



Scandinavian Journal of  
Public Administration  
Vol. 30 No. 1 (2026)  
p. 58 - 78

DOI:  
<https://doi.org/10.58235/sjpa.40318>

#### Keywords:

discursive legitimacy;  
narrative linguistics;  
multimodal discourse  
analysis;  
public sector  
communication;  
storytelling

# Giving Coronavirus a Face: Municipal Storytelling as Discursive Legitimation

Hanna Sofia Rehnberg<sup>1</sup> and Maria Grafström<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

While storytelling has become widely used in organizational communication, the mechanisms through which it shapes legitimacy remain insufficiently understood. This study addresses this gap by applying linguistic methods to analyze three stories from Swedish municipal communication campaigns during the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim is to deepen understanding of the mechanisms of organizationally crafted storytelling and how they may shape discursive legitimation in local government. Drawing on narrative linguistics and multimodal discourse analysis, we examine how meaning is produced in these narratives. The analysis identifies three intertwined mechanisms structuring municipal storytelling: *personification*, *values*, and *a shared narratorship*. These mechanisms foster emotional engagement, construct images of responsible and caring municipalities, and invite readers into communities of action. At the same time, we show the complex – and at times paradoxical – nature of storytelling: while stories can clarify information and enhance accessibility, they may also obscure or blur understanding by allowing municipalities to promote themselves subtly, make strategic selections about which aspects to emphasize, and communicate organizational interests without clearly revealing themselves as the sender. The study contributes to a more critically informed perspective on discursive legitimation and underscores the need for reflexivity when public authorities use storytelling to reach out to citizens.

## Practical Relevance

- This study identifies and examines a set of central underpinning mechanisms of storytelling in municipal legitimation processes. It thereby offers a broader understanding of the narrative format and its inherent characteristics – an understanding that is essential for practitioners who wish to apply storytelling in a public sector context in a conscious, deliberate, and responsible manner.
- By grounding its analysis in linguistic examination of concrete municipal narratives, the study keeps its theoretical reasoning closely connected to empirical, text-based evidence. This approach demonstrates how insights, concepts, and methods from both linguistics and organization studies can be brought together to support a nuanced and reflective understanding of narrative legitimation processes.
- The study highlights the need to critically examine narrative formats in public sector communication. By showing how stories convey values, construct identities, invite identification and foster community-building, it offers an understanding of how narrative choices shape processes of municipal legitimation as well as how their implications in terms of transparency, clarity, and accountable governance.

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author: [Hanna Sofia Rehnberg](#) , is an associate professor and lecturer in the Swedish language at the Department of Scandinavian Languages, Uppsala University. As a sociolinguistically oriented scholar specializing in linguistic discourse analysis, she investigates storytelling, organizational communication, media discourses, citizen communication on social media, and language use in the asylum process.

<sup>2</sup>Maria Grafström , is an associate professor and lecturer in organization and management at Stockholm Business School, Stockholm University, and researcher at Stockholm Centre for Organizational Research (SCORE). Her research focuses on the mediatization of organizations, public sector communication, and how the media create and circulate ideas and shape organizational agendas.

Article first published as an article in press: February 11, 2026  
Article published in Vol. 30 No. 1: March 16, 2026

## Introduction

In recent years, public sector communication departments have increasingly turned to storytelling techniques in their civic communication, in an effort to reach citizens better, make information more appealing to broad audiences, build relationships, and strengthen their reputation (e.g., Dailey, Gilmore, & Rangarajan, 2022; Moldenæs, 2016; Orr & Bennett, 2016). This trend became particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, when communication experts worldwide demonstrated great ingenuity in their efforts to disseminate various types of information (e.g., Larson et al., 2020; Levin-Zamir, 2020; Riley et al., 2021). For example, in a commentary on the role of information and vaccine hesitancy published in a medical journal, Kantor (2021) concludes: “In a battle between a good story and real numbers, the story always wins” (p. 9).

To date, research on storytelling in organizational communication has largely focused on the effectiveness of storytelling and on generating best-practice recommendations, such as identifying effective techniques and suitable narrative types for different contexts (Barbour, Doshi, & Hernández, 2015; Heath, 2004; Huang, 2024; Kent, 2015; Weber & Grauer, 2019). Despite acknowledging the powerful nature of stories as a communicative practice, this stream of research seldom problematizes the use of storytelling or considers its potential unintended consequences. The actual stories and the underlying storytelling mechanisms tend to be black-boxed.

In this article, we seek to shed light on these mechanisms within the context of local government. We draw on linguistic methods to conduct a close analysis of narratives as a distinct mode of communication. This analysis enables us to initiate a discussion on how organizationally crafted storytelling may influence legitimation processes.

Legitimacy is necessary for organizations and their long-term survival (Suchman, 1995), and recent research has increasingly focused on discursive legitimation, i.e., how legitimacy is established through communication (Vaara, Aranda, & Etchanchu, 2024). For example, Vaara and Tienari (2008) argue for the importance of recognizing textual strategies used by organizations in legitimation processes. One prominent textual strategy in all kinds of organizations is narratives. They are often considered to play a key role in organizational life, which aligns with the recognition of storytelling as an important means of sensemaking (e.g., Bruner, 1986, 1990; Nadesan, 2022). In line with this, stories are utilized in various ways and for multiple purposes within organizations (e.g., Boje, 2008; Gabriel, 2000; Linde, 2009), particularly in strategic communication undertaken by management teams and communications departments.

From a public sector perspective, a common rationale for employing storytelling is the need to present information in a manner that is easily comprehensible and accessible to the general public (e.g., Matheus & Janssen, 2020). According to Fung (2013), in the context of democratic transparency, information must not only be available but also intelligible – especially when it serves to enable citizens to safeguard their interests and well-being. Within this framework, narratives emerge as an effective communicative tool. Barbour, Doshi, and Hernández (2015) show that when information is conveyed in narrative form, citizens report enhanced understanding, reduced cognitive burden, and a greater willingness to share the information with others. Furthermore, narratives are known to construct identity – an aspect intrinsically linked to legitimacy (cf. Xu & Shubo, 2024).

At the same time, the narrative format can be deceptive, as narratives often convey values and worldviews implicitly (cf. Rehnberg, 2014). This implies that the ambition to use storytelling to make municipal information straightforward and readily accessible to citizens may, in some respects, produce the opposite effect: obscuring how values are constructed and promoted through the text, and blurring the understanding of who the sender is.

By deconstructing narrative as a form of communication – focusing on both the micro level and the underlying storytelling mechanisms – we contribute to a deeper understanding of municipal storytelling in relation to the construction of legitimacy. The stories analyzed stem from a critical period during which the legitimacy of public sector organizations was being questioned globally, amidst challenges in information dissemination and increasing competition for citizens’ attention.<sup>1</sup> In our analysis, we focus on how meaning was constructed when

Swedish municipalities used storytelling in their crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Against this background, this study aims to elucidate the underlying mechanisms of storytelling in municipalities and to develop knowledge on how these mechanisms may shape discursive legitimation processes. More specifically, we ask which features of the narrative format are utilized and what meanings are attributed to the municipality as a result.

In line with Thorbjørnsrud and Ytreberg (2020), and others, we argue that organizational communication should be subject to critical examination regarding whose interests it serves. When it comes to public sector communication, such scrutiny may be even more crucial in countries like Sweden, which are characterized by a state-oriented risk culture (Cornia, Dressel, & Pfeil, 2016) – where trust in authorities is high, self-reliance is not a central value, and crisis management is primarily attributed to the state. Under such conditions, people may be more inclined to accept public information at face value and embrace narratives disseminated by municipalities and other public authorities, with less emphasis on individual scrutiny and critical evaluation. Against this backdrop, we aim to contribute to a more linguistically informed approach to municipal storytelling.

Our study begins by outlining the theoretical point of departure: the role of narratives in constructing discursive legitimacy. We then turn to narrative linguistics to lay the foundations for our analytical framework. After this, we present our empirical material – three municipal stories – and introduce our methodological approach: multimodal discourse analysis. We then apply this method and examine how meaning is constructed across textual and visual modes. Based on the analysis, we explore how municipal narratives shape discursive legitimation. Finally, we discuss the potential implications of the underlying storytelling mechanisms identified in the study.

