

University stories in an age of distrust, the end of power and deep, digital disruption Martin Stewart-Weeks Curtin University August 2016¹

Many thanks for the opportunity to join your deliberations.

I want to talk about the way institutions tell themselves, and others, stories about their purpose and mission.

Story telling for institutions turns out to be very important.

And the reason is that the quality and nature of those stories is directly linked to questions of trust and legitimacy.

And trust and legitimacy are the only currencies in the end in which institutions can trade to sustain their role and their work.

A number of larger trends have combined to question our relationship to, and view of, important institutions in government, politics, business, religion and civil society.

The questions go to the heart of why institutions are important in the first place. They are also driving a discussion about whether the current mood of distrust and disengagement, which seems to be reaching epidemic proportions, signals a desire to replace institutions, bypass them or to change them so they work more effectively.

So how does this “bonfire of the institutions” impact universities?

Telling stories

Institutions retain the relevance and respect they crave by telling compelling and simple stories to themselves and to the people and communities they serve, about their purpose and mission. If those stories, or narratives, become confused or obscured, or perhaps even lost altogether, the result is that trust and legitimacy start to leak, sometimes alarmingly.

What are the stories that universities should be telling themselves and the community about what they do and why they are important? I think there are at least three. I'll come back to them later.

But I wonder whether some of the stories about the role and value of universities may be selling them short?

Some of their contemporary stories are too constrained and narrow and therefore fail to provide a satisfying account of the value of universities have always provided as sources of knowledge, meaning and persistence.

Rebuilding trust and legitimacy for our public institutions, including universities, is the most important challenge we face. .

We're living at a time of transition when institutions of all sorts are leaking trust and legitimacy. That is partly the explanation for Trump, Brexit and at least some elements of the recent election here in Australia. This about the plethora of royal commissions into child abuse and the abuse of children in institutions. Think of the Chilcott inquiry in the UK into the Iraq war. Or the effect of Wikileaks and Edward Snowden on people's perceptions of the national security apparatus in the US and in plenty of other countries around the world too.

¹ www.publicpurpose.com.au; some of the material in this paper draws on [Changing Shape: Institutions for a digital age](#), Martin Stewart-Weeks and Lindsay Tanner, Longueville Media, 2014

People and institutions appear to be drifting apart, fuelled by a related distrust of experts and elites. It is a very dangerous and unsettling combination.

If that's right, then I think universities are very much in the frame.

And they are implicated in two ways.

Not only do they have to attend to their own foundations of trust and legitimacy as important social, economic and cultural institutions in their own right.

But also as centres of culture, knowledge and critical perspective on the wider societies of which they are part, they have a big role to play to resist, and turn around, the erosion of trust and legitimacy impacting the wider social and political context.

In education, the contest seems to be strengthening between a more recent narrative, which is largely instrumental and economic, and a deeper, more persistent story about education's intrinsic moral and public purpose.

Getting that balance right is especially difficult in the case of universities, whose essential "business model" is built around their ambiguous position in and of the world. More of that later.

For the moment, let me quote from a recent piece from the Griffith Review, written by University of Sydney academic Tamson Pietsch, the opening sentence of which reads, "I love institutions!"

"But institutions hold us in time and they connect us to each other. This is why I love them and this is why they are part of explaining what has gone wrong, and central to working out what we might do to make it right.

The institution I know best is the university. Universities still work with an understanding of time and human capacity that stretches beyond the frames of annual reports, funding cycles, government elections or even of individual careers.

For all their problems, they are still places that recognise the messy, uncertain and often troubling aspects of human life.

Universities are founded on an acknowledgement that we are meaning-making creatures, that so much about life is uncertain, and that expertise takes years to develop. Their power lies in their relational character: it is not monetised exchange and short-term benefit that underpins their mission, but rather an encounter with ideas and with each other.

With their buildings, books and bequests they draw us into a form of time that stretches out beyond the life of any one of us; and with their bars and playing fields and classrooms they bring us into an engagement with one another.

