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Article

Getting the Story Right: A Constructivist Interpretation of Storytelling in the Context of UK Parliamentary Engagement

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Abstract

This article examines Parliament's use of storytelling techniques as a means of representing itself to citizens, and representing citizens to themselves. It does so with reference to the 'constructivist turn' in representation literature—particularly its emphasis on co-constitutive meaning-making—which, as this article shows, is also applicable to studies of engagement and narrative. Storytelling constitutes a vital means of engagement, yet has hitherto received insufficient scholarly attention within a parliamentary context. This lacuna is all the more significant when considering the emotional and often informal means of participation that increasingly characterise the UK's political landscape. In relating storytelling to parliamentary engagement (and emphasising the co-constitutive qualities of both), an innovative visual analogy (based on fractals) will illustrate the conductivity of storytelling to two pursuits: Parliament's attempts to represent itself within the political sphere, and its claims to be relevant to citizens. Both of these pursuits represent key tenets of Parliament's responsibility to engage, and to mediate between citizens and governance. Through the theoretical lens presented here, Parliament's attempts to engage through storytelling will be examined according to the techniques used, and their likelihood of reaching an audience that, in constructivist terms, is created through this act of representation.

Keywords

constructivist turn; emotions; engagement; narrative; parliament; participation; representation; storytelling

Issue

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1. Introduction

Parliament is relevant. Parliament is evolving. Parliament is yours. These words, emblazoned across a wall of the UK Parliament Education Centre, constitute the *modus operandi* of a legislature that has been unprecedentedly active in public engagement efforts, staking claims to its own political relevance. The plurality of these efforts—encompassing petitions (see Caygill & Griffiths, 2018; Leston-Bandeira, 2017), educational workshops, and social media campaigns (see Griffith & Leston-Bandeira, 2012; Leston-Bandeira & Bender, 2013)—belies the fact that parliamentary engagement is a relatively recent phenomenon. Parliament's discernible role in connecting citizens to governance was apparent only after the turn of the millennium (Leston-Bandeira, 2016, p. 502). This de-

velopment must be understood alongside the UK's electoral history; the expanding franchise during the nineteenth century, and the emergence of mass parties in the twentieth century (Norton, 2013, p. 404), vastly expanded Parliament's representative responsibilities. Nevertheless, in recent decades the representative functions of political institutions across Western Europe have encountered widespread dissatisfaction (Norris, 2011). Despite appearing more interested in the political process, UK citizens' feelings of efficacy when engaging with Parliament are declining (Hansard Society, 2018). Moreover, self-actualising and informal (i.e. non-institutional) modes of political expression are increasingly pervasive, especially among younger generations (Manning, 2013, 2015). Disaffection towards institutional politics, and institutions' apparent failure to harness this increasingly

informal participation (Dalton, 2008), necessitates a re-examination of Parliament's engagement role.

Expressions of disaffection and disengagement have often followed recent parliamentary scandals, illustrating citizens' existing preconceptions and underlying social narratives; in other words, what citizens already thought about Parliament, and what they were 'primed' to think (Fielding, 2011). Notably, the 2009 parliamentary expenses scandal drew attention to "an already-established narrative in which politics and corruption were close bedfellows" (Fielding, 2011, p. 227). Dominant narratives constitute accepted and culturally-entrenched truths (Langellier, 1999; Lyotard, 1984; Young, 2000) and in this sense "are not called stories. They are called reality" (MacKinnon, 1996, p. 235). The twenty-first century has seen a proliferation of narratives—primarily as a means of fulfilling myriad commercial and political agendas (Fernandes, 2017; Salmon, 2010)—to the extent that they now constitute legitimate theoretical frameworks. Theories such as the narrative policy framework (NPF; Jones & McBeth, 2010) have provided an empirical basis for studying the ways in which public policy is informed and shaped by narratives. This carries significant implications for parliaments; "places where competing narratives are told and claims on public resources are made" (Parkinson, 2013, p. 440). Indeed, the relevance of narratives to parliamentary policy is already evident through O'Bryan, Dunlop and Radaelli's (2014) use of the NPF to analyse legislative hearings.

Nevertheless, Parliament's *utilisation* of narratives as a mode of engagement remains under-researched. The importance of storytelling in challenging dominant narratives (Andrews, 2004)—such as those of disaffection and dissatisfaction—are of especial importance in the political and parliamentary context described thus far. As this article shows, parliamentary storytelling—by bodies *within* Parliament—lacks unity in form and content. There is also an evident inconsistency in the institutional application (or awareness) of storytelling principles; that is to say, a lack of (broad) understanding that stories must be *told* rather than simply *presented*. This suggests a deficit of institutional understanding as to how and why stories work as an engagement device, reinforcing Kelso's observation of Parliament as an institution "lack[ing] any kind of corporate identity", or "the means to approach political disengagement in a holistic fashion" (2007, pp. 365–366). This article provides a comparative analysis—grounded in the 'constructivist turn' within representation theory—of parliamentary storytelling initiatives that attempt to co-constitutively represent Parliament to citizens (and the citizenry to itself). Through this analysis, it draws attention to a non-holistic parliamentary approach to storytelling that is likely to hinder the prospect of engaging an audience. However, it also serves to clarify ways in which parliamentary engagement can be strengthened through effective *storytelling*.

