Storytelling as strategic communication on migration

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Executive Summary

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•	Practitioners regularly recommend storytelling as an effective means of strategic communication about migration.

•	This report provides the first review of the academic literature on the characteristics and effects of storytelling and how this might be best used for migration communication.

•	Storytelling is distinct from other forms of communication due to its ability to clear and retain attention, disarm critical thought, and provide an opportunity for the storyteller to demonstrate a large range of skills and thus enhance their credibility. It is thought to be an evolutionarily adaptation.

•	Experimental evidence supports the notion that storytelling is more persuasive than, for example, appeals to authority using experts.

•	The report outlines seven best practices according to these criteria and demonstrates them using examples.
•	Future research should continue to classify current campaigns according to their use of stories and test the effects of the various recommendations listed above using experiments and impact assessments.

Recommendations

1. Communicators must include storytelling and have stories to hand in their repertoire for all key policy goals.

2. Effective storytelling must be immersive; to do so requires disarming audiences via entertainment, enjoyment, and empathy with both characters and audience.

3. Storytelling should increase the credibility of the storyteller itself by demonstrating a range of skills, such as description, humour, empathy, and so on.

4. The central insight or "lesson" of the story should give relief and joy to the audience following both cognitive and emotive exposition of the central dilemma to be resolved.

5. The central dilemma of the story should resonate with the audience either by appealing to values and/or their personal lives.

6. Storytelling is not always the most persuasive format; when debating empirical and objective issues, "killer facts"—those which are unambiguous and relevant to the argument—can be most persuasive when not integrated into stories.

7. Experimental evidence has produced several insights into which stories perform best, including those in which the story:

   a. Aligns with the values of the audience;
   b. Is specific and relevant to the audience;
   c. Emphasises and describes emotions, not only negative ones, and does so in unison with cognitive points (facts, data);
   d. Emphasises agency and personal control;
   e. Stories told from the first-person perspective and real-life individuals have been shown to be more persuasive.

Introduction

How can we use communication to achieve migration policy objectives? How can we communicate in a way that allows us to meet the eponymous goals of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (UN, 2018), "de-polarised" debates (OSCE, 2021), or "re-balanced" narratives, the goal of the ICMPD's 2020-23 EUROMED Migration V programme, to which this report contributes. Moreover, how can migration communication help governments uphold legal- and rights-based migration policy frameworks when under threat? Finally, how can communicators do so to maximise the potential benefits and minimising the potential costs of migration to both origin and host country populations? Strategic communication is a key element in governing both immigration and emigration by informing, persuading, and motivating behaviour. One of the most common pieces of advice given on all three types of communication when used to achieve both emigration and immigration policy objectives—and, indeed, in policy fields beyond migration—is to "tell stories". Storytelling supposedly ensures that messages are most effectively delivered to host populations and potential and actual migrants themselves.

Indeed, "storytelling" is regularly cited by professionals working on migration communication as key to achieve a range of migration policy objectives. The Global Forum on Migration and Development (2020: 6) lists "storytelling" as the second of their five ways to 'create impactful content'. They state that 'Storytelling has the unique capacity to unite diverse groups of people through common values and life experiences … [and] can help the public to better relate with the experiences of migrants.' Similarly, the European Commission-funded Clarinet project (2020) lists "storytelling" as one of its five "essential features for a successful, highly-impactful communication campaign" on migration. Finally, one of the European Programme for Integration and Migration's (2014) four briefing papers provided a guide to communicating migration via storytelling. Table 1, outlines the key recommendations from existing immigration communication best-practice guides by NGOs and similar that attempt to increase public positivity to migration in Europe and North America. As we can see, using storytelling is one of the most common recommendations. Storytelling is also a common tool of emigration focussed campaigns, particularly those that seek to deter irregular migration (Dennison, 2023).