## Discursive Legitimation and a Linguistic Perspective on Narratives

This theoretical section begins by establishing the role of communication in constructing legitimacy and by introducing narrative linguistics as a framework for unpacking how stories operate within organizational contexts. It then presents key narrative functions identified in previous research, along with a set of underlying storytelling mechanisms proposed in this study.

### Legitimacy and the role of communication

Legitimacy is obtained when organizations act according to established norms and align with dominant values and beliefs (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), and it is largely constructed through various forms of communication. In a recent review article, Vaara, Aranda, and Etchanchu (2024) use the umbrella term *discursive legitimation* to label “research on how language or communication may relate to underlying assumptions about what is deemed legitimate” (p. 2). While news media have been identified as a particularly important source of what is perceived as legitimate behaviour in society (e.g., Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Jonsson, Greve, & Fujiwara-Greve, 2009) – not least during the Covid-19 pandemic (Nyqvist & Lundgren-Henriksson, 2023) – organizations themselves also play key roles in the discursive construction of legitimacy (e.g., Svenbro & Wester, 2023). In contexts marked by crisis and uncertainty, organizations often prioritize meaning-making through communication (e.g., Christensen & Lægheid, 2020; Falkheimer, 2021; Zappettini & Rezazadah, 2024) – including, importantly, through narratives (e.g., Clementson, 2020; Heath, 2004).

What is considered legitimate organizational behavior depends on the social context and changes over time (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). Organizational practices are highly susceptible to trends (Abrahamson, 1996), and in the still-persistent era of New Public Management (Hood, 1991), public sector organizations often follow the lead of private companies, which have long used storytelling to build brands and enhance their reputation. However, public authorities must contend with multiple – and even conflicting – goals and address the needs of various publics (Frandsen, Johansen, & Houlberg Salomonsen, 2016), which creates specific communicative conditions. As noted by Canel and Luoma-aho (2020),

public sector communication “must balance the democratic communication aims of *engaging citizens* with organizational and institutional goals, as well as with survival in the midst of budget restrictions” (p. 1, italics in original). Aggerholm and Thomsen (2016) similarly reflect on the conflicting goals and demands that characterize legitimation processes in the public sector. In a study examining managerial discursive legitimation as a “particular mode of strategic communication”, they argue that managers in public sector organizations need to navigate between “heterogeneous discourses expressed within the organization and the discourses expressed at the political level” (Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2016, p. 195). This creates specific conditions not only for how storytelling is shaped within public sector organizations, but also for the meanings these narratives acquire in relation to their context. In other words, the democratic challenges inherent in public sector legitimation processes naturally influence how narrative legitimation unfolds in municipalities and other public authorities.

### **Narrative linguistics to deconstruct stories**

Aggerholm and Thomsen (2016) emphasize the importance of analyzing discourse at a detailed level to gain insight into how organizational legitimacy is formed, and they have advocated for an increase in research adopting this approach. Following their call, we employ multimodal discourse analysis, focusing mainly on linguistic aspects, to explore how meaning is constructed through storytelling. Our detailed linguistic analysis allows us to explore in greater depth how stories function in a municipal setting, as they convey values, often in implicit ways—values that can impact and shape individuals’ opinions and actions, as well as their perceptions of the organizations behind the stories. This means that we, to use the words of Gabriel (2015), see narratives not as “something that happens ‘inside’ a given box called organization, but as something that serves to construct the box itself” (p. 2011). This is also in line with Whittle, Vaara, and Maitlis (2023), who argue that a focus on linguistic elements and processes in organizational studies helps us to understand how discursive structures, like narratives, influence sensemaking and thereby reproduce – or transform – systems of thought.

In order to unpack narrative – a form of communication that is often black-boxed – we conduct an analysis of three municipal stories. Focusing on discursive meaning making in terms of identity and image construction as well as relationship building, our analysis is grounded in a constructivist view of language, where language use and reality are understood to exist in a dialectical relationship: Organizations are understood to be, to some extent, constituted through the stories told about them – meaning that these stories shape how the organization is perceived, thereby contributing to the formation of organizational legitimacy, or conversely, to its erosion. While extant research tends to focus on the link between stories and the construction of legitimacy, we argue that it is equally important to examine the building blocks and characteristics of the stories themselves. To address this gap, our study provides a close-up analysis of three stories, with the aim of shedding light on the nature and specificities of the narrative format.

We treat the texts we have analyzed as *narratives* (or *stories*, as we use these words interchangeably), based on the following criteria (see Rehnberg, 2014): A crucial aspect of a narrative is that it has a plot. The concept of plot can be made more accessible through Greimas’ (1966) classical actantial model, which provides a framework often used in management literature on storytelling. This model defines a narrative as consisting of a *subject* in search of an *object*, in other words, a protagonist striving to achieve a particular goal, or more succinctly: a protagonist with a project. The protagonist is typically accompanied by *helpers* and opposed by *opponents*. In addition, narratives usually include one or more characters who occupy the actantial role of *recipient* – that is, the one who benefits from the protagonist completing their project. Narratives are thus characterized by relations, aspirations, tensions, and contradictions, which together create a dynamic force that propels the story forward. Notably, the protagonist is not merely an agent (the presence of agents is a common criterion for identifying narratives), but a perceiving and experiencing agent with emotions (cf. Fludernik, 1996). Consequently, there is someone with whom the reader can identify.

Another essential feature of narratives is that they consist of both referential and evaluative elements (e.g., Labov, 1972), meaning that they are not merely plain reports of events. Rather,

they are imbued with evaluation that serves to bring out the message and purpose of the narrative. In addition, narratives are situated in specific times and places (e.g., Baynham, 2015) – for example, in a particular municipality during a pandemic.

Narratives always involve a narrator. In this study, we use the concept of *speaker roles* as defined in Goffman's (1981) participation framework. According to Goffman, a speaker may assume one, two, or all of the following roles: the *principal* (the one responsible for the content of the message), the *author* (the one who formulates the message), and the *animator* (the one who delivers or voices the message).

### **Narratives – functions and underlying storytelling mechanisms**

As a form of communication, narratives can serve a wide range of – and often quite different – functions. They are particularly well-suited to constructing identity, fostering relationships and community, conveying knowledge and morality, providing entertainment, and fulfilling both sense-making and aesthetic purposes (e.g., Bruner, 1986, 1990; Czarniawska, 1998; Hydén, 2008; Linde, 2009; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997). Not least, narratives are known to serve persuasive functions, especially when employed in rhetorical discourse (e.g., Lucaites & Condit, 1985). Many of these functions are linked to the frequently noted capacity of narratives, given the right conditions, to evoke engagement, emotion, and empathy, to shape attitudes, and to influence behaviour (cf. Andersen et al., 2017; Iversen, 2013).

In accordance with the narrative functions outlined above, previous research suggests that storytelling used in organizational communication – hereafter referred to as *strategic storytelling* – can foster organizational identification and strengthen relational ties by promoting a sense of belonging and shared identity within organizations (Linde, 2009; Salzer-Mörling, 2004). This is achieved by assigning individuals prominent roles in the stories and in the storytelling process. It is also achieved by crafting and disseminating stories that convey specific values, particularly those perceived as positive within the sociocultural context in which the organization operates and seeks to foster engagement. In and through stories, such values are not only expressed but also associated with the organization behind the story. Drawing inspiration from linguist Labov (1972), Rehnberg (2014) identifies a range of strategies for expressing values in strategic storytelling, from explicit evaluation to more implicit techniques, such as the selection of characters assigned particular roles (e.g., hero and victim), the portrayal of these characters, and the specific solutions promoted within the narrative.

Based on an understanding of narratives rooted in linguistic theory, we highlight three underlying, intertwined mechanisms on which strategic storytelling relies: The first is *personification*, clearly illustrated by Thorbjørnsrud and Ytreberg (2020) in their analysis of so-called human interest stories (i.e., personal stories turned into individual cases or personal exemplars). They demonstrate how organizational actors use personal experience in their quest for visibility, legitimacy, and impact. Notably, they argue that emotional stories featuring archetypal roles and appealing to basic moral instincts are particularly attractive to communicators seeking the receiver's attention. The second mechanism concerns *values*. While all communicative practices and formats are value-laden to some extent, the emotionally charged storytelling format conveys values in distinctive, intrinsic, and often implicit ways, shaped in large part by the mechanism of personification. Finally, an intrinsic feature of storytelling is that a story is always told by someone, here referred to as the *narrator*. This aspect is fundamental to the impact of strategic storytelling, as we will demonstrate in our analysis.

