

Stories as Viruses

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These posts wander all over the place as you've no doubt noticed. Call it "schizophrenic interest" - I find interesting and remarkably applicable stories in a wide range of subject matter. take, for example, viruses.

Biological viruses are very strange organisms. To this day there is no proof that they are actually alive. They have no organelles, no division of biological labor, no ability to reproduce themselves without help. The way they reproduce is through the cellular equivalent of a "hostile takeover."



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As you can see in the beautiful image captured by Mike Smith at left, viruses are often depicted as a lunar lander-looking thing. There is a head which contains viral DNA, a tail sheath which stabilizes the "lander," and tail fibers that anchor the virus to its bacterial host.

When the virus "lands" on a bacterium, the DNA contained in the head of the virus is squirted into the host cell through a hypodermic needle of sorts that extends through the bottom of the viral tail and pierces the cellular membrane of the host. The DNA "takes over" from the native bacterial DNA, converting the host from an independent bacterium into a virus production facility - hence the hostile takeover. The bacterium begins to produce viruses at an alarming rate until it contains so many that it bursts - freeing more viruses to

infect other bacteria. This one-to-many phenomenon is why viral infections are so potentially dangerous and why we use the term "going viral" when we talk about a story, message, or YouTube video that becomes insanely popular over a short period of time.

At the risk of sounding like a 1960s subversive radical, I have to observe here that good stories work like viruses. They have the potential to "infect" people's thinking with a new idea, causing them to change the way they think and to take on the role of spreading the story themselves, just as a virus takes over the host bacterium for its own purposes. This is why storytelling can be a compelling driver behind culture change in a society - or a company. Cultures, whether corporate, national or spiritual, are supported by storytelling. Want to change the culture? Change the stories. Consider this: When revolutionaries stage a coup, the

first thing they do is seize radio and television stations. In extreme cases, as we have seen in some threatened totalitarian regimes, they try (usually unsuccessfully) to shut down telephone networks, satellite feeds and Internet access. Why? Because pervasive media are the basis of pervasive messaging, which equates to storytelling. All modern protest movements – Occupy Wall Street, the various manifestations of Arab Spring, the growing unrest in China – owe their success to the powerful communications capabilities of social media.

My message is this: the most powerful virus on the planet – the most dangerous, the most impactful – is a relevant idea. When we talk about the fact that a story is the central element of a leadership message because it initiates a conversation about “what could be” rather than “what is,” hopefully you understand that if the story is told well, if the subject matter is relevant to the person you’re talking with, then they will cause the story – and its inner message – to go viral. At that point you have accomplished the very difficult but important task of handing ownership of the story over to the person who will now help you make it real.

Thanks for reading.