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1 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees

Table 1. Key recommendations from existing migration communication best-practice guides

	Sharif (2019)	Banulescu-Bogdan (2018)	Marthouz (2006)	Bamberg (2018)	Welcoming America (2018)	Christiano (2017)	GFMD (2020)	OHCHR (2020)
Strategic arrangements								
Develop a proactive communications strategy	X	X					X	
Set up partnerships for communications/support others	X		X				X	X
Research and target moveable audience, know their perceptions and prejudices	X		X	X	X		X	
Communications content								
Focus on values	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Use **storytelling**				X		X	X	X
Elicit emotion	X				X	X		
Hope/positivity/solutions/vision focus	X		X					X
Avoid attacking audience		X						
Avoid repeating opposing ideas/increasing their salience		X		X				X
Find common ground		X					X	X
Neutralise opposition arguments			X				X	
Be responsive to (local) context							X	X
Acknowledhe complexities							X	
Communications delivery								
Choose credible messengers, including migrants of moderates	X	X					X	
Use succint / digestible / focuse messaging	X			X	X	X		
Be visual	X					X		
Test impact							X	

As such, this report asks how we can best use storytelling in migration communication. It provides the first review of the academic literature on the characteristics and effects of storytelling and how this might be best used for migration communication. It then overviews experimental evidence on the persuasive effects of storytelling in comparison to other communication techniques and the contingencies therein. Finally, it outlines best practices according to these criteria and demonstrates such practices using examples.

Storytelling: What it is and why we do it

"Humans are essentially storytellers" – Walter Fisher

"Reality is too complex. Stories give it form." – Jean Luc Godard

"Story is a yearning meeting an obstacle." – Robert Olen Butler

Stories are descriptions of a specific sequence of connected events. They usually include one or more characters that are human or humanlike and have some degree of coherent structure and context in which the characters and events take place (Kreuter et al., 2007). In most stories, the plot revolves around the struggles of leading characters to achieve some sort of goal. How and if that struggle is resolved often has some broader normative point. Like narratives, they are highly selective, with much of the story's characteristics determined by what events the storyteller sees as relevant to include and, thus, implicitly link (Dennison, 2021). However, unlike narratives, they are specific rather than a generalisable sequence of events (Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Toolan, 2012).
"The topic isn't a priority on Morocco's media agenda," said a second Moroccan respondent (Respondent 2) interviewed. "In normal times, Morocco is an exporter of Moroccan migrants to Europe and North America, and is a host country for other migrants; the issue isn't of importance."

Evolutionarily, Jones and Peterson (2017) highlight the ability of narratives to facilitate understanding by 'organising information in a way that is conductive to human cognition'. More than that though, by being essentially creative instead of relying solely on retrospective data and evidence, stories also can make audiences think in more prospective, future-oriented terms of new possibilities and structures (Denning, 2021). This freedom from extrapolation from the past—unlike data—gives stories an additional imaginative quality.The presentations were twofold: pictures of violence that reflected the reality of migration policy between Morocco and the EU, as there are barricades between the two occupied cities of Ceuta and Melilla, with migrants attempting to climb the metal fence and the impact on them, and the other side of images that official Moroccan media tried to disseminate showing Morocco as a country that welcomed irregular migrants or that sought to regularise their status that began in 2014.

Moreover, storytelling is distinct from other forms of communication—and evolutionarily adaptive—due to its ability to clear and retain attention, disarm critical thought, and provide an opportunity for the storyteller to demonstrate a large range of skills and thus enhance their credibility. To be able to tell a story well requires a large range of skills—descriptive, logical, synthetic, emotive, strategic, linguistic, empathetic, dramatic, ironic, humorous—the demonstration of which themselves increase the credibility of the messenger and, therefore, their central message.