2. Representation and Engagement amid Dominant Social Narratives

Parliamentary engagement is a comparatively recent phenomenon, and parliamentary engagement through storytelling is newer still. Politicians and Parliamentarians¹ (and/or their strategists) have historically employed stories to engage citizens (Fernandes, 2017; Fielding, 2011; Salmon, 2010), though their efforts have traditionally encouraged engagement *with them or their party* (e.g., securing votes) rather than with Parliament *per se* (Norton, 2013). Parliament's engagement efforts—making the aforementioned claims of *relevance*, *evolution*, and '*public ownership*'—have often been limited to providing information (Norton, 2013). Academics have frequently criticised this 'unidirectional' approach, describing Parliament's (and MPs') use of social media, for example, as prioritising depth (quality engagement) over breadth (the reach of a message), resembling 'broadcasting' rather than engagement (Coleman, 2005; Gibson, Nixon, & Ward, 2003; Norton, 2007). In these cases, there is no opportunity (or evident desire) for a response from the supposed audience. Moreover, the term 'parliamentary engagement' can presuppose a unified, coherent effort, itself a gross oversimplification. The initiatives discussed within this article are those of specific parliamentary services, and should not be generalised as 'institutional'. Examining their content addresses a lacuna identified by Judge and Leston-Bandeira: an overwhelming scholarly focus on the means—and extent—of interaction, while "relatively little attention has been focused upon what is being communicated to citizens" (2018, p. 2). These initiatives are accordingly conceptualised as attempts to *represent* Parliament to citizens, and citizens to themselves.

Contemporary representation literature continues to cite, build upon, and critique Pitkin's seminal *The Concept of Representation* (1967) as a theoretical touchstone. However, the work of recent scholars such as Michael Saward has sought to afford more attention to the *act* of representation:

For Pitkin...it is the inanimate object—the painting, the icon, the symbol, the map—that represents. The intentions of the maker of the symbol, etc. are either ignored or reduced to merely informational impulses. (2006, p. 300)

The contribution of the 'constructivist turn' more broadly is in conceptualising a 'claim' made to an audience: a claim about the claim-maker to the audience, and a claim about the audience *to themselves* (Coleman, 2015; Disch, 2015; Hinchman & Hinchman, 2001; Mansbridge, 2011; Parkinson, 2009; Saward, 2010; Street, 2004). The audience's engagement with (and legitimation of) this claim brings it into being as representation. Saward's critique

¹ While the focus of this article is largely institutional in scope, please refer to Warner's (2018) article within this thematic issue for a discussion of political representation in relation to MPs.

of Pitkin emphasises the aims of the creator, and this article examines Parliament accordingly; as an agential co-constituent in a dynamic not only of representation, but of engagement and storytelling.

Conceptualising engagement as a dynamic thus affords just as much agency (and responsibility) to citizens as to institutions. This is highly pertinent to contemporary political engagement literature, which often characterises the citizenry as ignorant of politics or consciously removed from it. Peter Mair exemplifies this when stating that “for many, at least as far as conventional politics is concerned, it is enough to be simply spectators” (2013, p. 543). This characterisation of citizens as spectators and audiences (Gibson et al., 2003; Putnam, 1995; Street, 2004) implies pervasive inertia; other studies, as van Wessel points out, diagnose citizens’ ‘unrealistic expectations’ of politics, stemming from failure to “understand what it is they are turning away from” and “what the reality and potential of democratic politics is” (2016, p. 2). Two objections can be raised here. The first relates to Mair’s use of the term ‘conventional’. Conflating disengagement with a detachment from formal politics implies a public/private dichotomisation—popularised during the Scottish Enlightenment (Manning, 2013)—that obscures contemporary societal trends, including “a blurring of public and private...reconnecting politics with morality/ethics” (Manning, 2013, p. 29). Secondly, descriptions of citizens’ lack of understanding often say more about *scholars’* understandings of politics than those of citizens:

Understandings are largely derived. Citizens’ understandings are taken to be predictable, on the basis of analysis of large-scale developments political scientists have identified (chosen?) as important. (van Wessel, 2016, p. 4)

Van Wessel instead conceptualises engagement as “an interplay between a citizen and the democracy she/he is trying to understand” (2016, p. 5). Discussions of engagement (and means of strengthening it) must therefore take account of citizens’ contextualised, situated knowledge of the political sphere.

Narratives are an essential facet of this situated knowledge, in that they create a structure for subjective experience. As Barthes argues “there is not, there has never been anywhere any people without narrative” (1975, p. 237). Storytelling, meanwhile—what Abbott refers to as ‘narrative discourse’—is a means of alluding to a broader narrative through “the telling or presenting of a story” (2008, p. 241). Through repeated collective storytelling a narrative is constructed. This clarification is important, given the frequent treatment of ‘narratives’ and ‘stories’ as interchangeable terms within academia (Daigle, 2016, p. 27). Within political science specifically, narratives are generally acknowledged and discussed in one of two respects:

1. Context: circumstances, socially-entrenched norms and popularly-held assumptions.
2. Appeal: connecting with a reader/audience through relatability and self-recognition.

The first permutation of narrative—*context*, against which events, figures and theories are examined—is ubiquitous within political science; narratives, after all, intuitively constitute “the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time” (H. P. Abbott, 2008, p. 3). This accounts for the importance of narratives as ‘structures’; as a form of meaning-making they reflect the human desire to establish patterns across random information and instances. This is substantiated by the cultural ubiquity of narratives (Campbell, 1968; Macintyre, 1977, 2007; Nussbaum, 2001) and their pervasiveness at a psychological level (Stephens & Breheny, 2013).

