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Zoom In Zoom Out on an Impactful Story

Learning Document
Egregor Community Event
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This learning document comes out of the Egregor community events, monthly gatherings where members of the community come together to explore a shared question, exchange experiences, and think collectively. We don't see ourselves as a think tank. We're closer to a lab: a space for experimentation and open reflection on the future of philanthropy, impact, and a just social and ecological transition.

Our learning documents are not meant to set out absolute truths or final conclusions. Each topic we touch on would deserve much deeper exploration. Instead, these pages capture the conversations that took place among people who are connected to the subject in different ways, with their insights, questions, tensions, and open threads. We share them as a starting point for further reflection, and we hope they invite you to continue the conversation with us.

Guest Speakers

Alexis Niki (StoryNova) is a narrative leadership coach and story strategist. Born in New York and of Greek heritage, she has lived most of her life in Europe, and each new culture invited her to reimagine her own story. Her path runs through painting, mind-body teaching, translating, screenwriting, filmmaking and coaching. Along the way she learned to notice patterns, dig for meaning, accompany people through change and tell stories that connect. Her work with individuals and organisations therefore centres on helping people recognise their stories and live them with intention. Her clients range from creative professionals and small businesses to nonprofits and global corporations. She is currently co-authoring a book on story and change for leaders.

Ciku Kimeria is an author, journalist, communications and strategy specialist and adventurer whose work explores the complexity of African stories. She is an Opinion Columnist at Bloomberg and a TEDx speaker, and was recently a Bellagio Center Resident with The Rockefeller Foundation. She is the author of two mystery novels, *Dance of the Monkeys* and *Of Goats and Poisoned Oranges*, and has written for Quartz Africa, African Arguments, OkayAfrica and The Africa Report, among others. She holds a Bachelor of Science from MIT and has advised leading global organisations on communications and strategy. She has also travelled to more than 60 countries, half of them in Africa.

Moderation

Arushi Gupta is a co-founder of Egregor, a natural scientist and intersectional and multidisciplinary researcher She works in the fields of climate change and adaptation, data analysis and visualization,

urbanism, systems thinking, and diversity, equity and inclusion. She has comprehensive experience in project management, participatory planning and communication strategy.

Executive Summary

Impact-driven founders and changemakers are often advised to tell a better story, which usually means refining a pitch deck or rehearsing how the venture began. This session looked beyond that craft to the larger narratives a venture already feeds or pushes against. For organisations that hope to change mindsets as well as practices, understanding these narratives may be as much a strategic question as a communication one.

A lesson that ran through the discussion was that stories tend to work best when the teller is recognisably present in them. Many people hold back because they doubt their story is good enough, although its meaning often becomes clearer in the telling. Specific stories also seemed to reach further than general ones, and what audiences keep is often an impression of who is speaking, which is where a relationship can begin.

Stories are also heard within a context. Platform-specific codes and wider contexts, such as the spread of AI-generated writing, shape how a message lands. The discussion suggested learning about these conditions and then deciding deliberately how to position oneself towards them, when to follow the rules, when to adapt, and when to break them.

Introduction

Alexis proposed distinguishing between three terms that are often used interchangeably. A **story** is the thing that happened, while **storytelling** is the crafting and performance of it. A **narrative**, in turn, is the larger pattern a story taps into, such as belonging, recognition or technological disruption. Any story is likely to touch several narratives at once, whether or not the teller intends it.

Building on this, Ciku emphasised the value of identifying what is distinctive about one's own voice. In her view, this core can stay intact across mediums and audiences, even as the form changes.

> *The first thing everybody thinks is that they don't have a story, or that the story they have isn't good enough, and both are completely false*. **– Alexis Niki**

Part I - Zooming In: What a Story Carries

The belief that one has nothing worth saying came up repeatedly. The session suggested that waiting to fully understand what a story means before telling it may hold people back, since the meaning often becomes clearer along the way.

Detailed, particular stories also seemed to connect with more narratives than general ones. Alexis illustrated this with the story of her first name, a man's name in both France and Greece, which her grandmother refused to use until a glamorous character called Alexis appeared on the television series *Dynasty*. That single anecdote touched on belonging, acceptance, family friction and recognition.

The listener shapes the meaning

A storyteller holds a meaning, no matter whether this meaning was premeditated or discovered while speaking. Listeners, however, filter what they hear through their own experience and identity, so the meaning they keep may differ. The effort still matters, because what the audience gains is a sense of who the storyteller is and how they think. A relationship can therefore begin to form before anyone has responded.

> *I don't think I can make people feel anything. I think I can wake up feelings that are already in them.* **– Alexis Niki**

Part II - Zooming Out: Authenticity, Platform and Format

Authenticity as practice



Credit: Kristoffer Heacox

While rehearsing her TEDx talk, Ciku was told by friends that she did not sound like herself. Without noticing, she had been imitating speakers she admired. Once she delivered the talk in her own rhythm, pausing where Kenyans would naturally pause, she felt she owned it. Authenticity may therefore need deliberate attention during preparation, and knowing a text well can free a speaker to focus on the room. Confidence in one's role seemed to matter too, especially in settings with strong codes such as academia, where speaking in one's normal voice can feel like a risk.

