

HOW AN ECOSYSTEM OF STORIES CAN PLAY A ROLE IN THE TRANSITION TO A LOW CARBON FUTURE

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1. Introduction

Stories are considered to be one of the earliest forms of human communication. Indeed, they play an important cultural role, helping create shared beliefs, purposes and norms throughout human history [1]. Given the current challenge of climate change, and broader questions of energy systems and environmental collapse, we might (re)consider what stories we hold onto, and what we believe the future will hold. Although the narrativeⁱ of economic growth is still alive and well, this business as usual perspective does not support the societal changes we need. Some are calling for new stories, or re-centring marginalised stories which foster alternative visions of the future [2], [3]. This paper sees stories as an ecosystem and explores whether and how the dominant narrative might be challenged by stories and visions arising in response to climate change and COVID-19.

2. Competition within an ecosystem of stories

Each story or narrative privileges a way of looking at the world, separating story from ‘non-story’ (that which we exclude). Narratives can be a powerful rhetorical weapon and political tool, shaping the future by presenting one vision of reality and obscuring discontinuities and contradictions which would undermine their intended meaning [4].

This is arguably the case for the dominant narrative that can be termed ‘modern economic

ⁱ In the full paper, we will distinguish between stories and narratives.

growth'. Approaches that follow this narrative often portray the only positive future as a high-tech version of the present, achieved through (green) growth and continued application of the current techno-economic 'hero story', where technology acts as the hero [5]. This may suit current incumbents, who envisage a future similar to today with technology enshrining our way of life, avoiding more systemic change.

However, the dominant narrative exists within a broader context, a 'system of stories' [5]. We liken this to an ecosystem, where different stories co-exist, compete, or even consume each other. In economics, narratives compete over the framing of the relationship between growth and environment, states and markets. Narratives in line with ecological economics highlight that perpetual economic growth on a finite planet is impossible, while those in line with modern economic growth suggest liberalised energy markets would improve economic efficiency, support cleaner production and internalise pollution costs. These narratives have influenced international sustainability policy and energy policy [6]. From an ecosystem perspective, we see economic growth as the 'apex predator' of modern thinking. What does this positioning mean for thinking about the future?ⁱⁱ

A single unifying narrative might be insufficient for transitioning to a more sustainable world, as engaging multiple experiences of different agents is necessary [3]. Seeing stories as part of a complex intellectual ecosystem could foster an understanding of multiple concurrent objectives, which is critical for addressing complex issues of social and climate justice, where different definitions of development are considered [7]. For example, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals provide a series of motifs that together need different kinds of stories to be told. Their different focuses support a series of different visions and narratives, rather than one overarching imagined future. In fact, there are some tensions between the goals.

3. Change in reaction to shocks

Finally, we consider how external shocks such can generate windows of opportunity for new narratives and significant policy development [8]. The COVID-19 pandemic is such a game changer: it has modified how we live and work, including accelerating shifts to online interactions and discrediting barriers to working from home. Early in the pandemic, quiet streets and improved air quality raised ideas of another way of life, with some calling for prioritising health and wellbeing over economic growth. Reactions to the pandemic illuminate a struggle between 'life as normal' and a desire for social change, resonating with the main narrative themes of reactions to climate change. The opportunity for change does not necessarily dictate its trajectory, and different outcomes (e.g., a better world or a worse one) could emerge from our choices about how to cope with the pandemic.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we recognise the need not only to change the dominant narrative, but to open up to a multiplicity of visions of the future, and consider how a whole ecosystem of stories could help us transition to a low-carbon world.

ⁱⁱ In the full paper, we will define the ecological terms and describe interactions in the natural world.

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