However, this is not the only human impulse that narratives speak to; there is a second permutation (*appeal*) which is especially relevant to storytelling. Stories constitute and reflect broader narratives—sometimes referred to as ‘master narratives’ or ‘metanarratives’—but they also hold *appeal* in their own right. Studies that acknowledge the second permutation as a mode of engagement are infrequent and typically focus on electoral participation through political parties (Coleman, 2015; Escobar, 2011). Parliament (and engagement with it) remains under-researched through this particular lens. If narratives are indeed the representation of stories, then investigating stories potentialises an enriched understanding of what “we tell each other” (Langellier, 1999, p. 125). That “there are always conflicting stories—sometimes two, sometimes more—competing for acceptance in politics” necessitates understanding these stories, so that the narratives they aggregate (constituting an entire “social world”) can be studied in turn (Bennett & Edelman, 1985, p. 160). Political science has a responsibility to address perceived weaknesses in political engagement (Flinders, 2012a, p. 30; Riddell, 2010, p. 552) and, by extension, understand existing (and potential) engagement mechanisms. Narratives and stories are not (just) academic ‘vantage points’. They are a means of—and potentially an impetus for—engagement with social reality.

3. Visualising Engaging Stories: A Fractal Analogy of Context and Appeal

As discussed, narrative and storytelling are semiotic instruments; they entail a form of meaning-making. Establishing an accepted, legitimated meaningfulness (‘making meaning’) thereby underpins an effective story. According to Niklas Luhmann:

Every intention of meaning is self-referential insofar as it also provides for its own reactualization by including itself in its own referential structure as one among many possibilities of further experience and action. (1995, p. 61)

The appeal (and success) of a story is incumbent upon the reader’s self-identification within a broader context, “see[ing] himself living this written life” (Benjamin, 2006, p. 372). MacIntyre concurrently observes that “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” (2007, p. 16). Nussbaum echoes this emphasis on relatability in observing that the reader(s) of a story, upon “seeing events as general human possibilities...naturally also see them as possibilities for themselves” (2001, p. 241). A story constitutes an allusion to possibilities that are appealing and relatable to a reader/audience, who must *recognise themselves* in the story they are told.

However, the importance of a story does not lie only in reflection. The relevance of storytelling *transcends* this immediate social and temporal context, thereby differentiating it from information:

The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment....A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. (Benjamin, 2006, p. 366)

The ‘strength’ of a story is therefore also incumbent upon on a transformative element, as elaborated by Nietzsche who, drawing on ancient Greek mythology, posits that “to be able to live at all [the Greeks] had to interpose the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians between themselves and those horrors” (1993, p. 23). Building on this, Kearney states that storytelling is *aspirational* “involv[ing] far *more* than a mere mirroring of reality” (2002, p. 12, emphasis in original). Indeed, as Nietzsche points out, storytelling “created the Olympian world with which the [Greek] ‘will’ held up a transfiguring mirror to itself” (1993, p. 23). The ‘transfiguring mirror’ is a use-

ful analogy for combining two aforementioned tenets of narrative: context and appeal. ‘Mirroring’ is relevant to *context* (self-identification and situated-ness), while the ‘transfiguring’ relates to *appeal* (aspiration, possibilities, and allusion). Context and appeal can therefore be amalgamated to demonstrate the ‘strength’ of a story (and narrative more broadly), as Figure 1 shows.

This not only validates ‘appeal’ as an academic focus (transcending invocations of narrative in a purely contextual sense); it also replaces the context/appeal dichotomy with an *interplay* (demonstrated by Figure 1), illustrating (to both of these concepts) the relevance of self-similarity. Several scholars have discussed the importance of self-similarity within narratives, using fractals as an analogy; these include Abbott (2001) and Shenhav (2015). Both authors utilise self-similarity and recursion (repeated similarity from one ‘progression’ to the next); definitively fractal characteristics (Eglash, 1999). A ‘fractal’ pattern is one that is mirrored (at every scale) by its component parts; well-known examples include Mandelbrot sets, Koch snowflakes and Julia sets. One of the most widely-recognised fractals is the Sierpinski triangle.

As Figure 2 shows, isolating one part of the Sierpinski Triangle refers back to its structure. Stories work in the same way. They reflect dominant narratives and reflect readers back to themselves as part of ‘something bigger’, which constitutes their appeal.

What existing fractal analogies (particularly Shenhav’s) have conspicuously lacked is an explanation of *why* (rather than *how*) their own analogies work. Scholars have critiqued Shenhav’s fractal approach in ignoring “the inherent agency of human actors” (Krebs, Jones, Aronoff, & Shenhav, 2017, p. 3), an omission which compromises the value of narratives *and* fractals as theoretical tools. Let us address the narrative element first. As Barthes argues, “a narrative cannot take place without a narrator and a listener (or reader)” (1975, p. 260). Without acknowledging the reader—who, along with

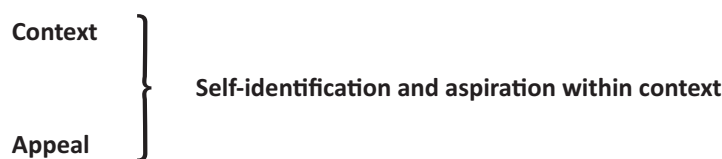


Figure 1. A definition of ‘engaging storytelling’, amalgamating two academic understandings of *narrative*.