Uniquely, stories tend to bypass our natural resistance mechanisms of critical thought, disarming us and our natural scepticism as we follow the plot, are entertained, and await the outcome (Krakow et al, 2018). As such, the immersive experience of stories can inform, persuade, and affect behaviour even when the facts themselves are weak or inconclusive (Green and Brock, 2000). In terms of health communication, meta-analyses of experiments show that embedding facts within stories can be more persuasive than presenting facts (de Graaf, et al, 2016; Zebregs, et al, 2015). Elsewhere, experiments have shown that news audiences are more likely to believe stories of individual people than numerical data or statements from officials.
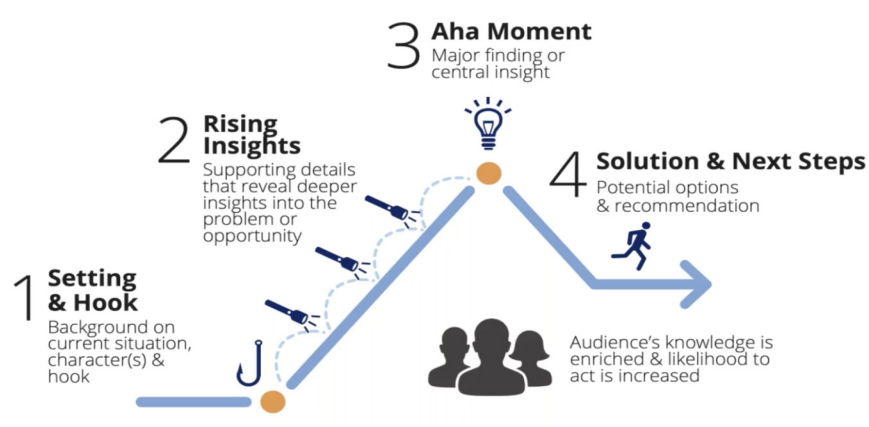
Figure 1. Stills from "Protect" project campaign using animated stories to encourage trafficked individuals to contact police
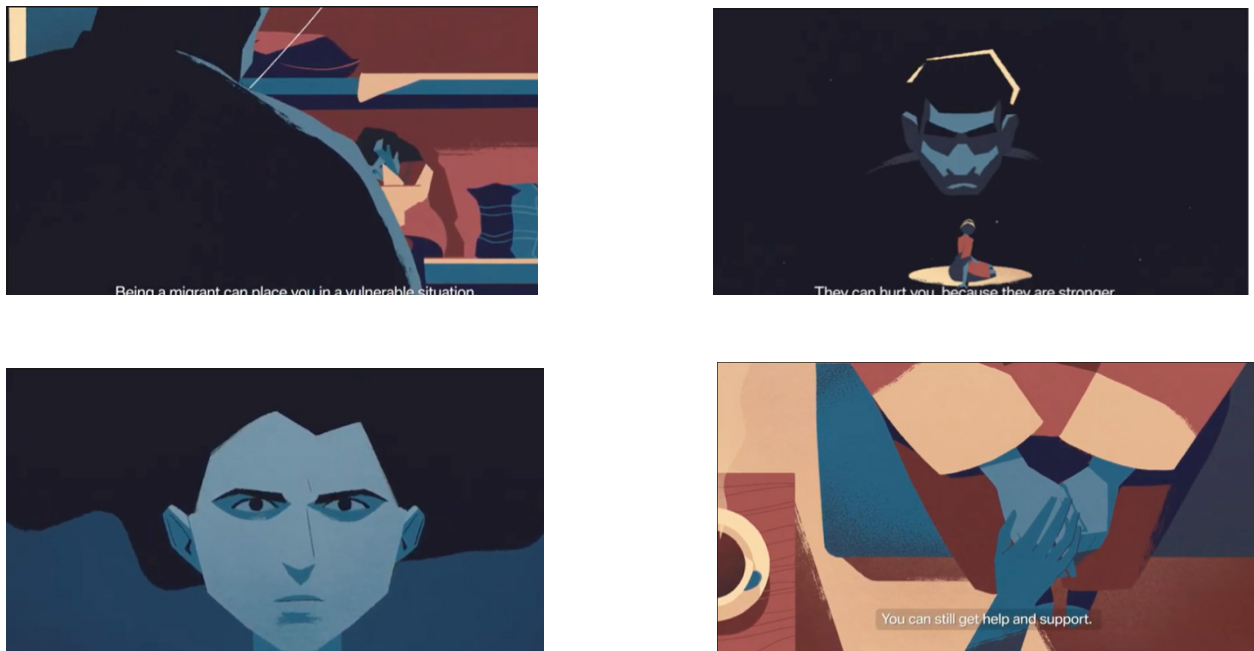
Stories can organise information, disarm audiences due to enjoyment, increase the credibility of the storyteller by demonstrating skill, and clearing space for attention via immersion. In each case, first, stories reduce "counterarguing" by being seemless and internally coherent (e.g. Brosius and Bathelt 1994; Hamby et al, 2020). Second, stories can reduce "counterarguing" by leading individuals to emotionally identify with the story's protagonist and their driving motivation (e.g Hoeken et al, 2016). For example, one experiment showed that individuals reading one of two stories in which two sisters debated how to care for a terminally ill parent—either via care or euthanasia—were respectively more likely to oppose or support legalisation of euthanasia afterwards (de Graaf, et al, 2012).

