

A short history of stories



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THERE WASN'T A LOT TO DO IN THE STONE AGE

Bit of hunting, bit of gathering. The usual. That's why some bright hairy spark came up with storytelling: not only was it a great way of relaying info, it was fun too. They made 'em catchy so people would remember them.

Some say part of the reason our Neanderthal cousins weren't as successful as us was because they had no stories. They could communicate, but because they couldn't tell stories they couldn't easily pass on vital information to others, including the next generation.

Li'l Neanderthal kids couldn't improve on their parents' techniques, they just had to start over again from scratch. Not only that, no stories meant no societies, no belief systems, no sense of shared identity. It was a big bad world and they couldn't cut it. Homo sapiens on the other hand were a dab hand. And the rest, I guess, is history. As in it actually is history.

Stories, like your first sexual experience, began around the campfire. Stories were passed down through poetry or song, from one generation to the next. But as time went on, the tales got taller. You just couldn't rely on them. So someone invented writing which was obviously great. The only problem was that not everyone could write. Writing, and therefore the flow of information itself, belonged to the elite. It's what allowed feudal society to flourish for centuries: keep the masses stupid and they're a lot easier to deal with.

Then you get ol' William Caxton, and Gutenberg, and all those other white men who took movable type mainstream (they'd been doing it all over East Asia for centuries but it just hadn't really taken off). That hip little religious document only you knew about? Now it was all over the place. Monks were spitting out their flat whites in disgust.

Soon just about anyone with some knowhow, money and hutzpah could start distributing their own information on a relatively massive scale. Books, which had once been so heavy and so expensive they had to be chained to the library, and came in any quantity you liked as long as it was one, could now be passed from person to person, or even sent across the ocean. People, who up until then had just been informed (if they were lucky), were now connected. Feudalism was out: it was time to wave hello to parliamentary democracy. (Most of the time. With a few caveats. And not everywhere, obviously).

People just couldn't get enough of being connected. And about a million inventions, tweaks and minor electric shocks later, we had kit that could send light and sound thousands of miles in a matter of seconds. Remember our friend Disney from [Episode 1?](#) He was a man who understood another milestone in this tale: mass audio-visual communication. Radio. Cinema. TV. Mass A-V made it even easier for popular movements to spring up, everything from Martin Luther-King's speeches to Stalinist propaganda. Take-out: use it wisely.

And of course, this kind of mass media heralded the golden age of advertising - but sadly for us, it wasn't to last. People got bored of just being connected. The next step was to become empowered.

More overflowing wastepaper baskets, and we'd managed to invent the internet. Creating and disseminating your own information was now not only free, you could do it anywhere. It was about ten times easier than replacing the cartridge on a fountain pen, let alone setting up your own printing press or inventing an alphabet.

Now blockchain, subject of a thousand lines of LinkedIn Vagon poetry, is about to ratchet that up a gear. A distributed network will allow us to interact with information in a way that will make us, like the title of this series suggests, hyper-connected, and therefore hyper-empowered.

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More than this, the crazy march of technology doesn't replace one way of telling stories with another, it just creates more.

The pen wasn't replaced by the printing press, and the computer didn't replace broadcast TV. And once we have blockchain, or whatever hell next thing turns up and screws around with the order of things, we'll still have all the rest of that shit (yes, you do still have to write your nan a thank you note is what I'm saying). The world just keeps getting more complex, and as adwomen and admen we have to deal with that world. People went from doing what they were told to being able to do something about it—and reaching them is, if not quite impossible, then a total ball-ache.

Now that the information flow wasn't a one way street, brands had to go from interrupting consumers' lives to trying to infiltrate this hyper-communicated network: creating stuff people would seek out and want to consume.

Content marketing, ya-dee ya-da, heard it before—but data made it a bit more fun. Data meant that you could get the right message (bag of monster munch), to right person (drunk man), to the right place (outside the takeaway), at the right time (when the takeaway has just closed). But without something to hold it all together, this message is about as useful as, well, a bag of monster munch.

Yes, data can be the bridge between your ad and the consumer, but without a story - hell, a storyverse - to tie all the bits together, the consumer is never going to experience a cohesion of message.

They're never going to connect up all the piecemeal dispatches you send them into a unified whole—a brand storyverse, if you will.

So what I guess I'm saying is don't end up like the Neanderthals—without a storyverse, every piece of communication your consumer receives is just a shot in the dark, destined to be drowned out by the noise. Now all you have to do is make like the stone age: tell a story, one that's catchy, emotional, relevant—or your brand, like them hapless Neanderthals, is in danger of dying out.

Can't wait for for episode 3? Get in touch with Mark Mullooly, Aesop's Business Development Director on +44 (0)20 7440 5550 mark.mullooly@aesopagency.com