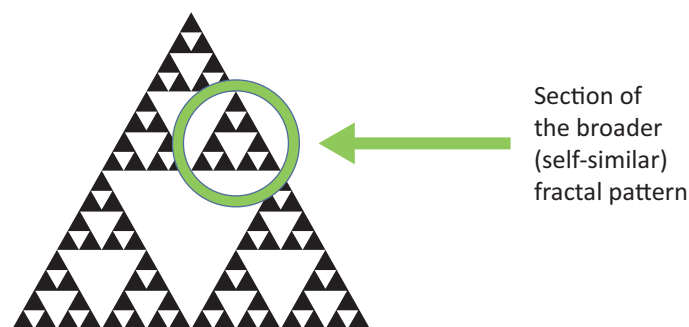


Figure 2. A Sierpinski Triangle: a fractal pattern in which individual elements reflect a broader self-similar structure.

the narrator, constitutes a storytelling dynamic—there is no narrative. Turning to fractals, Shenhav correctly observes that recursion and self-similarity are a *means* of (re)generating narratives (2015, pp. 60–68). In doing so he shows that narratives endure and perpetuate because they relate back to dominant, already-legitimated social narratives. As Derrida puts it, “everything begins by referring back (*par le renvoi*), that is to say, does not begin” (1982, p. 324). However, having identified self-similarity as a means of regeneration, Shenhav fails to also identify it as an *impetus*. Self-similarity constitutes the appeal of narrative; seeing oneself and ‘completing the outline’ “based on [one’s] own fantasies, emotional circumstances, and ideologies” (Bennett & Edelman, 1985, p. 164). To omit this factor from a fractal analogy negates the analogy’s *raison d’être*.

A fractal analogy of context/appeal interplay is provided below. At the level of the reader and of the narrative context, the reader is reflected as *part of* a broader structure that is self-similar to them; a ‘transfiguring mirror’, to borrow Nietzsche’s aforementioned metaphor. The broader structure analogises the contextualising effect of narrative. It also demonstrates the centrality of the reader to a narrative, and the fractal nature of successful storytelling.

As Figure 3 shows, the reader—upon being told a story—relates the elements of this story (which are typically numerous, hence the multi-coloured arrowed lines) to their own personal context, i.e. a self-similar backdrop of narratives (represented here as a larger fractal pattern that the reader can ‘find themselves’ within, or with which they can identify). This backdrop constitutes the reader’s own situated reality. Note that the relation of story elements—which may relate to the plot, characters, or ‘moral’—can result in a (re)connection (i.e. the green and yellow lines, which reflect back upon the reader) but can also fail to do so; thus Figure 3 demonstrates how re-

lating to a story is a granular process, rather than a binary ‘success’ or ‘failure’. This illustrates how *appeal* is incumbent upon the reader’s ability to relate to (i.e. find themselves within) the story via *the reader’s own context*. The story itself is a conscious representation of the storyteller, “traces of [whom] cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (Benjamin, 2006, p. 367), but also of the reader, who—in effective instances—recognises, and relates to, the representation. Figure 3 thus presents a stark contrast to the fractal analogies discussed previously, which do not incorporate *appeal (to context)* as a reason why stories perpetuate.

Taking the fractal analogy demonstrated in Figure 3, and applying it to the expenses scandal mentioned in the introduction, we can demonstrate the appeal of stories; in this case, media accounts of corrupt and selfish politicians, which were seen and read by the reader/audience, and interpreted against the reader/audience’s own situated reality (composed of underlying assumptions and familiar, self-similar narrative elements). Ultimately these stories ‘made sense’ (i.e. were accepted and legitimated) amongst a public that, in the context of a global financial crisis—as well as the aforementioned ‘corrupt politicians’ narrative (Fielding, 2011)—“were acutely attuned to crisis narratives” (Flinders, 2012b, p. 10). The crucial point here is that through being attuned to (and *familiar with*) these *crisis narratives*, citizens could personally relate crisis stories to their situated knowledge. *Crisis stories* of corrupt politicians thereby reflected citizens’ own understandings within a broader (and self-similar) narrative structure of *corruption in politics*. This example of public outcry shows how ‘appeal’ need not be positive, but must be accepted as ‘making sense’ in context. We will explore this phenomenon in a more prospective manner in the following section, and utilise the fractal analogy in analysing attempts at parliamentary engagement through storytelling.