In doing so they equip us with thick forms of connection: knowledge, ethics of participation and relationships that give us ways to live and to flourish in the fractured and fluid world of what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has called 'liquid modernity' <https://griffithreview.com/articles/on-institutions/>

The context: four big ideas

There are four ideas that I think are part of shaping the context within which to think about the stories that universities need to tell about themselves. There are others, of course, but these four, individually and together, are especially powerful I think in framing this discussion.

The age of distrust

Waleed Aly wrote a piece a week before the federal election in which he suggested the best way to look at the election was through the frame of an age of distrust.

“This is an age of anti-establishment dissent. That doesn’t mean the establishment will always lose: Hillary Clinton might beat Donald Trump in November, and I expect the Coalition to be returned on Saturday. But it does mean the establishment’s authority is rapidly eroding.” Waleed Aly SMH 01:07:16

In 2015, US Attorney General Loretta Lynch described one of her top priorities as alleviating an “epidemic of distrust” between communities and law enforcement. <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2015/07/27/us-attorney-general-alleviating-epidemic-distrust-between-minorities-police-top.html>.

The 2015 Edelman Trust Barometer found “an alarming contraction of trust across all institutions.”

It explained that “trust in government, business, media and NGOs in the general population is below 50% in two-thirds of countries, including the U.S., U.K., Germany, Japan and Australia.” The largest drops in trust in business since the 2008 survey were in Singapore, Canada, Germany and Australia, where trust levels are now down to 48%.

Innovation was seen as something that would make the world a better place by only 14% of respondents to the survey in Australia.

The explanations are instructive.

They are driven, according to Edelman, by the “unpredictable and unimaginable events of 2014,” including the spread of Ebola in West Africa; the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370, plus two subsequent air disasters; the arrests of top Chinese Government officials; the foreign exchange rate rigging by six global banks; and numerous data breaches, most recently at Sony Pictures by a sovereign nation.

I suspect we might all have our own examples to add to that list, whose length seems to be growing.

<http://www.edelman.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2015-Edelman-Trust-Barometer-Australia-Press-Release.pdf>

So how do institutions respond to the age of distrust?

And in particular, what do universities have to do as a contribution to the rescue trust by rebuilding confidence in their role and value?

Recognition is the starting point.

Universities – all institutions - need to call out the phenomenon of declining institutional trust and accept that not only is it happening but that there are often very good reasons for it. They need to explicitly put themselves in that frame.

Correct and patient diagnosis is a second reflex. Universities need to explain how restoring trust will draw partly on a function of the things that universities are good at – discovering and curating knowledge, careful research, good teaching and a willingness to both confront, and sometimes to create, uncomfortable but necessary new insights about the world.

I tend to agree too with Tamson Pietsch in her Griffith Review piece that universities can also contribute by creating what she called the “thick connections” of people and ideas that stretch beyond more limited and immediate constraints of economic transaction, time and place.

I think there is something very powerful about the idea of “thick connections” – the ties and relationships people typically form through persistent and direct interaction.

Learning and teaching, collaborative research and the best opportunities for social engagement on campus or in other physical settings are all places and times that have the potential to thicken connections. I also think a digital dimension can be blended into this community process, although it’s an interesting question the degree to which a purer digital or “online only” approach might erode this important thread in the story.

A third response focuses on the organisational and management of universities themselves. Universities can lead by example by being more open and accountable to their staff and stakeholders, to their students and to the wider community.

Legitimacy requires not just transparency, but legibility too.

The real problem I think behind the precipitous decline in institutional trust is also partly a function of not being able to understand what institutions are doing, or why. Seeing them is one thing. Knowing them is quite different.

Real or perceived, the drift and distance that now seems to characterise much of the uncertain and increasingly cynical relationship between people and their institutions is because they can’t “read” them. People don’t know their institutions, and when they get to know them better, they often don’t like what they find out or perceive.

In a more settled and predictable age, when I suspect we rather liked the fact that our institutions were largely opaque and distant and just got on with their work without bothering us, legibility wasn’t really an issue.