### **Material and Analysis Process**

Using storytelling in communication with citizens during the pandemic might appear to be an especially suitable method in Sweden, due to the country's relatively extensive strategy of addressing the Covid-19 crisis through recommendations rather than regulations (e.g., Johansson et al., 2023b; Svenbro & Wester, 2023). This strategy necessitated significant reliance on citizens and made it imperative for authorities to actively influence citizens to willingly assume responsibility. Against this background, we conduct a multimodal discourse analysis of three stories published online during the Covid-19 pandemic. Each of the three stories was

sourced from a different municipality, where it featured as part of a distinct communication campaign that included multiple stories. Two of the municipalities, Varberg and Uppsala, were identified through an interview conducted with a representative from Varberg Municipality, as part of a related research study (on the use of journalistic methods in municipal communication). The interviewee described how Varberg Municipality used storytelling to reach both employees and residents during the pandemic, and also mentioned Uppsala as another example. Since both Varberg and Uppsala relied on written stories, we actively searched for a third municipality that used oral storytelling, with the aim of including different modes of narration in our study. We selected Nordanstig, as it was the first municipality we identified that employed oral storytelling. The three stories were chosen on the grounds that they represent typical examples of storytelling within each respective communication campaign.

The three stories – one each from the municipalities of Uppsala, Nordanstig, and Varberg – provide a rich understanding of the underlying storytelling mechanisms, which we set out to examine in this study. They differ in terms of format, mode of communication, and protagonist configuration (see Table 1). As the analysis demonstrate, they also differ in terms of function.

*Table 1. Data: three stories used in municipal communication during the Covid-19 pandemic*

	<b>The Uppsala narrative</b>	<b>The Nordanstig narrative</b>	<b>The Varberg narrative</b>
<b>Format</b>	Personal narrative	Personal narrative	Newspaper article
<b>Communication mode</b>	Written text	Video	Written text
<b>Protagonist</b>	A citizen	A municipal council chair	Employees

As a first step in our analysis, we carefully read all narratives employed in the three municipal campaigns. Based on the parameters presented above, we then selected three stories, one from each campaign, for detailed analysis.

Inspired by linguistic discourse analytical theories on the fundamental functions of language and discourse, we focus on narrative meaning making in terms of representation, relation, and identity (cf. Fairclough, 1995; Halliday, 2014). More specifically, to identify the underlying storytelling mechanisms, we examine how the stories utilized by the municipalities promote specific *worldviews* by representing reality in particular ways, facilitate *identification* and *relationship-building*, and simultaneously construct *identities* and *images*. Notably, we are interested in the worldviews constructed in the stories, as these form the foundation against which the organizations project their identity. To situate the analysis, we also identify the specific *functions* the stories fulfil in their respective contexts.

To analyze *representation*, we focus on actantial structure (cf. Greimas, 1966); to analyze *relation*, we attend to narrator and addressee; and to analyze *identity*, we consider evaluation and values, that is, which values are expressed and how. In line with previous narrative research (Rehnberg, 2014), we draw on social semiotic theory (Kress, 2010), as our analysis is multimodal. Accordingly, our analysis does not focus solely on verbal aspects, but rather on the meaning potentials realized through the assemblage of different media (oral and written communication, still and moving images). In this context, we use the terms *reading* and *readers* as overarching concepts, encompassing viewing/listening and viewers/listeners.

Another contribution of social semiotics, used in the discussion section, is the concept of *provenance* (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), which refers to meaning-making through connotation. The concept highlights how meanings shaped within one context are transferred and transformed when practices or artifacts – such as an object, an activity, a concept, or a genre – are brought into new settings. In this way, *provenance* involves the relocation of meaning from one context to another.

## Narrative Meaning Making – Three Municipal Examples

The texts analyzed feature different types of protagonists – a citizen, a municipal council chair, and employees – who are united in their role of contributing to the narrative meaning-making and, ultimately, to the discursive construction of legitimacy.

### Uppsala: Using residents as cautionary examples and collaborators to prevent the spread

The Uppsala narrative (Uppsala Municipality, 2021, April 29) is presented in writing and includes a photograph. It is part of the digital communication campaign “I have had Covid-19”, which includes three texts, each seemingly written by a resident of Uppsala. The narrators share the common factor of not belonging to a group at risk of becoming seriously ill with Covid-19; however, they have all been relatively hard hit after catching the virus. The Uppsala narrative includes a vignette in which Daniel is mentioned by name: “Daniel caught Covid in May. This is his story.” The text then continues in the first person, in what appears to be Daniel’s own words. It begins:

The fact that I, someone young, fit and active, would be hit so hard by Covid, honestly, I never believed it – only that it affects people at high risk. But I was wrong.<sup>2</sup>

This introductory passage has several functions: It establishes a contrast and builds tension, but also allows for identification among those who perceive themselves as not threatened by the pandemic. In that way, the introduction can serve as a warning – there are likely several readers who believe that if they catch Covid, they will not become seriously ill. Daniel goes on to talk about the progression of his illness and his feelings and reactions to the symptoms and consequences. The story contains details that inspire empathy, for example: “It felt like I couldn’t breathe, and I was terrified.”

We then learn that six months after catching Covid, Daniel is still unable to work as a firefighter. The evaluations expressed in the story serve the main purpose of highlighting the suffering the disease has caused Daniel – which means that being healthy is indirectly portrayed as a desirable value. The values in the story are conveyed to a great extent by expressing contrasts, among them the fact that the firefighter Daniel, who normally has good physical fitness, is now left exhausted just by using the stairs. The values are also conveyed when Daniel recounts his experience of the physical symptoms (“It is as though something is pressing down hard on my chest”) and expresses his feelings, including his longing to return to his job.

The penultimate paragraph, where Daniel directly addresses his intended readers, summarizes his message:

I honestly did not think it would affect me so hard. But Covid can affect anyone. I hope that by reading my story, you will reflect and protect yourself and those around us.

The addressees, who are addressed in the singular second person, are most likely residents of Uppsala, as the text is published on the Uppsala Municipality website.

Finally, the text ends with a passage where Daniel is no longer the narrator:

Help us share Daniel’s story with younger people. Together we can reduce the spread of infection!

The text does not specify who has now taken on the role of narrator, i.e., who the pronoun *us* refers to. However, it is reasonable to assume that this is Uppsala Municipality. The target group is re-specified, and the reader is implicitly depicted as someone who is not young. ‘Younger people’ are made out as being the ultimate target group that can be reached *via* the people who read the text. Readers of this text are thus invited into a circle (primarily comprising adults) engaged in reaching out to the irresponsible youth. Drawing on Daniel’s story—which appeals to the reader’s emotions and is apparently intended to create insight—the text makes a direct appeal to the reader to share the story, an action portrayed as helping to reduce the spread of infection. The use of the word *together* in the story’s final sentence further reinforces this invitation to join a community.

The text includes a photograph of Daniel wearing a firefighter’s uniform (see Image 1). He stands against a black background that can be interpreted as threatening, looking serious as he

holds a sign that reads “I have had Covid-19”. The photograph reinforces the impression of Daniel’s story serving as a form of testimony, further emphasizing the gravity of the situation.

*Image 1. The Uppsala narrative (Uppsala Municipality, 2021, April 29)*

## Daniel

Att jag, som vältränad och ganska ung, skulle drabbas rätt hårt av covid. Det trodde jag verkligen inte, tänkte att det bara drabbar personer i riskgrupper. Men jag hade fel.

– Daniel fick covid i maj. Det här är hans berättelse.



### Jättesvårt att andas

Jag fick otroligt ont i huvudet och hade ingen ork men jag kopplade det inte till covid då. Efter ett par dagar fick jag feber och frossa och eftersom det var massor om covid i medierna då så jag höll mig hemma. Fast det kändes bara som en rätt rejäl influensa de första dagarna.