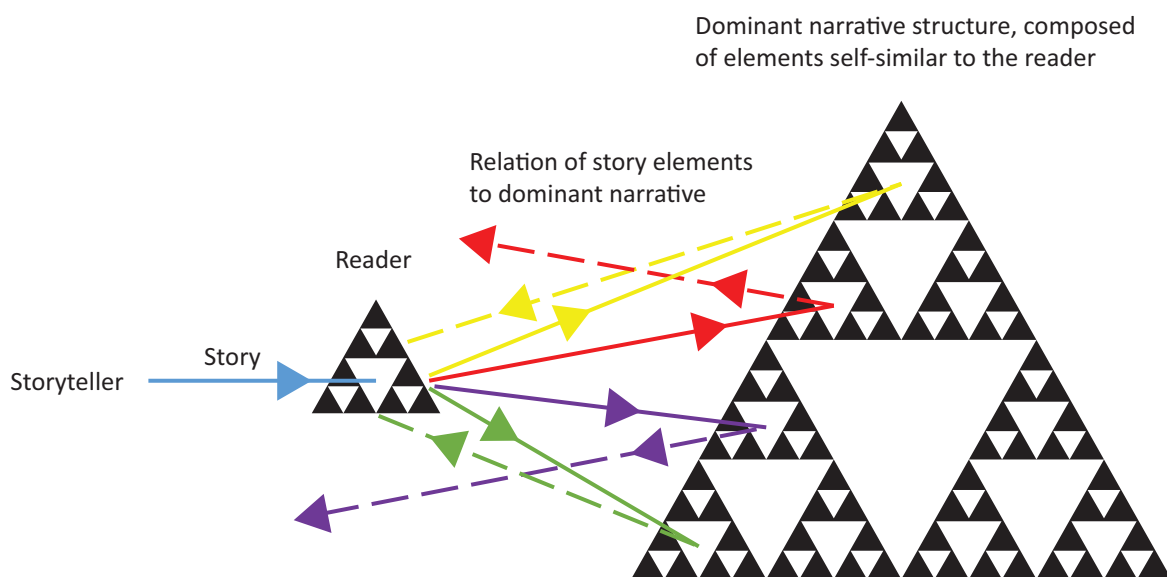


Figure 3. Storytelling and its appeal: encompassing context and appeal through self-similarity and recursion.

4. *The Story of Parliament: Informing through a Story*

A comparative analysis of parliamentary storytelling initiatives reveals a great deal about the likelihood of success for these engagement strategies. The consistency between the desired audience and the form of storytelling will be assessed through the fractal theoretical framework elaborated previously; that is to say, a constructed audience's prospective ability to see themselves in the story presented to them. The questions addressed by this analysis are as follows:

1. In what way is Parliament being represented?
2. What audience is the storytelling initiative trying to create and appeal to?

In answering these questions, we will give consideration to the parliamentary body responsible for the initiative (to avoid 'defining' parliamentary engagement in any holistic fashion), as well as visible trends in citizen perceptions of Parliament. The latter point reinforces a co-constitutive study of parliamentary engagement, and also provides a basis for discussing the likely success of a specific initiative.

Numerous parliamentary engagement initiatives have thus far mentioned the term 'story' within their respective discourse. The Voice and Vote Exhibition, commemorating the centenary of women's suffrage, claims to "tell the story of women in Parliament, the campaigning, the protests and the achievements. It will also examine where we are today and how you can make change happen" (UK Parliament, 2018). We can see the way in which precedent and context is presented as an inducement to engage; the presupposition is that *appeal* (i.e. the desire to find out 'how you can make change happen') stems from *context* ('where we are today'). In engagement initiatives such as this, the mention of a 'story' is fairly incidental; it serves merely as a shorthand for the presentation of a sequence of events or information (consistent with a conceptualisation of narrative as a means of understanding *time*). This distinction provides a basis for comparing two recent parliamentary efforts, both of which cite a 'story': *The Story of Parliament*, and *Your Story, Our History*. Both were first publicised in 2016; an analytical comparison reveals two distinct conceptualisations of how stories can be communicated and—considering their contemporaneous existence—reinforces a perceptible lack of holism in Parliament's institutional approach to engaging storytelling.

The Story of Parliament (House of Commons Enquiry Service, 2016), published in booklet and poster form, presents a timeline of democratic milestones between the Magna Carta in 1215 and voting reform in 1969. It provides key details about Parliament and its history, resembling a story inasmuch as it presents a sequence of events (H. P. Abbott, 2008; Barthes, 1975) in the past tense, a common narrative device (H. P. Abbott, 2008). In discussing this initiative, let us return to Figure 3's

fractal analogy and ask the following questions: who is the storyteller? What element of the story would the reader recognise themselves within? And who or what could the reader then engage *with*? The story being presented here is 'disembodied'; there is of course a 'creator' (the Enquiry Service) but no clear 'storyteller'. The 'informational impulses' that Saward (2006, p. 300) draws attention to (in order to 'de-encapsulate' their attributive importance to representation) aptly encompass *The Story of Parliament*. The initiative evidences an informational impulse from its creator, rather than a storytelling impulse, recalling Walter Benjamin's aforementioned dichotomisation of the two. In this situation, the reader/audience is provided with purely temporal context. There is no appeal to relate or engage, only the provision of further information: online links and contact details. Thus in the absence of a storyteller the reader/audience is presented with information and then expected to engage, in return, *with* that information.

The question of the *subject* of this story—and, by extension, the issue of 'ownership'—is extremely important here, as the following section will also demonstrate. The terminology of *The Story of Parliament* implies not only that the story is *about* Parliament, but also that the story *belongs* to Parliament. Assuming the voice of the narrator (even, in this case, a 'disembodied' voice) is an authority claim in itself; it is a position of privilege in terms of access to the knowledge being communicated, and (in more literal terms) the power this potentialises over the reader/audience (Bauman, 1986, p. 38). "Claims about story ownership", as Shuman argues, "follow unstated, culturally specific rules about who has a right to tell about particular experiences and in what way, to whom" (2015, p. 53). Allocation of the 'right' to these experiences is all the more pertinent to a document that, as discussed, concludes its 'story' in 1969 (i.e. within living memory). The reader/audience, moreover, is only directly addressed in the final section: "Parliament and you" (House of Commons Enquiry Service, 2016, p. 7), thus limiting the degree to which the story facilitates a narrative dynamic and instead recalling the 'broadcasting' discussed in Section 2. *The Story of Parliament* thus (re)presents Parliament as the 'owner' of its own democratic story (via disembodied information rather than a storyteller), jeopardising the prospect of connectivity with the audience it constructs.