The basic format of stories and their unique properties have unsurprisingly therefore been adapted by strategic communcating to inform, persuade, and motivate, as shown in Figure 1. In this format, the central insight or "lesson" of the story gives relief and joy to the audience following both cognitive and emotive exposition of the central dilemma to be resolved.

Figure 2. "Telling effective data stories"[2]

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsIE6Q7hXe8&t=8s
[2] Retrieved from https://www.datacamp.com/blog/telling-effective-data-stories-with-data-narrative-and-visuals

Storytelling and strategic comunication – What works?

"Stories are the communal currency of humanity" – 1001 Arabian Nights

"Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world today." – Robert McKee

Whereas the above evidence suggests that storytelling is unambiguously a powerful means of communication, including persuasive communication, it is by no means the only one and thus not always the most effective. Similarly, there is increasing evidence that how one communicates with stories is overwhelmingly important.

Contrary to claims to always use stories instead of facts, there is plenty of experimental evidence that, in some cases, using facts—in the form of simple statistical information (Baesler and Burgoon, 1994) or question-and-answer style (Bekalu et al., 2018). These and other studies suggest that "killer facts"—those which are unambiguous and relevant to the argument, such as regarding scientific and statistical findings—can be most persuasive when not integrated into stories. However, not all arguments—particularly regarding attention-raising or persuasion on normative grounds—are purely empirical issues.

Furthermore, stories are relatively more persuasive when facts are weaker or less relevant. Krause and Rucker (2020) use experiments to distinguish between when coupling facts with stories enhance or undermine persuasion. They show that (a) stories bias cognitive processes away from negative (i.e. those not desired by the storyteller) thoughts and (b) stories draw attention away from the processing of facts. In both cases, individuals are disarmed by the narrative flow giving the storyteller, at minimum, the opportunity to present their case. Such ability to win scarce and valuable attentional resources is perhaps the most valuable component of storytelling. When facts were weak, people were more persuaded by a story with the facts embedded within it than by the facts alone. However, when facts were strong, the opposite effect occurred: people were more persuaded by facts alone than by facts embedded within a story. Stories are most persuasive when they, a priori, reassure the individuals of their credibility, relevance, and importance.

Jones and Peterson (2017) review the climate change science communication and narrative policy framework (NPF) to show that stories in which the plot, setting, and characters have the following attributes are more persuasive: (1) align with audience beliefs and values; (2) are in specific, relevant, and recent terms; (3) emphasise positive emotions, personal control and benefits rather than sadness, futility, and losses (see also Dennison, 2024a); (4) link components via causality, risk, and agency; and (5) reference policy solutions with broad support.

Figure 3: Stills from "Struggling to survive campaign" using personal stories to encourage migrants and the general public to take action against exploitation[3]

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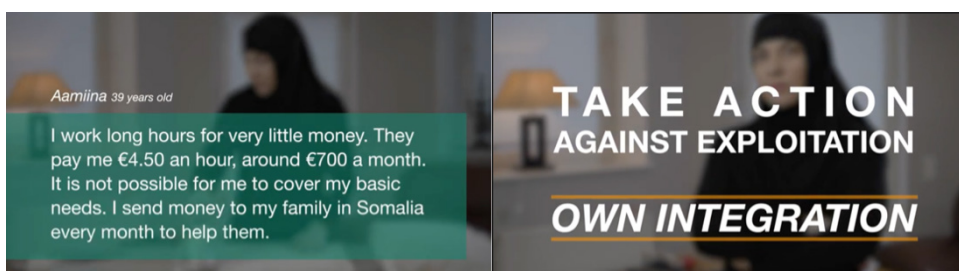
[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLEm-Nx5A_91p6iArQXZQgklaeWLc-7opf&time_continue=40&v=J4gxFkitAbo&feature=emb_logo