Knowing the codes, and when to break them

For campaigners and advocacy work, adopting an audience's codes can help reach that audience but may also distort the message. Ciku's advice was to learn the codes well and then break them. People who have brought something new to a platform have often used it against type, such as emotionally honest posts on LinkedIn. Once the form is understood, a storyteller can choose consciously whether to meet expectations or play against them, and then test what works.

There is also a practical side. Because algorithms sort content according to the codes it uses, borrowed codes may bring a borrowed audience that is not the one an organisation needs. The dominant style on LinkedIn, for instance, is people talking about themselves, which seems to work but can be hard to reconcile with the aim of building a community. This opened up the wider question of how far founders should adapt to formats they do not feel connected to.

> *Know the rules, and break them in a way that feels comfortable to you*. **- Ciku Kimeria**

Part III – Community Discussion

The narratives already in the room

We all live inside stories we did not write. One approach shared during the session is to identify the narratives that touch one's work and decide, for each, whether to ignore it, handle it lightly, use it as an opening or counter it to stand out as an alternative. When speaking to French audiences, Alexis used to make a brief joke about having a man's name, which took two seconds and addressed something that might otherwise have been a distraction.

AI-generated writing and how it shapes storytelling

AI writing was discussed as a particularly visible tool shaping narratives and storytelling at the moment, given how much published text now reads as well formed but somehow empty. These tools can flatten writing, and the discussion offered some guidance for those who use them anyway. One suggestion was to write a messy first draft by hand, shape it with the tool and finish it by hand again, rewriting anything that starts to sound like the tool. Participants also noted that AI tends to push towards American conventions of drama and resolution, which could quietly damage a story that was never meant to resolve that way.



Views on the longer term differed. Some wondered whether people who have never known anything else will have the distance needed to correct what these tools produce. Others felt it is still early, and Ciku observed that a market usually survives for every format, much as physical books did after e-readers arrived.

Creative energy

Creativity often ebbs and flows. On days when nothing comes, Ciku prefers not to force it and reads widely in the meantime. New input is sometimes necessary to inspire output. Another view was that an empty tank often signals a mind still busy with something else, and capacity might therefore be lacking. For this reason, one suggestion was for organisations to let people walk during working hours, to free the mind and create new space.

One channel, several audiences

Many organisations communicate through a single channel with audiences who expect different things, such as technical professionals and the community organisations they support. One suggestion was to start from the core story, which stays the same, and identify the different meanings it carries. These can then be matched to audiences and spread across posts, for instance by telling the full story once and focusing on one meaning in each post that follows. Readers tend to self-select, and few people read everything an organisation publishes anyway.

Cross-Cutting Insights

Hesitation often has the same source

The belief of having no story and the unease about adopting a platform's codes both seemed to stem from worrying about how one will be received. Recognising this may make it easier to begin.

Meaning is shared between the storyteller and listener

Throughout the session, tellers appeared to have more control over the story than over what it meant to others. What listeners took away consistently included an impression of the person, which may be the more lasting part of the exchange.

Authenticity grows with preparation

Several contributions linked sounding like oneself to rehearsal and to feeling secure in one's role. Knowing the material well seemed to leave speakers more room to be present.

Codes and narratives are worth naming

Platform conventions and wider conditions such as AI shape how a story is heard, whether or not they are addressed. The discussion suggested treating them as choices, deciding in each case whether to work with them or against them.

Specificity can serve several audiences

The idea that a particular story carries many meanings also offered a practical answer for organisations addressing different audiences through one channel. A single core story, broken into its meanings, can be shared in ways that let each audience find its part.

Conclusion

The event moved between the personal level of the relationship between storyteller and listener, and the wider structures, styles, and purposes of narratives and stories. Zooming in showed how much a small, personal story can carry and how many larger patterns it may touch, often beyond the teller's control. Zooming out brought in platforms and the narratives already circulating, which are likely to keep changing. Across both, the discussion suggested that stories tend to land when the person telling them is recognisably present. For impact-driven ventures, this may be an invitation to look beyond the craft of storytelling towards the narratives their work is feeding or fighting.

> *Imagine this dystopian future where AI has taken out all of us, the world is grim and miserable. One thing for sure we'll all be doing is sitting around a fire, telling stories. Great stories will outlive us.* **- Ciku Kimeria**

Want to continue the conversation?

Reach out to our speakers and moderator Alexis Niki (alexis@storynova.com), Ciku Kimeria (shiks.kimeria@gmail.com), and Arushi Gupta (arushi@egregor.net) or Egregor President Guillaume Soto-Mayor (guillaume@egregor.net) and Egregor COO Inés d'Haultfoeuille (ines@egregor.net).

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