It is important to further discuss the reader/audience that is constructed (or at least presupposed) in this manner. In successive Hansard Society audits, a clear majority of respondents have indicated Parliament's essentiality to democracy (2017, p. 5), while what is lacking, as discussed in the introduction to this article, is a widely-held feeling of efficacy; connectivity between citizen *input* and parliamentary *output*, or—more generally—connectivity *per se*. A lack of connectivity is unlikely to be addressed by *The Story of Parliament*, since it provides very little to connect *with*. Moreover, the same Hansard Audit, when comparing its most recent data to its first Au-

dit in 2004, found that recent respondents' claims to be:

Knowledgeable about politics [were] 10 points higher (52% vs 42%), and knowledgeable about Parliament 16 points higher (49% vs 33%). But...satisfaction with the system of governing Britain is down seven points (36% to 29%) and people's sense of being able to bring about political change (our efficacy measure) is down three points (37% to 34%). (2018, p. 4)

This problematisation of the link between being informed and engaged—a link that serves as a prerequisite for *The Story of Parliament's* effectiveness—is further undermined by the research of scholars such as Norris (2011) and Dalton (2008), who observe (respectively) a cleavage between perceived performance of political institutions and democratic aspirations, and an increasing skepticism as to the motives of these institutions. While not suggesting that greater access to information has *caused* these developments, their prevalence—alongside an increasingly politically sophisticated and informed citizenry—certainly problematises a causal link between information and engagement (indicated by satisfaction, trust, and efficacy). These citizen-wide characteristics undermine *The Story of Parliament's* constructed audience, for whom information and engagement are positively correlated. It is important to reiterate that engagement is discussed in this article in a *parliamentary* context, with a co-constitutive view of the story's purpose (i.e. making a claim for parliamentary relevance). Parliament's claimed role as a 'mediator' is undermined by irrelevance and non-efficacy—i.e. citizens' *self-perceived* inability to effect political change *through Parliament*—narratives that this story does not address.

The constructed citizen audience within this case study is therefore *increasingly* inconsistent with the broader social trends that scholars such as Dalton (2008) and Norris (2011) have identified. As we have shown, *The Story of Parliament* does not tell a story, which negates the prospect of changing (or even addressing) broader citizen narratives of Parliament (with relation to efficacy, satisfaction and trust, for example). The information presented would (in accordance with the fractal analogy in Figure 3) simply be related to these narratives, which constitute the reader/audience's existing situated knowledge. This is important to point out because the *Story of Parliament* booklet is still distributed by the House of Commons Enquiry Service and remains available in Portcullis House, an important site of "social interaction and engagement" for visitors to Parliament (Hansard Society, 2011, p. 69). What we can see is a disjunction between the implied aims of the initiative (disseminating a greater degree of information about Parliament) and Parliament's broader aims of engagement; either in phenomenological terms (e.g., trust and satisfaction) or in more behavioural terms (given the failure to provide a subsequent 'avenue' for engagement). In Walter Benjamin's terms, then, the *Story of Parliament* is, as an

engagement initiative, unlikely to "survive the moment in which it was new" (2006, p. 366).

5. *Your Story, Our History: Engaging through Storytelling*

The Story of Parliament was discussed in the previous section as a disjuncture between techniques, principles, and societal trends. It also demonstrates a presentation of context without an appeal to context. The *Your Story, Our History* initiative, by contrast, exemplifies appeal *through* context. It is a series of YouTube films in which citizens face the camera and describe the impact of a piece of legislation on their lives. Stories about race relations, gender equality, and female suffrage are thus told through first-hand experience. In this way, the *Your Story, Our History* initiative (crucially) acknowledges the role of a storyteller. The 1965 Race Relations Act, for example, is not framed as Parliament's story; instead, it is the story of Shango Baku, who relates his experience of persecution, and his positive experiences following the passage of the Act (UK Parliament Education and Engagement Service, 2016b). The audience being constructed here is one that can relate personally to the persecution Shango experienced, and/or directly benefited from parliamentary legislation. In addition, the story constructs a 'ghostly' audience (Langellier, 1999, p. 127); viewers who may not have suffered persecution but can relate to narrative cues of isolation and uncertainty, a "sea of circumstance" as Shango puts it (UK Parliament Education and Engagement Service, 2016b). The telling of the story thereby "makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (Benjamin, 2006, p. 364); those who share common values, if not experience (Young, 1996, p. 131).

This leaves the 'meaning' of the story incumbent upon the reader, who relates the appeal of the story to their own narrative context (discerning the former through the latter). The process by which this appeal is found is demonstrated below, building upon the fractal analogy presented earlier.

Figure 4 illustrates an instance in which themes of persecution and racism may not be relatable to an audience, whereas uncertainty and isolation are themes that they can relate to (via the reader/audience's narrative background). Context (of the reader/audience's narrative background) thereby becomes appeal (through facilitating the story's relatability). Figure 4 demonstrates only a hypothetical example, since the form that the appeal takes—and the existence of appeal in the first place—is inherently subjective.