These findings echo and can be aligned with those more broadly suggests that strategic migration messaging, including narratives (Dennison, 2021) should align with the values of the audience both regarding immigration (Dennison, 2020a; Dennison, 2024b) and emigration (Dennison, 2023). Similarly, communicators should carefully select the emotions that their content elicits according to desired physiological effects leading to specific policy goals (Dennison, 2024a).

Specifically, affective expressions can be used to refer to the protagonist's explicit description of how they feel at a given moment as opposed to merely listing a series of events, which has been demonstrated to lead to higher persuasion (Keer et al., 2013). Ham et al. (2015) demonstrate that storytelling by robots becomes more persuasive when accompanied by direct gaze (looking into the camera), particularly when combined with hand gestures.

Figure 4: Stills from "Anyone trafficked" campaign using personal stories to raise awareness of human trafficking[4]

Moreover, emotion and cognition should be elicited in unison for the most impactful messaging. Hamelin et al (2020) conducted an experiment to compare the persuasive impacts of emotion-based and cognition-based fictional texts. Intriguingly, by analysing various biometric data such as eye tracking, facial expressions, and skin responses, they found that while the emotive narrative elicited a quicker and more pronounced persuasive response, the cognitive narrative had a more enduring effect over time.

That said, stories have been shown to be stronger than expert endorsements. Barbet et al (2024) demonstrate that narratives wield greater persuasive power than expert endorsements in shaping preferences on education and environmental policies. This effect is especially pronounced among individuals exhibiting populist attitudes and voting behavior. Research indicates that personalisation through stories focused on individuals (Iyengar et al, 2015) can be more persuasive than expert or politician interviews (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Lefevere et al., 2012), particularly if they align with the individual's predispositions (Aarøe and Petersen, 2020; Ryffel et al., 2014). De Graaf et al (2012) similarly shows identification with a character leads to narrative persuasion (also Dennison, 2022).