Men efter fem dygn fick jag plötsligt jättesvårt att andas och åkte in till akuten. Det kändes inte som att jag fick in nån luft och jag blev väldigt rädd. Jag domnade också i fingrarna och läpparna och tappade lukt- och smaksinnet helt. Jag hade sett många berättelser om personer som behövde sövas och läggas i respirator. Till och med dog. Hur skulle det gå för mig?

### Helt utan ork

Jag fick låna en syremätare av en kollega. Den lugnade mig, även om jag blev lite manisk på att mäta. Jag låg hela tiden inom det tillåtna spannet och efter ungefär tre veckor kände jag mig lite

Photo within screenshot: Göran Ekeberg/Add light AB.

To summarize, the story invites the reader to identify with Daniel while simultaneously offering them the role of agent. The reader is encouraged to take action to influence the situation. The coronavirus is presented as the common enemy (the opponent), and the objective (the protagonist’s project) is to stop the spread of infection by prompting people to reflect on the gravity of the situation and protect themselves and those around them. The world constructed in and through the story is one in which we are all vulnerable, yet also one in which action enables us to seize a certain degree of power and make a difference. Meanwhile, Uppsala Municipality is implicitly portrayed as responsible but also non-authoritarian: no orders are given; instead, a plea is expressed.

## Nordanstig: Offering a role model to inspire determination and endurance

The Nordanstig narrative (Nordanstig Municipality, 2020, May 5) is a video published on a municipal webpage alongside four other videos, each giving voice to one or two of the municipality’s employees, who share their own accounts of the ongoing pandemic in Nordanstig and the actions they consider necessary (Nordanstig Municipality, n.d.). It starts with a written title, summarizing its message and introducing the narrator, who is the main person in the video:

Carin Walldin

Chair of the municipal council, 70+

Stays home

The narrator speaks naturally, in a dialect (cf. Moldenæs, 2016), and addresses the audience directly. She is wearing a tracksuit and at one stage, the camera zooms in on her loosely tied trainers (see Image 2). She stands firmly on the porch of what appears to be her home, a traditional wooden house in the countryside. On occasion, the camera pans the surroundings, which comprise fields and a river that can be assumed to be well-known to local. The front door squeaks gently and a muffled engine noise can be heard in the distance.

Image 2. Compilation of screenshots from the Nordanstig narrative (Nordanstig Municipality, 2020)



She speaks candidly and somewhat sternly about how provoked she feels by those aged 70 and above who are not staying at home, despite the prevailing recommendation:

I have to say I am incredibly provoked by all the 70-plussers who are not listening to the advice being given by experts and the Government – even the King has told us to stay home if we're 70 or older. And that's what we have to do, because there are no special rules and laws that apply to us living in Nordanstig.

She refers to herself using both *I* and *we*; by the latter pronoun, she constructs a community including the reader. In addition, she uses the third-person plural pronoun (them) to refer to those who do not follow the recommendation to stay home:

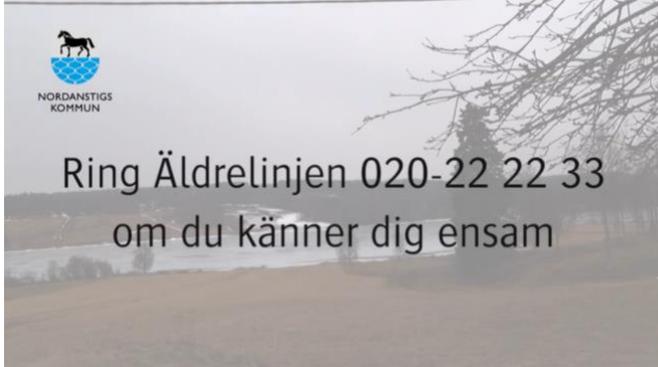
I was sitting and listening to the municipal council, and I could hear the voices of people over 70 who were sitting in on the council meeting, and I want to say to them: Stay home! We can arrange these meetings online. It works perfectly.

Carin Walldin backs up her words and makes her own opinion known. *She* is the one who feels provoked. *She* is the one who has stayed home for three and a half weeks, and she gives examples of what people can do during quarantine by explaining what *she* does; she reads and listens to audiobooks, calls friends and acquaintances, goes for walks – and cleans. “My home is incredibly clean now”, she says, interrupting herself with a laugh, “Well, somewhat at least.” Here, she expresses a certain amount of self-distance, and the story develops an element of humour.

She admits that staying home every day is not enjoyable. This expresses her sympathy while also enabling more viewers to identify with her; she is not simply happy and satisfied, the stay-at-home rule is also a struggle for her at times. However, feeling bored is not an acceptable reason to flout the recommendations. At the end of the video, written advice aimed directly at residents aged 70 and above is displayed. For example, those who feel lonely are encouraged to call a special hotline for elderly people, and this advice is formulated as a direct appeal to the

elderly themselves, addressed with the second-person singular pronoun (the Swedish *du*): “Call Äldrelinjen [a hotline for elderly people] 020-22 22 33 if you feel lonely” (see Image 3). This text is accompanied by the municipality’s logo.

*Image 3. Screenshot from the Nordanstig narrative (Nordanstig Municipality, 2020, May 5)*



The video is an indirect appeal in the form of a personal account, and the overall value promoted in and through the account is compliance (with the current expert recommendations). Thanks to the chair of the municipal council being over 70 and practising what she preaches, she can be portrayed as a role model and even as a stern one. However, distinguishing between the municipality as an institutional actor and Carin Walldin as an individual actor is difficult, since in her role as chair of the council she not only represents but also embodies the municipality: Is it Carin Walldin, for example, who is provoked by those who do not follow the expert recommendations, or is it the municipality?

The protagonist’s project in this story is to get people aged 70 and above to stay home. While the coronavirus is an implicit opponent ‘those who do not comply with the recommendations’ are clearly singled out as explicit opponents. However, it is unclear who assumes the actantial role of recipient; no explicit mention is made of whether it is the elderly people themselves or somebody else (such as society or healthcare) who are expected to benefit from elderly people staying home.

The elderly residents of Nordanstig are evidently the intended primary audience, since the video was published on the municipality’s website and the written advice at the end of the video addresses them directly. Those addressed are invited to identify with their down-to-earth, local resident chair of the municipal council who radiates authenticity and sincerity, someone who is straight to the point, concise, humorous, and empathetic. In the video, local residents are also tied to a larger national community led by experts, the Government, and the king.

In summary, in and through the story, the elderly are portrayed as both victims and agents. The responsible 70-plussers are those who constitute the narrative’s *we*, with the story inviting the addressees into this community. The story can be viewed as an attempt to inspire determination and endurance among this target group by offering a simultaneously authoritative and unpretentious role model who both warns and advises. As almost nothing is said explicitly about the municipality, the image of the municipality constructed in and through this narrative largely coincides with the image of the municipal representative Carin Walldin. Further, the moving footage of the plain wooden houses and the rural landscape contributes to creating an image of the municipality as a traditional, down-to-earth community, closely connected to nature and rooted in simplicity and authenticity. Finally, the text at the end of the video presents the municipality (represented by its logo) as caring, familiar, and responsible towards older residents.

### **Varberg: Using coworkers in ways that depict the municipality in a favourable light**

The Varberg narrative (Varberg Municipality, 2021, April 23), titled “Like entering a burning building”, is structured as an interview with three healthcare workers at a sheltered housing

facility. It is part of the digital “Coronavirus Archive”, which includes 50 labelled stories dated from 2020 to 2022 (Varberg Municipality, n.d.). The majority of these texts are based on interviews with employees working in different sections of the municipality. The protagonists in the Varberg narrative talk about how afraid they have been during the pandemic, and how much they have had to fight – and that things are not over yet. The photograph included in the text (see Image 4) clearly illustrates the fact that the pandemic is ongoing. The main people in the story are depicted in their work uniforms, wearing the “Covid visor” and keeping a safe distance from each other. In the background, a wall is visible, presumably part of the facility where they work.