But as increasing transparency has suggested that many of our institutions – politics, government, the church, the legal system and law enforcement for example – are confronting deep flaws and poor performance, we’re not so sure.

And after 50 years or more of the deep death of deference, blind trust in any form of institutional authority is no longer a viable reflex

The end of power

Moises Naim was a Venezuelan Trade and Industry Minister in 1989 and 1990. He served for 14 years as editor of *Foreign Policy* and is now a distinguished fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

In the *End of Power*, he describes a process not so much of the end of power in a simple or literal sense but rather an evolution in the way power is conceived and used. <http://moisesnaim.com/books/the-end-of-power/> You’ll get a hint from the book’s subtitle – “from boardrooms to battlefields and churches to states, why being in charge isn’t what it used to be.”

This is an early statement of the thesis:

“To put it simply, power no longer buys as much as it did in the past. In the twenty-first century, power is easier to get, harder to use—and easier to lose. From boardrooms and combat zones to cyberspace, battles for power are as intense as ever, but they are yielding diminishing returns. Their fierceness masks the increasingly evanescent nature of power itself.

Understanding how power is losing its value—and facing up to the hard challenges this poses—is the key to making sense of one of the most important trends reshaping the world in the twenty-first century.”

Naim is not naïve.

His point is not that big corporations or public institutions either don't or won't continue to exercise significant power and the ability to shape and force agendas. They will and they do.

But especially under the influence of digital technology and the dispersion of power across many more nodes in more complex networks of influence and authority, the exercise of power even by the larger players, has become more complex.

One consequence of the end of power for universities is how they make their work and their values more accessible and understandable to a wider audience.

There's an obvious link between the end of power and the age of distrust, especially the dimension of distrust that is feeding disengagement with elites and experts.

The rehabilitation of expertise is one very big part of the mission of universities in the period ahead.

Too big to know

David Weinberger worked on the Howard Dean 2004 presidential campaign in the US as one of the earliest political campaigns to engage deeply with the emerging world of social media and the spreading influence of the Internet as a political tool. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Dean

Weinberger, who is a philosopher and academic at Harvard's Berkman Centre, is a leading thinker and writer about the Internet and the digital age.

Weinberger explains that the rate of growth of knowledge has rendered the world simply too big to know. This is a world where, to quote his subtitle, the facts aren't the facts, experts are everywhere and the smartest person in the room is the room.

<http://www.toobigtoknow.com/>

This is how Weinberger explains himself:

“That knowledge is a property of the network means more than that crowds can have a certain type of wisdom in certain circumstances. And, as we will see, it's not simply that under some circumstances groups are smarter than their smartest member. Rather, the change in the infrastructure of knowledge is altering knowledge's shape and nature. ... (it) is becoming inextricable from – literally unthinkable without – the network that enables it.”

If more often than not, the smartest person in the room is the room, the task now, Weinberger argues, is to “learn how to build smart rooms –that is, how to build networks that makes us smarter, especially since, when done badly, networks can make us distressingly stupider.” (xiii)

In a world grown too big to know, how do universities prosecute their institutional mission around knowledge and meaning by pushing outside their boundaries to engage with the wider world which, at the same time, it is trying to shape and change?

Universities will contribute to the creation of cultural knowledge and public understanding by working in more complex, fluid networks of other institutions as well as non-institutional players and interests.

Part of the story of universities will be more deeply social and connected than ever.

Some great examples are Curtin's own work with companies like Woodside and the collaborative work around the Square Kilometer Array for example.

One of the ways in which universities contribute to a world grown too big to know will be to accelerate the democratization of knowledge and culture.

That resonates with Naim's end of power thesis. It's not so much that universities will lose the institutional power that derives from their cultural meaning and knowledge role.

Far from it.

The rehabilitation of trust and the way we create and use expertise requires more from universities in that core role, not less.

The big shift: from efficiency to learning

The Centre for the Edge sounds like a suitably paradoxical place from which to think about the business of transition.

Paradox, it seems, is the hallmark of transitions.

John Hagel's work as co-Chair of the Centre has spawned over ten years of research and thinking about the institutional consequences of what they describe as the "big shift."