Significantly, in *Your Story, Our History*, Parliament relinquishes a *claim* to the story, a key point of contrast to *The Story of Parliament*. Ownership of the story is allocated to the citizen *telling* it; stories of various pieces of parliamentary legislation are thus entitled "Layla's Story", "Shango's Story", "Jannett's Story", and so on (UK Parliament Education and Engagement Service, 2016b). As discussed in the previous section, this carries sub-

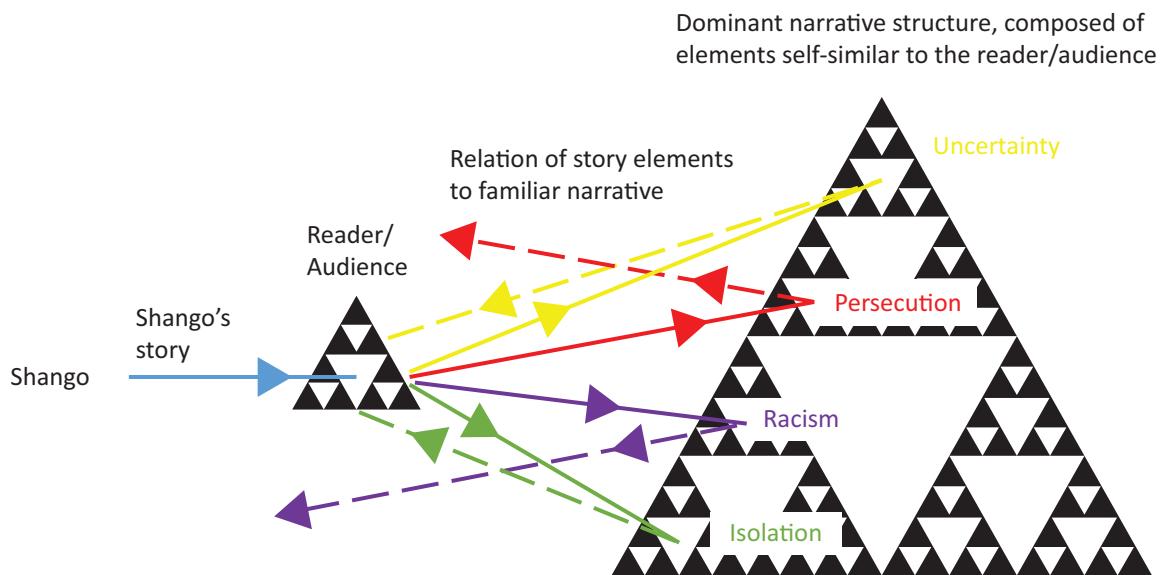


Figure 4. A reader/audience’s relation of “Shango’s Story” (and its associated themes) to their narrative context.

stantial significance in affording the ‘right’ of the story to the individual who tells it. In (re)allocating this right, the initiative presents an embodied (i.e. ‘told’) story that addresses pervasive sociological themes; that is to say, themes of abstraction, and a lack of identity, that pervade external *and internal* perceptions of Parliament (Kelso, 2007; Leston-Bandeira, 2016). It is highly significant in this context that an embodiment, or ‘face’, is presented; not that of Parliament *per se* but that of *citizens* (who can represent—i.e. ‘speak for’—Parliament’s importance to their own life stories). As Saward acknowledges, “to speak for others...is to make representations which render those others visible and readable” (2006, p. 313) The Education and Engagement service thereby represents Parliament *through* citizen representations, illustrated (and substantiated) by their own life stories. The transmission of these tangible experiences through storytelling potentializes effective engagement, enjoining citizens to engage not (only) with information, but with a story that facilitates self-recognition and relatability.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of *Your Story, Our History* is also potentialized by the construction of a citizen audience that embraces subjectivity and self-actualisation (in the manner illustrated by Figure 4); that is, the very descriptors that increasingly characterise the contemporary citizenry (Manning, 2013, 2015). Thus, parliamentary storytelling ‘through citizens’ eyes’ would appear to be ideally-placed as an appeal to “the audience, whose members can complete the outline based on their own fantasies, emotional circumstances, and ideologies” (Bennett & Edelman, 1985, p. 164), because *Your Story, Our History* constructs an audience that actually reflects broader societal characteristics and trends. This is reinforced by the fact that self-actualisation is described as especially prevalent among younger citizens (Manning, 2013, 2015), which is highly pertinent to the current accessibility of *Your Story, Our History*—

via YouTube—given the (albeit narrowing) gap in generational internet use (Office for National Statistics, 2018). These considerations are crucial to the effectiveness of storytelling (even in a potential or prospective sense), which is incumbent upon the intended audience and whether the narrative applied appears suitable to them; or indeed, whether an audience is even conceptualised (McBeth, Jones, & Shanahan, 2014, pp. 249–250).

Viewed as an act of representation, *Your Story, Our History* constitutes—via the storytelling it facilitates—several forms of claim-making:

- Relevance (in enacting legislation);
- Development (alongside broader societal trends);
- Relinquishing control over stories (in favour of ‘citizen storytellers’).

Relevance, development, and (non-)ownership reflect the *modus operandi* discussed in the first section (‘Parliament is *relevant, evolving, and yours*’), to which *Your Story, Our History* displays fidelity (as well as to storytelling at a conceptual level). The definitively co-constitutive nature of storytelling is made relevant to the process of engagement (which in its own right is also co-constitutive) through letting citizens decide what Parliament means to *them*. This is a process specific to the *telling* of a story, rather than the *presentation* of one (i.e. making it available). Moreover, *Your Story, Our History* tells—rather than presents—an embodied, personified story via a *storyteller*. This is the difference between *Your Story, Our History* and *the Story of Parliament*. The former tells a story as something to be engaged with; as a means of parliamentary engagement in its own right. The latter presents a story, showing how a person *might* learn more; not why they may wish to.