Image 4. The Varberg narrative (Varberg Municipality, 2021, April 23)



VARBERGS KOMMUN | Corona arkivet | Meny

Coronaarkivet / "Som att gå in i ett brinnande hus"

23 april 2021

## "Som att gå in i ett brinnande hus"



Att säga att de befunnit sig i pandemins skugga är fel. Jessica Botsjö, Carolin Andreasson och Carina Stjernström på Östergårdens särskilda boende har arbetat mitt i den. Nu är det åtta veckor sedan de fick sin andra vaccinationsspruta – och lättningen är stor.

Jessica, Carolin och Carina, undersköterskor respektive vårdbiträde, sitter i personalrummet. Visiren ligger på bordet, men munskydden är på. – Det känns nästan konstigt på fritiden när man är helt utan skyddsutrustning. Naket och bart! säger Jessica och ögonen smalnar av skratt över munskyddet.

När frågan kommer: "Hur har det gångna året varit?" tystnar skrattet. För år 2020 har satt sina spår hos alla tre. Till sist svarar Carina:

The text structure is similar to that of a traditional newspaper article; it includes a main heading, several intermediate headings (some of them made up of quotes), and a preamble, and the body text is interspersed with quotes from those interviewed. The text is unsigned, but as it is published on the municipality’s website, the reasonable conclusion is that a municipality communications officer has written it. While the full names of those interviewed are included in the preamble, they are referred to only by their first names in the rest of the text, creating a sense of intimacy.

Unlike the other two texts, this text recounts aspects of the municipality’s daily operations, as those interviewed – the protagonists – talk about their work. Still, the Varberg narrative also has a personal quality, bringing details to life and conveying strong emotional expression. For example, the reader is told how Jessica’s eyes “squint with laughter above her face mask” when she talks about how she has become so accustomed to wearing protective equipment that it almost feels strange to go without it outside of work. This laughter contrasts with the dark feelings that are then expressed, both directly and through comparisons, such as in the following quote from Carina:

“It’s been awful, and I will never forget the early stages. Going to work was like entering death’s waiting room. I was afraid, terrified.”

Similar to the other analyzed texts, this one also demonstrates how storytelling can create a sense of intimacy with the reader – and consequently help establish trust. To begin with, intimacy and recognition are fostered through relatable details in the text. The following quote is one example:

It's the small, regular things they miss the most.

“You can only hope that the vaccine will bring us back to normal”, says Carina. “I'm not bothering with things like going abroad. I just want to be able to go out for coffee in town and give my older friends a hug.”

Many readers no doubt share the same loss of these “small, regular things”, and are therefore able to feel a sense of closeness and solidarity with Carina and her colleagues. This, in turn, easily creates a trust that makes other statements in the text – including those about the municipality – appear more credible than they otherwise would have.

The text also creates meaning by giving prominence to a clarification provided by the protagonists:

There is one thing all three of them want to make clear before the end of the interview: everyone in their facility who caught Covid-19 received appropriate care.

“A lot has been written about the horrible stories told by relatives, and of course, this needs to be discussed, but that's not how it is generally”, says Jessica.

“Most people who come here are over 90 and many have underlying illnesses. Patients dying is unfortunately part of our everyday life. You mustn't forget that we have actually had a lot of patients who have survived and got better”, Carolin adds.

The utterances quoted above indicate the presence of a narrative in legacy media that Jessica and Carolin aim to correct. Here, meaning is constructed by embedding a discrete element within a particular contextual framing: stories are not simply contextualized but positioned within a specific context shaped by the storyteller's perspective. That perspective, in turn, is formed by the values the storyteller seeks – and is situated – to express in the given storytelling situation. In this case, these are values that contribute to a more favourable portrayal of coronavirus-related healthcare in Varberg. By foregrounding the protagonists' attempt to correct the media narrative, the text invites the readers to recalibrate their expectations and to attribute greater credibility to the protagonists' account – and, by extension to statements concerning the municipality.

The story also includes explicit evaluation – in the form of quotes – that portray the municipality in an advantageous way:

“[...] And we always had really good support from the municipality's safety team”, says Carolin.

“The municipality's occupational health service also did a good job”, says Carolin.

As in the other two example stories, both the municipality and the individuals in this story share the role of protagonist. As staff members, Carolin and her colleagues are even *part of* the municipal organization. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that Carolin and the municipality are not one and the same – if they were, the quotes above would amount to self-praise. Accordingly, these direct words of praise for the municipality could hardly have been published on the municipality's website had they not been voiced by an individual.

As this story is published on the municipality's website, we can assume that it is primarily aimed at residents of Varberg. This likely includes both the municipality's employees (who may feel encouraged and find the protagonists' experiences relatable) and other residents (who may need to be informed that the media narrative does not capture the full picture).

In summary, this text portrays Carina, Jessica, and Carolin as heroes in the fight against the coronavirus. The municipality's safety team and occupational health service are likewise portrayed as helpers. No direct appeal is made to the readers. Still, a close-at-hand interpretation is that they are implicitly cast as helpers in the fight against the coronavirus – though only indirectly, insofar as they can support the municipality's employees by displaying understanding and exercising caution towards media reporting.

The world created in and through the story is one where empathetic municipal employees are suffering, fighting, and supporting each other – always with the municipality's residents in mind. It is a world in which the municipality is good, although it occasionally faces criticism

that produces a distorted picture. And while the employees' working situation is marked by strain and constant pressure, they continue to fight tirelessly.

## Discussion: Underlying Mechanisms of Municipal Storytelling in Processes of Discursive Legitimacy

In this study, we have set out to provide insight into the underlying mechanisms of storytelling in municipalities and to develop knowledge about how these mechanisms may shape discursive legitimation processes. Our analysis of the three stories demonstrates how a sense of community is constructed through both address and appeals. Furthermore, we have shown how the individual protagonists – who are also given a voice in and through the texts – emerge in ways that encourage identification, while their identities coincide with the image of the municipality. The narratives from Uppsala and Nordanstig both serve to involve residents in the collective effort against Covid, whereas the Varberg narrative serves not so much to involve residents as to legitimize the municipality and its actions. Thus, the image-building function is more prominent in the Varberg narrative, while it is implicit in the other two. For a summary of our findings, see Table 2.

*Table 2. Analysis summary*

	Uppsala	Nordanstig	Varberg
<b>Function</b>	Warn about the disease's insidiousness, and encourage adults to collaborate in preventing the youth from spreading the pandemic.	Reproach the elderly, urge them to stay at home and inspire a sense of determination and endurance.	Highlight the municipal employees' hard work and empathy despite a challenging work situation, and portray the municipality in a positive light.
<b>Worldview</b>	A world where everyone is vulnerable, yet capable of seizing a degree of power and making a difference.	A world where the elderly are both victims and agents.	A world where the municipality is good, though occasionally criticized in a way that misrepresents it.
<b>Identification</b>	Young and fit readers are positioned to identify with the resident, firefighter Daniel.	Elderly readers are positioned to identify with Carin Walldin, chair of the municipal council. (Carin Walldin, in turn, identifies with the elderly, which positions her to also admonish them.)	Readers are positioned to identify with the employees Carina, Carolin and Jessica.
<b>Relationship-building</b>	Adult residents are encouraged to team up with the municipality, thus forming a community with it. Relations are also constructed between the readers and Daniel, as he addresses them directly.	The responsible 70-plusers form a community to which all elderly readers are not only invited but also compelled.	The employees form a community with the municipality.
<b>Identity</b>	The protagonist is portrayed as young, fit, yet vulnerable and caring.	The protagonist is portrayed as elderly, down-to-earth, stern, candid, humorous, and empathetic.	The protagonists are portrayed as scared, hardworking, and appreciative of their employer.

The analysis reveals the intricate interweaving of the three underlying storytelling mechanisms explored in this study: personification, values, and a shared narratorship. Together, these mechanisms contribute to enabling identification, identity formation, and relationship-building. Below, we discuss these mechanisms and their implications when storytelling is employed to construct legitimacy.

### Personification

Individuals are assigned prominent roles, as both protagonists and narrators, in all three stories analyzed. This aligns with earlier research showing that personification is an essential feature of strategic storytelling, facilitating continuous evaluation and a shared narratorship (Rehnberg, 2014). Indeed, readers more readily identify with an individual than with a faceless, distant authority. It is also generally easier for people to form relationships with individuals than with impersonal institutions.

