeople don't speak for themselves. The institutional narrative usually reinforces itself. And, it is often set against someone or something else. There is

very little generative power in it. What's interesting is that the power-over narrative propagated by some institutional spokespeople and colluded with by what's left of mainstream media and "losing-their-stuff-all-over-the-place social-media-empowered activists" actually keeps us all as humans-finding-their way, down.

Souls are shy.

Stomping around making all kinds of noise is not the way to draw them into community.

So, first we talk to the people on the ground where reality is actually going down.

That's our first challenge. In most organizations, the people are not allowed to even talk to you. And if they do, and they are off-script, the repercussions can be awful. At one time we had to protect a source from an environmental advocacy group who was prepared to risk our source's life for the sake of their preferred narrative. Trump isn't the only one making things up. It's pervasive.

Already, this Generative Journalism thing is proving less straightforward and airy than meets the eye.

Now, let's say we've got someone willing to talk. Let's say they are weather beaten, and tired. Let's say they see problems all around. We listen to them. Then we ask, well, what would you rather was happening? Where are there signs that alternative could come to life? Where have you seen that done before? Who was there, what were they doing? What did each of them bring to the situation? What elements were present in the circumstances that made that thing possible? What could you do to recreate those elements before the sun goes down today? What's the best thing that could happen? What would you like, want, or need from the community to make that happen? What's your next step?

Then we write our story, very often leading from the answer to the last question. We call this journey from problem to possibility, "the turn."

These are tough questions and there is no escape.

So, what's happening now is that our source, who might have been feeling powerless in the face of some wrong or injustice about which we could write a nasty story, has instead just concocted a generative image of the future. Not only that, given their vantage point and position in the world they have scanned their

immediate environment for the materials at hand. They have established that what they wish to see is actually possible because they have seen something like it somewhere in the world already. And, they have been called into agency and asked for their next step and what would be required to make it happen. And that's our story. Then, in most cases, they go do it, and/or someone else comes along and they do it together. And that's our next story. Repeat.

This is a story, a narrative, of Seeing someone, respecting them, coaxing out their giftedness, honouring their truth, cultivating their agency, and gently inviting them into a safe space to give their true gifts a start along the path. They are enabled and ennobled and held in the hands of a supportive narrative.

This is responsible journalism.

Irresponsible journalism, sweeps in, reports the so-called facts of the terrible situation set before them, inquires not at all into a preferred future or possibility, therefore creating more misery, pain, and divisiveness, and despondency. It reinforces the narrative of problems and pain, happily calls it objective and even watchdog journalism, shrugs its shoulders at the "reality" of it all, and moves on.

Does that mean that in Generative Journalism we simply publish so-called positive stories at the expense of working the hard issues? We are a long, long way from not taking on the hard issues. Truth is that we are far more effective than just about any other form of journalism I have ever seen.

Generative Journalism works from a change theory, corroborated in practice, that transcends most activist approaches to creating change. Our approach is an unseen attack on the issues at the root of things.

Sun Tzu teaches that if you have gone to war you have already lost. This is true. If you want to be all war-metaphor about it, Generative Journalism is a higher form of warfare. We win because we don't go to war. We cultivate the conditions so that doing so is not necessary except by a last resort. If all you see from us are so-called positive stories, maybe it's because we've won, or are winning, the battle with a big bad issue. Maybe something good was caused to happen. That's a lot farther along than most ever get.

Words Create Worlds

It was recently put to me that our statement of intention to cultivate an “emerging narrative of gifts” is a bit strange and somewhat esoteric.

The definitions of those three words are:

Emerging: becoming apparent or prominent

Narrative: a spoken or written account of connected events; a story

Gifts: natural abilities or talents

The sentence can now read: The story of people’s natural abilities and talents is becoming apparent and prominent through a collection of spoken and written accounts of connected events.

In my experience, if we focus on cultivating a story about what people are doing to create the communities they wish to live in according to their natural talents and what is important to them, we are more likely to see constructive change for the better. That is the gift we wish to offer: To find, illuminate, and leverage those stories. Increasingly, others are doing the same. You are invited to join us.