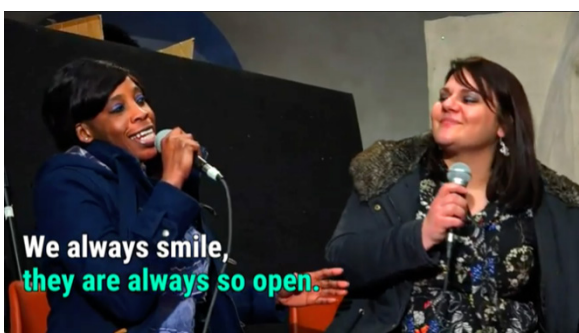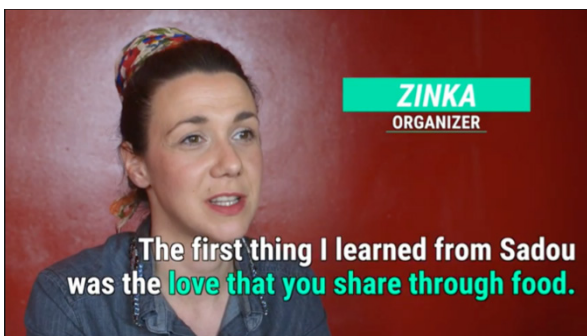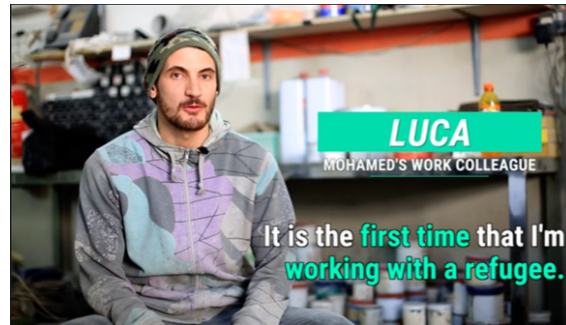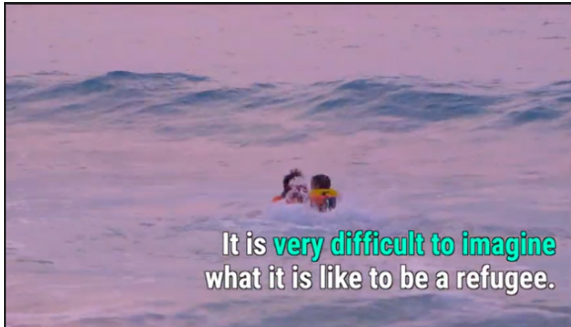Figure 5. Still from "My Return to Georgia" campaign by IOM Germany using personal stories to encourage participation in an Assisted Voluntary Return and Retintegration campaign[5]
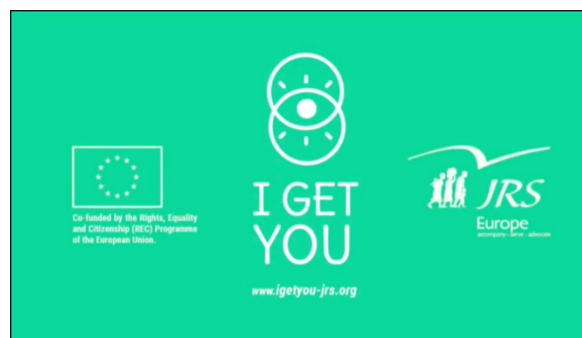

In terms of specific contingencies, stories told from a first-person perspective or using first- or second-person pronouns have been shown to elicit stronger identification and therefore observe stronger persuasive effects (e.g. Christy, 2018). Zhuang and Guidry (2022) overview the extent to which storytelling can reduce stigma amongst individuals to show that it does and that narratives constructed with the first-person point of view were to be superior in reducing stigma.Kang et al (2020) show that stories do better than information to persuade consumers, and that those from the actual founder more so than a fictitious customer, supporting the notion that real-life rather than ficitional characters are more persuasive.

Figure 6: Stills from "I get you campaign" using personal stories to raise awareness of the backgrounds of migrants[6]

It is very difficult to imagine what it is like to be a refugee.

LUCA
MOHAMED'S WORK COLLEAGUE
It is the first time that I'm working with a refugee.

We talk, we joke, we work well together.

He has hidden all this in his heart and he suffered immensely.

What makes me happy here is that finally I am able to create my

ASIER
ORGANIZER
Under different circumstances, I could've been one of them.

ZINKA
ORGANIZER
The first thing I learned from Sadou was the love that you share through food.

my plan is to make these things great.

We always smile, they are always so open.


Rather, one has to commit to action.

Recommendations for migration communication

1.	Communicators must include storytelling and have stories to hand in their repertoire for all key policy goals.
2.	Effective storytelling must be immersive; to do so requires disarming audiences via entertainment, enjoyment, and empathy with both characters and audience.
3.	Storytelling should increase the credibility of the storyteller itself by demonstrating a range of skills, such as description, humour, empathy, and so on.
4.	The central insight or "lesson" of the story should give relief and joy to the audience following both cognitive and emotive exposition of the central dilemma to be resolved.
5.	The central dilemma of the story should resonate with the audience either by appealing to values and/or their personal lives.
6.	Storytelling is not always the most persuasive format; when debating empirical and objective issues, "killer facts"—those which are unambiguous and relevant to the argument—can be most persuasive when not integrated into stories.
7.	 Experimental evidence has produced several insights into which stories perform best, including those in which the story:
	a.	Aligns with the values of the audience;
	b.	Is specific and relevant to the audience;
	c.	Emphasises and describes emotions, not only negative ones, and does so in unison with cognitive points (facts, data);
	d.	Emphasises agency and personal control;
	e.	Stories told from the first-person perspective and real-life individuals have been shown to be more persuasive.