The big shift describes the impact on business, government and civil society of a combination of digital infrastructure and liberalizing economic policy and financial activity.

<https://blog.thefetch.com/2014/01/30/john-hagel-on-the-shift-and-the-power-of-narrative/>

In the industrial era, Hagel and his colleagues argue that institutions scaled for efficiency. That was relevant when things were more predictable and long periods of stability characterised the surrounding political, economic and social context.

In the digital era, where speed, complexity and transparency are assaulting the commanding heights of their power and influence, Hagel and his colleagues argue that institutions now have to scale for learning.

What matters in these conditions is not how efficient you are but how quickly you learn. Learning, in this context, is the process of shortening the lead time between picking up signals about change, risk and opportunity from markets, customers and citizens, or from your own front line staff, and developing an effective response that embeds quickly in new practice.

Scaleable learning is basically all about more rapid, but also deeper cycles of ideas and evidence into action and results. In a period of volatile change and deep uncertainty, learning IS efficiency.

This is a fundamentally new ethic of institutional performance in a world where, as Hagel and others explain in another context, we have made the shift from a world of "push" to a world of "pull".

A world of "push" is a world which creates a demand for an idea or product that someone else has come up with and then finds a way to get people to buy it.

A world of "pull" is a world of social movements and shared purpose whose ambition is to invite participation in the creation of something people believe in and want to be part of.

How should universities respond?

How should universities respond to a world being shaped by a combination of these four big trends – the age of distrust, the end of power, too big to know and the shift from scaleable efficiency to scaleable learning?

How should universities explain to people, including their own people, how they not only propose to behave in the light of these trends but also how they think the university's enduring institutional role – knowledge, innovation, teaching and research, the creation of community, persistence and cultural meaning – will play in the kind of world they imply?

At least some of the drift and distance we are seeing right now in the relationship between people and institutions is a function of stories that are confused or even conflicting.

Another conclusion might be that universities need to embrace the ambiguity inherent in their mission – persistence, connecting people and ideas across time and place, creating and sharing knowledge, creating cultural meaning - at a time when making that mission and value work in the contemporary world is making legitimate, and mounting demands for change.

In other words, if institutions want to remain the same, things will have to change.

Deep digital disruption

Institutions and technology don't understand each other very well. That is both surprising and frustrating because they each change the shape, and influence the performance and potential, of the other in profound and sometimes unexpected ways.²

But technology has always changed institutions.

Just think of the impact of printing on the authority of the medieval church. Or the way newspapers, radio and then television changed the way we design and consume politics, sport and education or engage with the Royal Family. Or the way cars and traffic lights have changed the way we design and manage cities.

More recent examples of technology and digital impact embrace the rise of platform economics and cloud computing.

Think Uber, AirBnB and, on a smaller scale, a start-up social enterprise like HireUp, which is creating whole new approach to disability support services which, according its young entrepreneurial founders, is a combination of eHarmony and PayPal - <https://www.hireup.com.au/>.

Think too about the growth of MOOC and MOOC-like digital platforms and technologies for learning and teaching and the rapid spread of an Internet of Things model of sensors plus big data and analytics to shift dramatically the way we manage cities, build and maintain infrastructure or manage health care.

I am also increasingly intrigued by the potential impact on so many aspects of the work of institutions, including in universities, of the spread of blockchain technologies.

This is not the place to open up a detailed discussion about the impact of blockchain or distributed ledger technologies in higher education. But it is a debate that is starting, and not without contest and controversy.

² This section draws on the research and analysis for Changing Shape, written by Martin Stewart-Weeks and Lindsay Tanner <https://www.amazon.com.au/Changing-Shape-institutions-digital-age-ebook/dp/BooIFXHZF2>

A recent thought experiment from the Institute for the Future in California, for example, introduced the provocative idea that all learning could be chunked into what the project called “edublocks”. Anyone could offer anyone else an “edublock” of learning –one hour blocks of sharing ideas, skills, knowledge and experience. Basically, anything we want or need to learn.