This last observation is a crucial distinction. It introduces what the narrative policy framework would refer

to as a ‘moral’, i.e. a policy solution (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 228). In the context of *Your Story, Our History*, parliamentary legislation is the ‘moral’ inasmuch as it constitutes the solution (for the citizens telling their stories). The relevance of parliamentary legislation, however, is not presented as finite within *Your Story, Our History*, which states that “there’s still much more to be done” (UK Parliament Education and Engagement Service, 2016a). This is consistent with Benjamin’s aforementioned description of a story—the value of which does not ‘expend itself’—but it also signposts a channel of engagement: participation in the legislative process. This is especially pertinent to recent ‘Public Reading Stage’ pilots, in which citizens are provided the opportunity to view and comment upon bills (such as the Children and Families Bill in 2013, for which a public web forum was opened between Second Reading and Committee Stage) before they become laws (Leston-Bandeira & Thompson, 2017). As Figure 1 shows, the appeal of context lies in self-identification and aspiration. Nussbaum, as we have discussed, stresses the importance of the reader/audience “seeing events as general human possibilities”, and applying (i.e. *making relevant*) these possibilities to themselves (2001, p. 241). The impact of this aspiration on specific means of engagement—in this case, a story of legislation encouraging participation *in* legislation—represents a valuable focus of future research.

It could be argued that the two initiatives we have discussed simply reflect varying aims, and different conceptualisations of storytelling. *The Story of Parliament* presents detailed historical information, and could be considered more ostensibly educational than *Your Story, Our History*, which presents a comparatively short timeline from a single perspective. The latter’s framing of stories as *being about* and *belonging* to the citizen storytellers (e.g., “Shango’s story”) should not obscure the fact that the UK Parliament (literally) possesses and distributes these stories. “The intentions of the maker” (Saward, 2006, p. 300) therefore remain crucial. However, a number of observations justify the comparisons (and conclusions) made within this article. Firstly, it is important to reiterate that inconsistent storytelling practice (between two *contemporaneous* efforts) reinforces a lack of holism within Parliament’s engagement strategy: holism that necessitates a shared engagement remit for the Enquiry Service and the Education and Engagement Service, which (respectively) released *The Story of Parliament* and *Your Story, Our History*. Secondly, even if *The Story of Parliament* does exist for educational purposes, its success rests on a positive relationship (between information and several key markers of engagement) that, considering broader social trends, is extremely difficult to substantiate. Lastly, attributing ‘informational impulses’ and ‘storytelling impulses’ to different initiatives does not downplay a crucial observation: that distributing information in isolation will not address, let alone challenge, disengagement and disaffection with popular conceptions of Parliament, or its underlying nar-

ratives. Responding to these narratives requires effective *storytelling*.

6. Conclusion

This article has shown the varying ways in which parliamentary storytelling attempts to construct a representation that is conducive to engagement principles and a prospective audience. This analysis, conducted through a fractal analogy, demonstrates the way in which an effective story can (and must) be *told* in order to be relatable and engaging. In this regard, the storytelling evident in *Your Story, Our History* demonstrates a crucial acknowledgement of the storyteller and the reader/audience in co-constituting an engagement dynamic. This approach merits wider application within parliamentary engagement policy, and greater attention from academics, since it represents a step change from the ‘unidirectional’ engagement methods that so often characterise Parliament’s mediator role. Storytelling, moreover, represents a form of engagement that is especially conducive to a modern political landscape characterised by citizens who exercise self-actualising forms of political action and expression, and establish subjective meanings independently. In the absence of a holistic approach to parliamentary storytelling as a mode of engagement, stories will remain limited to what citizens ‘overhear’ about Parliament. Reinforcing this situation is a continued conceptualisation of stories as resources that do not require *telling*, and thus fail to address or challenge citizen narratives that undermine Parliament’s legitimacy. We need only consider the aforementioned narratives surrounding the expenses scandal—to take just one example—to have some grasp of the implications for the wider democratic process.

An assessment of the quantifiable effectiveness of parliamentary storytelling techniques is outside the scope of this article. At present there is no data relating to the impact of one form of parliamentary story over another; indicators such as Twitter activity do little to indicate the experience of the reader in response to the stories discussed within this article. In addition, the existence of these ‘stories’ across different media (print, websites, and social media) restricts the degree of quantitative analysis that can be undertaken at this point. As a precursor to future research, this article has discussed why a certain story would be potentially effective (and appropriate) in relation to another, with consideration to Parliament’s basic engagement aims as well as socio-political trends among the citizenry. Further research in this area is required, potentially utilising additional theories such as the narrative policy framework and its research approach template (Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2018), as well as methods for *measuring* the deliberative quality of specific stories (Gold et al., 2017). However, at this point we can conclude that storytelling is becoming pervasive (even) within parliamentary engagement initiatives, but a deeper institutional understanding of

how (and why) these stories *work* is required. Effective storytelling holds considerable benefit for parliamentary engagement and representation, and in the construction of claims that an increasingly self-reflexive citizenry can plausibly relate to.

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Conflict of Interests

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