



Narrations of Sustainability How to Tell the Story of the Socio-Ecological Transformation

Fischer, Daniel; Schaefer, Torsten; Borner, Joachim

Published in:
GAIA

DOI:
[10.14512/gaia.27.3.19](https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.27.3.19)

Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for pulished version (APA):

Fischer, D., Schaefer, T., & Borner, J. (2018). Narrations of Sustainability How to Tell the Story of the Socio-Ecological Transformation. *GAIA*, 27(3), 334-336. <https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.27.3.19>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

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

Narrations of Sustainability. How to Tell the Story of the Socio-Ecological Transformation | GAIA 27/3 (2018): 334–336 | **Keywords:** narration, nature writing, storytelling, sustainability communication, transmedia

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.

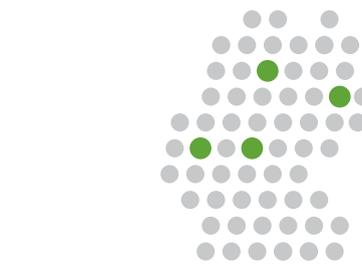
Narrative Formats of Science Communication

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



NaWis

Verbund für Nachhaltige Wissenschaft



LEUPHANA
UNIVERSITÄT LÜNEBURG

UNIKASSEL
VERSITÄT

IASS
POTSDAM



Wuppertal
Institut

Contact authors: Prof. Dr. Daniel Fischer | Arizona State University | School of Sustainability | Tempe | USA and Leuphana University of Lüneburg | Institute for Environmental and Sustainability Communication | Lüneburg | Germany | dfische6@asu.edu

Prof. Dr. Torsten Schäfer | Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences | Institute for Communication and Media | Darmstadt | Germany | torsten.schaefer@h-da.de

Joachim Borner | Collegium for the Management and Design of Sustainable Development | Berlin | Germany | borner@kmgne.de

Contact NaWis-Runde: Prof. Dr. Uwe Schneidewind | Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy | Döppersberg 19 | 42103 Wuppertal | Germany | +49 202 2492100 | uwe.schneidewind@wupperinst.org | www.wupperinst.org

© 2018 D. Fischer et al.; licensee oekom verlag. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

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

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 format¹. The program included key notes from various disciplines and presentations of practical projects as well as workshops for an in-depth exchange². 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

FIGURE 1: Panel discussion at the conference *Narrations of Sustainability* with Lars Rademacher, Jan C. Schmidt, Torsten Schäfer (all Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences), Beatrice Dernbach (Technische Hochschule Nürnberg) and 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 Lab³ 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*)⁴ 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.

References

- Clark, W. C. 2010. Sustainable development and sustainability science. In: *Toward a science of sustainability. Report from the conference* Toward a Science of Sustainability, Warrenton, VA, November 29 to December 2, 2009. Edited by S. A. Levin, W. C. Clark. 80–100.
- Clark, W. C., N. M. Dickson. 2003. Sustainability science: The emerging research program. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* 100/14: 8059–8061.
- Fischer, D., M. Storksdieck. 2018. Storytelling: Ein Ansatz zum Umgang mit Komplexität in der Nachhaltigkeitskommunikation [Storytelling: an approach to deal with complexity in sustainability communication]? In: *Zwischen Ohnmacht und Zuversicht?: Vom Umgang mit Komplexität in der Nachhaltigkeitskommunikation [Between paralysis and confidence: Dealing with complexity in sustainability communication]*. Edited by T. Pyhel. DBU-Umweltkommunikation 10. München: oekom. 161–176.
- Schäfer, T. 2017. *Nature Writing und Journalismus – warum es der Annäherung Bedarf*. <https://gruener-journalismus.de/nature-writing-und-journalismus-warum-es-der-annaehrerung-bedarf> (accessed September 2, 2018).
- WBGU (German Advisory Council on Global Change). 2011. *World in transition: A social contract for sustainability. Flagship report*. Berlin: WBGU.

GAIA ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR SCIENCE AND SOCIETY

© 2018 Verein Gaia | Konstanz, St. Gallen, Zurich

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Irmis Seidl | Birmensdorf
(responsible according to the press law)

EDITORIAL OFFICE

Dr. Almut Jödicke | ETH Zentrum | PO Box CAB 42
| 8092 Zurich | Switzerland | redgaia@env.ethz.ch

Dr. Martina Blum/Tobias Mickler | oekom verlag |
Waltherstr. 29 | 80337 Munich | Germany |
blum@oekom.de/mickler@oekom.de

Dr. Ulrike Sehy | oekom verlag | Hagenbuchrain 13 |
8047 Zurich | Switzerland | sehy@oekom.ch

GRAPHIC DESIGN + TYPESET

Heike Tiller | Munich | h.tiller@freenet.de

PUBLISHER

oekom verlag – Gesellschaft für ökologische Kommunikation mbH | Waltherstr. 29 | 80337 Munich | Germany | www.oekom.de | Partners and shareholders: Jacob Radloff, Feldafing, 77 percent, and Christoph von Braun, Munich, 23 percent

ADVERTISEMENTS

Mona Fricke | oekom GmbH |
+49 89 54118435 | anzeigen@oekom.de

PRINTER

Friedrich Pustet GmbH & Co KG | 93008 Regensburg | Germany | www.pustet-druck.de

The magazine and its contents are protected by copyright. Any use, which is not explicitly provided for by copyright law requires the permission of Verein Gaia. Articles by named authors do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the publisher and editors. Unsolicited manuscripts, for which no responsibility is accepted, will be treated as being offered for publication according to the conditions of the publishers. Only original unpublished works will be accepted. The author(s) shall consent to any editorial changes that do not distort the meaning of the original text.

FREQUENCY Four times a year.

SUBSCRIPTION

Trial subscription (2 issues including shipping in Germany): 29.50 EUR | **Subscription**: private: 110.20 EUR; institutional: 198.90 EUR; reduced: 74.50 EUR | **Single issue**: 27.30 EUR. VAT included, plus shipping. Cancellations six weeks before end of subscription year. Payment in advance.

SUBSCRIPTIONS, DISTRIBUTION

Verlegerdienst München GmbH | Aboservice oekom verlag | Gutenbergstr. 1 | 82205 Gilching | +49 8105 388563 | Fax: +49 8105 388333 | oekom-abo@verlegerdienst.de www.oekom.de/gaia/abonnement

ACCOUNT for Germany: Postbank Hamburg | IBAN DE19200100200007623203 | BIC PBNKDEFFXXX for Switzerland: PostFinance SWISS POST | IBAN CH730900000401946074 | BIC POFICHBEXXX

Since 2008, oekom offsets its unavoidable CO₂ emissions.

 **Climate neutral**
Publisher
ClimatePartner.com/53585-1805-1001

ISSN (Print) 0940-5550, ISSN (Online) 2625-5413

Printed on
Circle Offset
Premium White,
certified with
The Blue Angel
(RAL-UZ 14).

³ <https://ccclab.info/willkommen>

⁴ www.sustelling.com