<http://www.learningisearning2026.org/>

The idea is that we all then spend our lives gathering different combinations of “edublocks”, ranging from formal learning in universities and schools through to things we learn on the job or from social and informal interactions.

And the ledger technology keeps an accurate and honest record of our accumulating learning and skills.

Think of it as lifelong learning meets Bitcoin.

It’s an idea that challenges big ideas about the nature of learning, the power and value of great teaching and the relationship between our learning and our connections to each other and to ideas and institutions.

In all of these examples, the impact is broadly the same. In some measure and in different combinations, power shifts, authority is tested and the constitution of legitimacy is transformed.

The dominant design principles of the digital world combine formal expertise with informal and experiential knowledge. They find requisite authority in contribution not status, rely on a few simple rules that privilege access and transparency, and master the demanding arts of collaboration and earned trust.

A digital model seeks legitimacy from legibility fed by the permanent scrutiny of the crowd who can keep watch from below rather than relying on the top-down visibility of distant and formal authorities.

The paradoxical impact of the new digital tools and platforms, especially the manifestation of the social web and social technologies, is to make our world both more connected and more fragmented at the same time.

With the ability to connect now at unprecedented levels of accessibility and affordability, we are witnessing a radical de-centering of so many aspects of our work, entertainment, political and commercial lives.

The digital world privileges smaller, looser networks and communities often at the edge of societies or distant from traditional centres of power and authority.

It changes profoundly the way these edges talk to those centres of power to share the burdens and opportunities of governance and collective action. We’re witnessing a hollowing out of the institutional centre whether it is governments and the public sector, large corporations, universities too perhaps or the big organisations and movements of civil society and social action.

For universities, that implies new ways to draw on the work of academics and staff and to make the links between their often highly operational and functional day to day work and the higher and deeper purpose and narrative of the university itself more naturally and deeply connected.

University stories

So what are the stories universities should be telling in the context of the age of distrust, the end of power and deep, digital disruption?

Before I make some suggestions about at least three stories that universities could be telling, it's worth reflecting on storytelling itself.

One example in the university context would be from the perspective of academics and their day-to-day work. There is a particular kind of story in relation to their research output that can sometimes translate as a limited and essentially transactional narrative. The job is to produce research, to generate publications, to attract grants.

That transactional focus becomes embedded in the material incentives that govern academics' work as well as cultures and practices that shape less formal means of recognition. How does the daily practice of those in the middle of the institution connect to its higher purpose, however that is construed?

Similarly, the narrative about the value of going to university has become trapped in a relatively transactional story about the relationship between a degree and employment, and often between a degree and a specific job in a specific industry or even corporation.

In a recent speech, Chief Scientist Alan Finkel drew an important distinction between a focus on making graduates "job ready" – an increasingly difficult, if not impossible task in a world of work whose contours and content are being so comprehensively churned by the combination of technology and competitive and economic pressure – and the ability to help graduates become "job capable." <http://www.chiefscientist.gov.au/2016/07/speech-swinburne-university/>

As a society, he noted, we are always preparing for a future we can't see. As individuals, we are always training for jobs we never expect to do. In a clarion call that speaks powerfully to the storytelling imperative, the Chief Scientist makes the bold claim that universities are "factories of the future".

That's how, he thinks, they get to the future first. And the way that happens is not by predicting the future, but "by training the people who make it unpredictable."

And as an important footnote to that suitably ambiguous insight, Dr Finkel says later in the speech that it is well nigh impossible to offer a perfect match of discipline to career. Indeed, he argues, if universities succumb to that social expectation, "we will work very hard to fall forever short of a goal it is simply pointless to pursue."

What is much less pointless to pursue is as instructive as the earlier warning. "What we offer instead is something worth having: the capacity to adapt to change – and the appetite to bring it about."

So the question is how should universities avoid the risk of construing the story telling element of institutional renovation in relatively narrow and transactional marketing terms simply to attract students, donations, grants, and academics in the short term?

There is a risk in even using the language of story telling, because it can sound a bit trivial and superficial. Stories can come across as a bit frothy and insubstantial.