However, this kind of personification also has potential downsides: while individuals are given prominence and voice in strategic stories, they are also embedded in organizational processes that may turn them into exemplars for reasons beyond their individual motives (Thorbjørnsrud & Ytreberg, 2020). Nonetheless, personification remains central to organizational storytelling and underpins the two other storytelling mechanisms examined in our analysis, as the following discussion outlines. In addition, personification inherently reflects qualities highly valued in contemporary society, such as ‘individuality’, ‘informality’, and ‘identity construction’ (e.g., Giddens, 1991). These elements contribute to shaping specific perceptions of the municipalities behind the stories, perceptions that can ultimately serve as part of the construction of organizational legitimacy.

### Values

One way in which personification relates to values in strategic storytelling is that the characteristics of the protagonist are regularly transferred to the municipality behind the story. For example, in the Varberg narrative, the brave, empathic, and hardworking employees are portrayed as representing and personifying the municipality.

As demonstrated in our analysis, values are closely associated not only with the protagonists but also with the individual narrators (in all three cases, these two roles intersect, even if that is not necessarily the case in storytelling more broadly). Values are conveyed explicitly by all narrators, while also being implicitly embedded within the narratives. The narrators’ choice of words, their appearance, and the content of their utterances reflect who they are, and the values they represent may “rub off” on the municipality, given that all the narrators serve as *deputy narrators* for the organizations (see further below).

Additionally, the semiotic resources and the material design of the narratives also express and convey values that imprint on the municipality. Compared to the (seemingly) authentic and “everyday” photographs included in the narratives from Nordanstig and Varberg, the stylized portrait of Daniel from Uppsala conveys rather different values—for example, ‘stylishness’, ‘design’ and ‘drama’. The ways in which images are used – including their visual style, aesthetic choices, and symbolic design – contribute to the construction of distinct forms of organizational identity, thereby shaping the conditions under which discursive legitimacy may be achieved in different ways.

Further, images of the organizations are created simply by the fact that the municipalities assume the role of storytelling actors. More specifically, the mere act of a public authority engaging in storytelling can be considered remarkable in itself, thereby contributing to the construction of a particular image of the organization (cf. Rehnberg, 2014). This process, encapsulated in the concept of *provenance* (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), can be understood as involving two interrelated dynamics: *First*, narrative is traditionally associated with ancient, mythical, and authentic forms of communication, often linked to intimate, everyday situations – like conversations between old friends sharing memories and experiences. In other words, narrative as a communicative form is imbued with inherent values; according to Thorbjørnsrud and Ytreberg (2020, p. 1097), a dominant idea of our time is that sharing of first-hand experiences – particularly in relation to health and illness – is considered a moral and existential

good. Moreover, the relationship typically established between a storyteller and a listener differs significantly from that between a municipality and a resident reading a rather dull municipal information leaflet. *Second*, when narratives are employed in public sector communication, they also evoke a different set of values, such as ‘innovation’, ‘novelty’, and ‘a forward-looking spirit’. This is due to the provenance of storytelling as a method – namely, that strategic storytelling is imported from the corporate world. In line with this, the Coronavirus Archive of Varberg received positive attention from both local media (Zurman, 2021) and a digital newsletter from the Swedish Communication Association (Sveriges Kommunikatörer, 2021).

### **A shared narratorship**

As mentioned above, the individual narrators serve as *deputy narrators* for the organizations. In this role, they are more restricted in what they can say compared to when speaking as private individuals in a personal context. Nevertheless, the situation is, in some respects, characterized by a greater freedom of expression than when the municipality is the sole communicator, which is the norm in traditional public communication. For example, the employees in the Varberg narrative are in a position that makes it legitimate to praise the municipality.

The individual narrators’ “speaking rights” rest on the fact that they speak from experience that is both personal and firsthand, which in turn strengthens their credibility and narrative authority. While conveying their personal narratives, these individuals simultaneously make it possible for the municipalities to communicate their messages – and to do so in a more subtle manner, as the focus remains on the individual narrators. This, we argue, is one of the affordances (Björkqvall, 2018; Gibson, 1977) of narratives when used in strategic communication. From the readers’ perspective, however, this affordance may constitute a pitfall, as it can blur – or even obscure – the actual sender of the messages.

This aspect of strategic storytelling can be further elucidated through Goffman’s (1981) concept of speaker roles. In the Nordanstig narrative, Carin Walldin is clearly the speaker. In Goffman’s terms, she functions as both the animator and the author, as the wording appears to be her own, given its natural, conversational tone. Similarly, Daniel, who is the central figure in the Uppsala narrative, can be seen as both animator and author of the main part of the story, given its first-person rendering. In the case of Varberg, the three employees serve as animators and authors in the direct quotations, whereas the speaker for the remainder of the text is presumably a municipal communications officer.

However, in all three stories, the principal speaker role is shared between the individual, personal narrator, whom the reader “meets”, and the municipality, which is responsible for and has shaped the communication initiative. In line with Rehnberg (2014), we suggest that this shared narratorship – more specifically, a shared “principalship” – plays a crucial role when storytelling is used in strategic communication; it is essential for linking the story to the organization.

One way to conceptualize this shared narratorship is to frame the individual narrator as the *proximal principal* – the figure encountered directly in the text – and the municipality as the *ultimate principal* responsible for the communication initiative. The individual narrator anchors and conveys the municipality’s message. The story format brings the individual narrator to the fore, even though the municipality is arguably the ultimate sender, shaping, publishing, and using the story to communicate with employees and residents. The voices of individuals create a sense of familiarity that, in turn, lends legitimacy to what is said. When readers can relate to people, it becomes easier to trust them and their statements. This transfer of trust from the individual narrator to the municipality can occur subtly, without the reader being fully aware of it. Moreover, it is often socially more difficult to dismiss or contradict an individual’s feelings and lived experiences than to ignore a call from an anonymous, formal authority.

### **Concluding Remarks: How Stories Can Blur Understanding**

This article has explored the underlying mechanisms of municipal storytelling and initiated a discussion about how these mechanisms may influence legitimation processes. As a starting point, we drew on literature on discursive legitimation (Vaara, Aranda, & Etchanchu, 2024)

combined with narrative linguistics, focusing on how meaning – specifically in terms of identity, image, and relationships – is constructed through stories and storytelling. By advancing understanding of narrative legitimation in the context of local government, this study contributes to the existing scholarship on how organizations engage in discursive legitimation processes (e.g., Svenbro & Wester, 2023; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Using multimodal discourse analysis, we conducted a detailed examination of three municipal narratives. This methodological approach enabled us to move beyond the surface level of the materials and to unpack the underlying storytelling mechanisms – mechanisms that both enable and constrain what can be communicated, and how. Our analysis provides a foundation for critically examining – and problematizing – storytelling as a form of discursive legitimation.

Given the communicative power of storytelling, it is not surprising that public agencies turned to narrative strategies in their efforts to reach and influence both citizens and employees during the Covid-19 pandemic. Stories are widely recognized as effective tools for disseminating information (e.g., Barbour, Doshi, & Hernández, 2015; Brooks et al., 2022; Kantor, 2021), not least because they are structured in ways that help audiences make sense of complex events. Furthermore, narratives – being a communicative form that often fosters emotional engagement – are considered particularly effective in times of uncertainty, when individuals are prone to seek meaning, explanations, and a sense of belonging and community (e.g., Huang, 2024; Nadesan, 2022). Moreover, stories featuring relatable individuals tend to be especially effective in shaping attitudes and influencing behaviour (Andersen et al., 2017). At the same time, when individuals are given a voice both in and through organizationally crafted stories, this can have an emancipatory effect (Rehnberg, 2014).

To conclude, storytelling emerges as a suitable communicative strategy for actors seeking to reach out to their audiences – not least in times of crisis – due to the many appealing functions inherent in the narrative form. This strategic potential is widely acknowledged, with both researchers and communication consultants emphasizing that narrative – when used purposefully in organizational contexts – can be a highly effective tool. However, we argue that the persuasive power of narrative is not merely a strength to be celebrated; it also raises important concerns that call for critical reflection. Such reflection should address both the broader practice of storytelling and the specific narratives that organizations construct and circulate.

