

## Social Matters – But Narratives Shape Our World.

The Impact of Social Media on Brand Management

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To implement a brand strategy, requires a real understanding of where the conversations important to the brand occur.

Social is now an important medium. But, just *how significant* is it?

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### Narratives

For a number of years, we have analysed **narratives** on the Internet. To do this, we start with a particular topic of interest, and examine where the content-creation on this topic occurs. We build a network graph across the web, print media, blog, twitter, etc, which represents the deep structure of that content. We call this the **narrative graph** related to the topic.

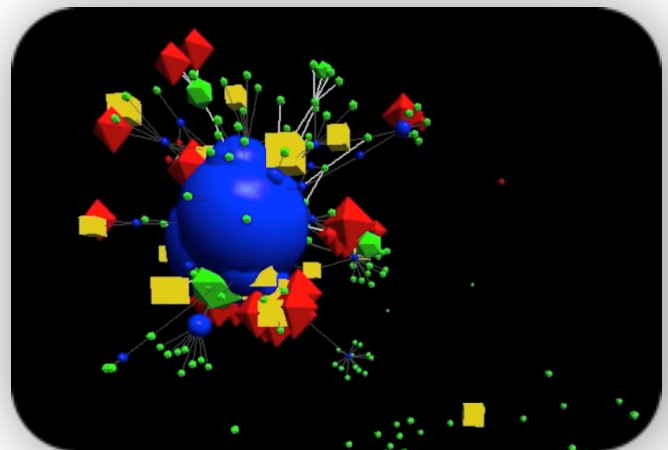


Fig 1. Narrative at rest

### Narrative Dynamics

We can observe how the narrative graph evolves. Here are two snapshots of a particular narrative, tracked over a number of days. The different coloured shapes represent blogs, web sites, news articles, journalists, twitter messages, people, organisations and other topics. In the second snapshot, we see the main conversation—like a hungry meme—reach out and ‘grab’ a related narrative, as it incorporate the smaller narrative’s themes and media into itself.

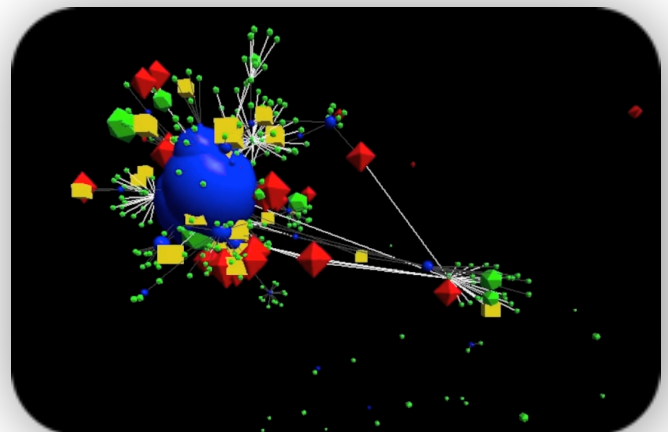


Fig 2. Capturing new engagement

## Narrative Typologies

Having analysed many thousands of narratives, we have drawn a number of important conclusions from our experience.

The structure of the narrative graph can vary widely, for different topics. Sometimes traditional media dominates. Sometimes two or three bloggers control the space. Occasionally one or two voices can dominate the story.

Based on many observations, we have characterised the narratives we see into a number of typologies.

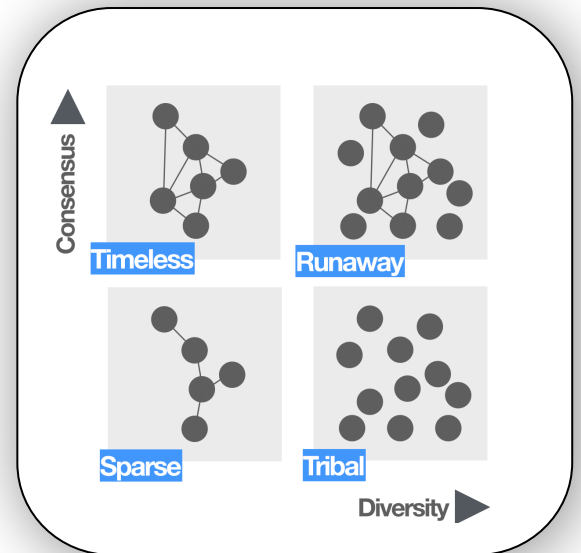


Fig 3. Distinct Narrative Typologies

## Timeless Narratives

Some narratives are **timeless**: often, these continue over many years, and include many voices that come and go over time. These are amongst the most naturally engaging narratives.

The topic of a timeless narrative is usually one where there is no *objective* answer, instead, there is on-going interest and the discussion is deep, rather than trivial.

These narratives often play out in traditional media, commercial web pages, books and academic articles, and may include the occasional blog and journalistic piece. Twitter and Facebook are usually far less relevant to them.