The kind of story telling I am talking about is actually a much more heavy-duty obligation to connect deeply with the idea of what it is, in the end, that is the persistent value in what you do, why you exist at all.

The chance to capture something of the original notion of universities as a "thick" and persistent community of learning, critical insight and innovation as well as the place where

specific skills and knowledge is grown, shared and tested might prove to be fertile story telling territory in the period ahead.

Let me finish by suggesting three stories that strike me as increasingly important for universities to tell as a way of protecting, extending or even rescuing the trust and legitimacy they need.

Objects of public love

The first story they should be telling is about their role as objects of public love, as UK innovation and policy writer and practitioner Charles Leadbeater puts it.

There's a sense that we've lost touch with the notion that anything "public" might be the object of love. After 30 years or more of relentlessly economic thinking and focus, our story about the intrinsic as well as the instrumental value of the public realm has grown a little thin.

Universities are public institutions in the sense they are part of, and animate, that public realm, a part of our lives that we share and hold in common,

Universities need to explain how they nurture and strengthen those aspects of our shared lives that matter to people, including things like the quality of democracy through informed debate and discussion, the way in which knowledge and research feed into opportunities, short and long term, for innovation and economic and social development and the investment in Australia's stocks and flows of human capital.

And importantly, this story should be at pains to explain that these features of the university are not "nice to have" additions to the "real" work of training people for current, specific jobs.

Part of this story has to be a concerted effort to deny the unfortunate tendency to divorce the university's role in preparing people for the world of work and its wider cultural and institutional role to create culture, community and connection.

These are not different stories. They are different, but necessary parts of the same story.

Thick connections and job capable

The second story is about the university's role in sustaining the thick connections of community and continuity that help to both ground people in a set of common values and ideas about the good life and the good society and help them to make sense of a process of change and disruption in which universities themselves are both implicated and instrumental.

How can universities tell both stories, demonstrating that a chance to engage with the community of learners and scholars, to think slow as well as fast, might constitute some of the most valuable "job ready" skills you will get from your time at university.

As Alan Finkel implied, the paradox may turn out to be that focusing on "job ready" at the expense of job capable, and forgetting the deeper meaning and institutional role of universities undermines exactly the kind of education and learning people need for tomorrow's work.

The story about storytelling

The third story universities need to tell is about the act of storytelling itself, why it is important and how it helps to connect more naturally the larger institution with the way in which people who work in universities conceive of their role, purpose and impact.

This kind of story telling needs to be a longer, slower and more persistent process of explaining the institution to itself. And it needs to be a process of explaining how

universities will respond to a world whose foundations of trust, power, legitimacy and authority are being severely tested.

You need to work out that story and tell it with passion and purpose. We need to you do that now more than ever.

Universities have a perfectly ambiguous position in this context, impacted in their own right by, as well as being one of the most important sources of institutional response to, the end of power in an age of distrust.

Universities have always been both in and of the world. This point emerged recently when I was involved in a planning session with the Vice Chancellor and senior management team at Western Sydney University, whose director of the Institute of Culture and Society, Paul James, put this idea into the centre of their strategic conversation.

Universities engage with the world in all its messiness and immanence and are active, sometimes leading players in shaping business, society, government and civil society. Universities are in the thick of things, in that sense, players and influencers in the real world.

At the same time, universities are institutions that make and test cultural meaning and knowledge for the long term. Just as much as universities play in the real world and make it change in quite specific ways, they also represent an important location from which to offer reflection and critique as well.

Echoing Alan Finkel's point, universities train people to make the world more unpredictable and then explain how an unpredictable world works and how to prepare for, and adjust to, its risks and opportunities. What a great place to be!

Like all technologies, universities are partly the response to problems and challenges they help to create. In this ambiguous period of social, economic and cultural transition, universities should be in their element, teaching us how to survive and thrive in these promising but contradictory conditions.

In the end, universities need a mix of idealism and pragmatism at the heart of their stories. It's possible that each might serve the other best by making sure they both receive equal and adequate attention.

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