During societal crises such as pandemics, there are many ways to frame the problem and how it can be solved. The organizationally crafted narratives we have analyzed – as is the case with all narratives – go beyond simply conveying information about the ongoing pandemic and the actions being taken; they convey values – often implicitly in ways that are not easily discernible – and create images of the organizations behind them.

Building on our analysis, we want to highlight three particular aspects that warrant further investigation regarding how the nature of stories may influence processes of discursive legitimation in a municipal context. First, not all types of content fit into the kinds of stories currently employed by municipalities. For example, the stories included in Varberg's Coronavirus Archive do not address situations in which the municipality may have contributed to worsening the crisis, or instances where municipal hierarchies and regulations placed individual employees or residents at a disadvantage. As Rehnberg (2014, p. 243) notes, the narrative format tends to favour individual acts of heroism, while simultaneously obscuring or downplaying organizational hierarchies and institutional responsibility. Second, the storytelling format – featuring an individual narrator who represents the organization, referred to above as the *deputy narrator* – tends to obscure the organization in its role as the ultimate sender. Third, the narrative format does not invite scrutiny or critical questioning, in contrast to traditional communicative formats in a public sector context. For instance, Svenbro and Wester (2023) show that Q&A sessions held as part of daily press briefings during the pandemic served as arenas for legitimacy construction, where government agencies and journalists interacted. Although government agencies, as experts with epistemic authority, usually held the power to explain and define the situation, journalists were both allowed and expected to ask critical and clarifying questions. In the stories we have analyzed here, the municipalities neither claim expert status nor make their authoritative power as public agencies visible. Consequently, there are no

expectations of critical or challenging questions—and no clear addressee for such questions. Stories told by citizens or employees are typically not perceived as forms of communication warranting scrutiny. In this way, they function as a subtle source of legitimacy that often goes unrecognized and unchallenged.

In summary, while storytelling constitutes a powerful communication tool for disseminating information and for persuading and engaging audiences, the narrative format and the underlying mechanisms of organizational storytelling may simultaneously obscure complex societal phenomena and complicate the accountability and transparency obligations of public authorities. Consequently, municipal storytelling places considerable interpretative responsibility on audiences, who must critically engage with the material and remain aware that the narrative ultimately originates from the organization itself, whose interests and position may shape how the story is told. We contend that the increasing adoption of storytelling within public sector communication warrants rigorous critical scrutiny and further scholarly inquiry. It is our hope that the present analysis offers a conceptual foundation to guide future research and foster sustained scholarly interest in how organizational storytelling shapes processes of narrative legitimation.

## Declaration of Interests

None.

## Acknowledgements/Funding

The study is part of a research project that is primarily funded by *Anne-Marie och Gustaf Anders stiftelse för medieforskning*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See for example Meng and Tench (2022) for international perspectives on crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic, and Johansson et al. (2023a) for an overview of the Nordic pandemic communication.

<sup>2</sup>In this article, the quotes from the stories are translated from Swedish, which is the original language.

## References

- Abrahamson, E. (1996). Management fashion. *The Academy of Management Review*, 21(1), 254–285. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258636>
- Aggerholm, H. K. & Thomsen, C. (2016). Legitimation as a particular mode of strategic communication in the public sector. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 10(3), 195–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2016.1176570>
- Andersen, K., Skovsgaard, M., Albæk, E., & de Vreese, C. H. (2017). The engaging effect of exemplars: How an emotional reaction to (dis)similar people in the news media affects political participation. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 22(4), 490–509. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161217723152>
- Barbour, J. B., Doshi, M. J., & Hernández, L. H. (2015). Telling global public health stories: Narrative message design for issues management. *Communication Research*, 43(6), 810–843. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650215579224>
- Baynham, M. (2015). Narrative and space/time. In A. De Fina & A. Georgakopoulou (Eds.), *The Handbook of Narrative Analysis* (pp. 119–139). Wiley Blackwell.
- Björkqvall, A. (2018). Critical genre analysis of management texts in the public sector: Towards a theoretical and methodological framework. In D. Wojahn, C. Seiler Brylla, & G. Westberg (Eds.), *Kritiska text- och diskursstudier* [Critical text and discourse studies] (pp. 57–79). Södertörn University.
- Boje, D. (2008). *Storytelling organizations*. Sage.

- Brooks, S. P., Zimmermann, G. L., Lang, M., Scott, S. D., Thomson, D., Wilkes, G., & Hartling, L. (2022). A framework to guide storytelling as a knowledge translation intervention for health-promoting behavior change. *Implementation Science Communications*, 3(35). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43058-022-00282-6>
- Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Harvard University Press.
- Canel, M. J. & Luoma-aho, V. (2020). Introduction to public sector communication. In M.-J. Canel & V. Luoma-aho (Eds.), *The Handbook of Public Sector Communication* (pp. 1–25). John Wiley & Sons.
- Christensen, T. & Læg Reid, P. (2020). The coronavirus crisis – crisis communication, meaning-making, and reputation management. *International Public Management Journal*, 23(5), 713–729. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2020.1812455>
- Clementson, D. E. (2020). Narrative persuasion, identification, attitudes, and trustworthiness in crisis communication. *Public Relations Review*, 46(2), Article 101889. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.101889>
- Cornia, A., Dressel, K., & Pfeil, P. (2016). Risk cultures and dominant approaches towards disasters in seven European countries. *Journal of Risk Research*, 19(3), 288–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2014.961520>
- Czarniawska, B. (1998). *A narrative approach to organization studies*. Sage.
- Dailey, S., Gilmore, B., & Rangarajan, N. (2022). The visualization of public information: Describing the use of narrative infographics by U.S. municipal governments. *Public Policy and Administration*, 40(1), 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09520767221140954>
- Deephouse, D. & Suchman, M. (2008). Legitimacy in organizational institutionalism. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, T. B. Lawrence, & R. E. Meyer (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism* (pp. 49–77). SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849200387>
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Media discourse*. Edward Arnold.
- Falkheimer, J. (2021). Legitimacy strategies and crisis communication. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1567>
- Fludernik, M. (1996). *Towards a 'natural' narratology*. Routledge.
- Frandsen, F., Johansen, W., & Houlberg Salomonsen, H. (2016). Responding to institutional complexity: Reputation and crisis management in Danish municipalities. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*, 20(2), 7–38. <https://doi.org/10.58235/sjpa.v20i2.14953>
- Fung, A. (2013). Infotopia: Unleashing the democratic power of transparency. *Politics & Society*, 41(2), 183–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329213483107>
- Gabriel, Y. (2000). *Storytelling in organizations: Facts, fictions, and fantasies*. Oxford University Press.
- Gabriel, Y. (2015). Storytelling. In M. Bevir & R. A. W. Rhodes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of interpretive political science* (pp. 211–223). Routledge.
- Gibson J. J. (1977). The theory of affordances. In R. Shaw & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Perceiving, acting, and knowing: Toward an ecological psychology* (pp. 62–82). Erlbaum.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Polity Press.
- Greimas, A. (1966). *Semantique structural: Recherche de méthode*. Larousse.
- Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (2014). *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar*. Rev. by C. M. I. M. Matthiessen. Routledge.
- Heath, R. L. (2004). Telling a story: A narrative approach to communication during crisis. In D. P. Millar & R. L. Heath (Eds.), *Responding to crisis: A rhetorical approach to crisis communication* (pp. 167–187). Taylor & Francis Group.
- Hood, C. (1991). A public management for all seasons? *Public Administration*, 69(1), 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.1991.tb00779.x>