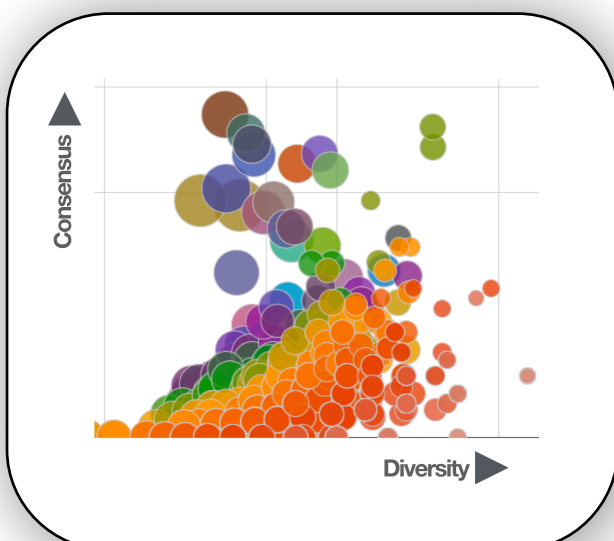


Fig 4. Many thousands of analysed narratives

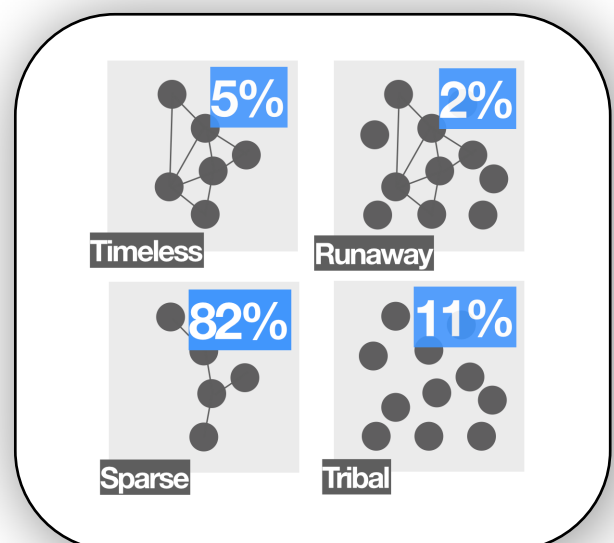


Fig 5. Each narrative type occurs with a different frequency

These narratives are often not easy to explore in their full richness via search engines.

We find that only about 5% of narratives are timeless. These narratives tend to be robust and hard to destroy.

These timeless narratives are important. They drive opinion-forming. They're where the thought leaders can be found. They're where ideas evolve, and from where savvy press and media draw their research. Timeless narratives harbour authentic, deep engagement.

Of commercial interest, for example, are timeless discussions about a particular purchase – for example the narratives around the merits of competing digital SLR cameras.

## Timeless Narratives and Brands

Timeless narratives are important for brand management. If brands can identify and understand the timeless narratives that relate to them and their values, they can improve their effectiveness, by *becoming part* of those relevant timeless narratives. There may be many timeless narratives that are relevant for a brand. There may be only a few.

If a brand understands the makeup of a timeless narrative it's often surprisingly easy to play in that space. This might involve direct contribution to the debate, the placement of advertising in the right media, the sponsorship of the right conference or event, or even the establishment of relationships with the right authors or bloggers. Every narrative is different, so every strategy is different. Success derives from *engaging where there is engagement*. And often it's not expensive to engage, it's just about being *smart*.

Of course, once you do engage, it is important to track the evolution of the narrative—to deepen understanding of the effectiveness of your current engagement, and to identify new opportunities.

It's been very surprising to us in the conversations we've held with a number of brand corporates, how a simple understanding of the relevant narratives often shows that existing brand spending is ineffective, being expended in areas where there is little real engagement. Often opportunities lie nearby, unexplored, where there are simple and inexpensive ways to engage, once you have a clear view on the relevant timeless narratives.

An example: we undertook a consulting project for a transport authority. The topic of "roads and freeways", whilst core to their concerns, constituted a very

sparse narrative. However, a re-focus on “traffic congestion”, in the relevant geographic area, identified a much richer, timeless narrative, with much colour and many opportunities for them to authentically engage with engagement ‘in the wild’ amongst their stakeholder.

## Narrative Engine

It is often tricky to manually identify relevant timeless narratives. To simplify the process, we’ve built a Big Data platform—Narrative Engine—which, when provided with a topic, quickly analyses and returns key metrics on related narratives.

## Narrative Landscapes

We have considerable experience now in finding the timeless narratives. As Narrative Engine runs are scalable, we can feed it a number of topics adjacent to the particular topic. This allows us to find a **narrative landscape**. The landscape has peaks and valleys. The peaks represent the timeless narratives that surround a particular topic and we can thus decide which topics will best reward strategies for engagement. We have developed a number of bespoke taxonomies that assist us in this.

So: our experience is that Social matters, but that success comes from understanding the **full narrative landscape** related to your brand, and **engaging where there’s engagement**.

## Social Media

Only occasionally, do we find it useful to engage via Social Media—more often than not it’s the traditional sources that drive engagement and significance.

Narrative Engine does incorporate Social Media as one input when analysing narrative landscapes, but as we might expect, Social Media hasn’t changed the fundamentals of brands themselves, or what they stand for. Those fundamentals still involve being part of the conversations that matter.

Our analysis shows there are often only a small number of conversations that do matter.

Success for brands is all about finding the timeless narratives and developing an engagement strategy into those.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr John Ricketts and Darrell Berry met in Japan in the 1990s. A recent Forbes magazine article credits them as being amongst the earliest pioneers of Social Media. They've been fascinated by the evolution of the Web and Social Media ever since, and have explored and consulted widely in this area.

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