Figure 7. ERRIN video using personal stories to affect public perceptions of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programmes
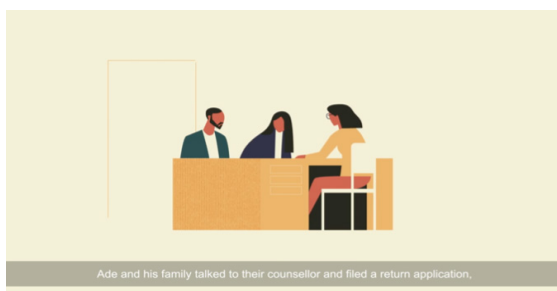
Finally, various scholars and literary commentators have sought to classify stories (e.g. Tobias, 1993). For example, Polti (1895) suggested that there were essentially 36 "dramatic situations". More recently, Booker (2004) suggested that there were seven "basic plots". These can be aligned with Schwartz's Basic Human Values to produce migration stories.

For example, "overcoming the monster" can be transposed onto immigration attitudes with "Overcoming prejudice, redeeming our country's democratic ideals" while "rags to riches" can similarly become a tale of "Our country grew rich and powerful through new ideas and people, when we turned inward we began to lose, but can become prosperous again."

Table 2. Seven story archetypes and the values to which they appeal

PLOT	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES	KEY VALUE APPEAL
Overcoming the monster	The protagonist sets out to defeat an antagonistic force (often evil) that threatens the protagonist and/or protagonist's homeland.	James Bond, Star Wars, Harry Potter	Security, benevolence
Rags to riches	The poor protagonist acquires power, wealth, and/or a mate, loses it all and gains it back, growing as a person as a result.	Cinderella, Aladdin, Jane Ayre	Power, achievement
The quest	The protagonist and companions set out to acquire an important object or to get to a location. They face temptations and other obstacles along the way.	Lord of the Rings, Raiders of the Lost Ark, The Ilyiad	Achievement Self -direction
Voyge and return	The protagonist goes to a strange land and, after overcoming the threats it poses or learning important lessons unique to that location, returns with experience.	Alice in Wonderland, The Odyssey, The Lion King,	Stimulation Self-direction
Comedy	Light and humorous character with a happy or cheerful ending; a dramatic work in which the central motif is the triumph over adverse circumstance, resulting in a successful or happy conclusion. Booker stresses that comedy is more than humor. It refers to a pattern where the conflict becomes more and more confusing, but is at last made plain in a single clarifying event. The majority of romance films fall into this category.	Bridget Jones's Diary, Four Weddings and a Funeral, A Midsummer Night's Dream	Hedonism Stimulation
Tragedy	The protagonist is a hero with a major character flaw or great mistake which is ultimately their undoing. The protagonist's unfortunate end evokes pity at their folly and the fall of a fundamentally good character.	Citizen Kane, Romeo and Juliet, The Portrait of Dorian Gray	Conformity, Universalism

Conclusion

Practitioners regularly recommend storytelling as an effective means of strategic communication about migration. This report provides the first review of the academic literature on the characteristics and effects of storytelling and how this might be best used for migration communication. Storytelling is distinct from other forms of communication due to its ability to clear and retain attention, disarm critical thought, and provide an opportunity for the storyteller to demonstrate a large range of skills and thus enhance their credibility. It is thought to be an evolutionarily adaptation. Experimental evidence supports the notion that storytelling is more persuasive than, for example, appeals to authority using experts.

Figure 8: Still from the "Aware Migrants" project using personal stories to dissaude individuals from irregular migration [7]

However, effectiveness is highly contingent on the relationship between the audience and story in terms of prior beliefs, empirical reality, credibility, importance, emotional engagement, and plot structure. The report outlines best practices according to these criteria and demonstrates them using examples. Future research should continue to classify current campaigns according to their use of stories and test the effects of the various recommendations listed above using experiments and impact assessments (Dennison, 2020b).

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[2]https://www.awaremigrants.org/spots/video-tchamba

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