- Huang, Y. (2024). Crafting persuasive stories: How uncertainty and sidedness influence narrative efficacy in promoting updated COVID-19 vaccination. *Science Communication*, 47(1), 81–108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10755470241267225>
- Hydén, L. C. (2008). Berättelseforskning [Narrative research]. In A. Meeuwisse, H. Swärd, R. Eliasson-Lappalainen, & K. Jacobsson (Eds.), *Forskningsmetodik för socialvetare* [Research methodology for social scientists] (pp. 89–104). Natur & Kultur.
- Iversen, S. (2013). Narrativ retorik [Narrative rhetoric]. *Rhetorica Scandinavica*, 63, 72–88.
- Johansson, B., Ihlen, Ø., Lindholm, J., & Blach-Ørsten, M. (Eds.) (2023a). *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic Countries*. Nordicom. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688>
- Johansson, B., Ihlen, Ø., Lindholm, J., & Blach-Ørsten, M. (2023b). Introduction: Communicating a pandemic in the Nordic countries. In B. Johansson, Ø Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic. Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic Countries* (pp. 11–30). Nordicom. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688>
- Jonsson, S., Greve, H. R., & Fujiwara-Greve, T. (2009). Undeserved loss: The spread of legitimacy loss to innocent organizations in response to reported corporate deviance. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 54(2), 195–228. <https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.2009.54.2.195>
- Kantor, J. (2021). The power of narrative: Storytelling, fear, and the COVID-19 pandemic. *JAAD International*, 5, 9–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdin.2021.07.005>
- Kent, M. L. (2015). The power of storytelling in public relations: Introducing the 20 master plots. *Public Relations Review*, 41(4), 480–489. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.05.011>
- Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. Routledge.
- Kress, G. & Van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication*. Arnold.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city: Studies in the black English vernacular*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Larson, H. J., Lee, N., Rabin, K. H., Rauh, L., & Ratzan, S. C. (2020). Building confidence to CONVINCED. *Journal of Health Communication* 25(10), 838–842. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730.2021.1884149>
- Levin-Zamir, D. (2020). Communication, health literacy and a systems approach for mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic: The Case for massive vaccine roll-out in Israel. *Journal of Health Communication*, 25(10), 816–818. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730.2021.1884773>
- Linde, C. (2009). *Working the past: Narrative and institutional memory*. Oxford University Press.
- Lucaites, J. L. & Condit, C. M. (1985). Re-structuring narrative theory: A functional perspective. *Journal of Communication*, 35(4), 90–108. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1985.tb02975.x>
- Matheus, R. & Janssen, M. (2020). A systematic literature study to unravel transparency enabled by open government data: The window theory. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 43(3), 503–534. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2019.1691025>
- Meng, J. & Tench, R. (2022). Strategic communication and the global pandemic: Leading through unprecedented times. *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 16(3), 357–363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2022.2075750>
- Meyer, J. W. & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2), 340–363.
- Moldenæs, T. (2016). Story found or story lost? Storytelling in audiovisual municipality branding. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*, 20(2), 59–76. <https://doi.org/10.58235/sjpa.v20i2.14959>
- Nadesan, M. (2022). Crises narratives defining the COVID-19 pandemic: Expert uncertainties and conspiratorial sensemaking. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642221085893>

- Nyqvist, F. & Lundgren-Henriksson, E.-L. (2023). From servant to survivor: Multimodal public service media narratives and restaurant industry identity during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Organizational Change and Management*, 36(8), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-06-2022-0166>
- Orr, K. & Bennett, M. (2016). Relational leadership, storytelling, and narratives: Practices of local government chief executives. *Public Administration Review*, 77(4), 515–527. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12680>
- Rehnberg, H. S. (2014). *Organisationer berättar: Narrativitet som resurs i strategisk kommunikation* [Doktorsavhandling, Uppsala universitet]. DiVA. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:758669/FULLTEXT02.pdf>
- Riley, A. H., Sangalang, A., Critchlow, E., Brown, N., Mitra, R., & Nesme, B. C. (2021). Entertainment-education campaigns and COVID-19: How three global organizations adapted the health communication strategy for pandemic response and takeaways for the future. *Health Communication*, 36(1), 42–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2020.1847451>
- Rothery, J. & Stenglin, M. (1997). Entertaining and instructing: Exploring experience through story. In F. Christie & J. R. Martin (Eds.), *Genre and institutions: Social processes in the workplace and school* (pp. 231–263). Cassell.
- Salzer-Mörling, M. (2004). Storytelling och varumärken [Storytelling and brands]. In L. Christensen & P. Kempinsky (Eds.), *Att mobilisera för regional tillväxt* [Mobilizing for regional growth] (pp. 145–155). Studentlitteratur.
- Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *The Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 571–610. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258788>
- Suddaby, R. & Greenwood, R. (2005). Rhetorical strategies of legitimacy. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 50(1), 35–67. <https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.2005.50.1.35>
- Svenbro, M. & Wester, M. (2023). Examining legitimacy in government agencies' crisis communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 17(1), 54–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2022.2127358>
- Sveriges Kommunikatörer (2021, April 12). *Kommunens storytelling: "Vi behövde vara brutalt ärliga"* [The municipality's storytelling: 'We needed to be brutally honest']. Sveriges Kommunikatörer [The Swedish Communication Association]. Retrieved December 6, 2023, from <https://sverigeskommunikatorer.se/kunskap/nyheter/kommunens-storytelling-vi-behovde-vara-brutalt-arliga/>
- Thorbjørnsrud, K. & Ytreberg, E. (2020). A human interest economy: The strategic value of turning ordinary people into exemplars in the news media. *Journalism Studies*, 21(8), 1092–1108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1720520>
- Vaara, E., Aranda, A. M., & Etchanchu, H. (2024). Discursive legitimation: An integrative theoretical framework and agenda for future research. *Journal of Management*, 50(6), 2343–2373. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063241230511>
- Vaara, E. & Tienari, J. (2008). A discursive perspective on legitimation strategies in multinational corporations. *The Academy of Management Review*, 33(4), 985–993. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20159457>
- Weber, P. & Grauer, Y. (2019). The effectiveness of social media storytelling in strategic innovation communication: Narrative form matters. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 13(2), 152–166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2019.1589475>
- Whittle, A., Vaara, E., & Maitlis, S. (2023). The role of language in organizational sensemaking: An integrative theoretical framework and an agenda for future research. *Journal of Management*, 49(6), 1807–1840. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063221147295>
- Xu, Z. & Shubo, L. (2024). The discursive construction of organizational legitimacy in higher education: Multimodal discourse analysis in Chinese business schools. *Discourse & Communication*, 18(1), 133–138. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17504813231195971>
- Zappettini, F. & Rezazadah, M. (2024). Communication strategies on Twitter: A critical discourse analysis of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. *International Journal of*

*Strategic Communication*, 18(2), 115–131.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2023.2280555>

Zurman, L. (2021, March 10). Coronaarkivet ska lägga fokus på pandemiåret i Varbergs kommun [The Coronavirus Archive is intended to focus on the pandemic year in Varberg Municipality]. *Hallands Nyheter*. Retrieved February 2, 2026, from <https://www.hn.se/nyheter/varberg/coronaarkivet-ska-l%C3%A4gga-fokus-p%C3%A5-pandemi%C3%A5ret-i-varbergs-kommun-1.42670419>

## Empirical Sources

Nordanstig Municipality (2020, May 5). *Carin Walldin fullmäktiges ordförande och 70+ håller sig hemma* [Carin Walldin Chair of the municipal council, 70+ stays home]. [Youtube video.] Retrieved October 25, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SB5cbzaAmk0>

Nordanstig Municipality (n.d.). *Nordanstigare om corona* [Residents in Nordanstig about corona]. [Information campaign mainly consisting of links to Youtube videos.] Retrieved October 25, 2023, from <https://nordanstig.se/startside/sidor/kommun-och-politik/trygg-och-saker/kris-och-sakerhet/krisberedskap/coronaviruset---Covid-19/nordanstigare-om-corona.html>

Varberg Municipality (2021, April 23). "Som att gå in i ett brinnande hus" ["Like entering a burning building"]. Retrieved October 25, 2023, from <https://varberg.se/coronaarkivet/berattelser/somattgainiettblinnandehus.5.6dc92db2178f0de5899564de.html>

Varberg Municipality (n.d.). *Coronaarkivet* [The Corona Archive]. Retrieved October 25, 2023, from <https://varberg.se/coronaarkivet.4.4b940b3917534efbed8617c5.html>

Uppsala Municipality (2021, April 29). *Jag har haft Covid-19* [I have had Covid-19]. Retrieved October 25, 2023, from <https://www.uppsala.se/kampanjsidor/jag-har-haft-Covid-19/>