

Living in a Box, or a Genie in a Bottle?

Archives as a Backbone for Corporate Storytelling

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Abstract

Corporate storytelling can be an instrument for evidence-based management. This requires that the prevailing stories are built upon verifiable facts. Archival records are perhaps the best source for identifying these. A sound culture for storytelling should be built upon good archives actively used to verify and develop narratives about the company. As an example this article presents a short analysis of multimodal texts from the Norwegian oil company Statoil based on common theories of texts and narratives. We found that archival records from Statoil's first years of activity give evidence that the company has been living up to its value statements. The company's current values; open, courageous, hands-on & caring, thus seem to be well founded in the corporate history. The value statements therefore may be regarded as suitable guiding concepts for robust corporate storytelling.

Keywords: corporate storytelling, archives, narratives, Statoil

1. Introduction

Storytelling has emerged as a phenomenon attracting interest when studying or developing organizations during previous decades. Denning (2012) claims that corporate storytelling must be authentic and rely upon facts. Stories are often developed based on real events inside or outside the organization. When actively using storytelling as a means for governance, or when studying prevailing stories in an enterprise, it is relevant to collect facts about the events on which they are founded. Such facts may be sought in the historical archives of the company.

Still the awareness of the possibilities of using historical archives for contemporary organizational analyses, strategic planning and operational purposes seems low. All too often archives are perceived as useful only as a source of evidence about previous decisions and practice for legal purposes, or as traces of the past solely of interest to historians.

The purpose of this article is to present a theoretical platform for contemporary corporate storytelling based upon documents and archival material. Based on theory, the use of corporate storytelling in a large oil company will be examined as a case study.

2. Material

2.1 Statoil ASA as a Case Study on Corporate Storytelling

Our case is based upon stories relating to the Norwegian company Statoil ASA in connection with its 40th anniversary celebrations in 2012. The story about Statoil is very much the story about how Norway became an oil nation. Today it is a fully integrated oil and gas company with an extensive international portfolio. Its activities are spread over 35 countries, and the company has approximately 23 000 people employed. It is one of the world largest sellers of crude oil.

In June 1972 the Norwegian Parliament decided that state involvement in the petroleum industry should be divided into three areas: political, administrative and commercial (Tønnesen & Hadland 2011). The political part was held by the Ministry of Industry (with a separate Ministry of Petroleum and Energy set up in 1978). It was responsible for shaping the goals for the petroleum sector, as stipulated by the Parliament and Government. The Norwegian

Petroleum Directorate (NPD) was established to take on the administrative role. It would be responsible for resource management and safety regulations within the industry. To manage the Government's commercial interests, The Norwegian State Oil Company, was established. It would later only be known as Statoil, which was the acronym suggested by the board at their meeting the 29 March 1973 (Note 1). The company was formally established on the 18 September 1972, and the headquarters were located in Stavanger.

At present Statoil builds its' activities based upon the following four values: *open, courageous, hands-on, caring*. We will use these four concepts as part of our analytic framework.

This project is designed as a single case study, using Statoil ASA as a longitudinal and critical case to test an established set of theories (Yin 2003). We will challenge and if possible confirm that theories on narratives and storytelling can be useful when analyzing contemporary and historical texts related to values and strategic development in a large company. Yin (2003) claims that the sources of evidence for case studies can be divided into six groups: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts. We will use contemporary documentation and archival records as our sources.

Our contemporary documentation is mainly found on the public website of Statoil ASA (www.statoil.com).

Records of historical value in Statoil are owned by Corporate Communication, and administered by the GBS Document Center. The records are prepared, catalogued and deposited at the Regional State Archives in Stavanger, and the term used is Corporate Historical Archive. All in all, more than 2500 shelf meters of oil and gas records are deposited at the State Archives in Stavanger. Historical records from all the big oil and gas companies operating on the Norwegian continental shelf are represented, as well as subcontractors, labour unions and other organizations. Statoil is by far the largest single contributor with about 1200 shelf meters. Statoil and the Regional State Archives of Stavanger have cooperated since 2006, and last year the contract was extended for another 4 years.

BP has so far not deposited any records. However, in the period 2013-2015, the company will deposit an estimated 200 shelf meters through the project Cultural Heritage Valhall. This is a project between the National Archives in Stavanger, the Norwegian Oil Museum, the Norwegian National Library and BP to document the Valhall field for posterity.

All the archival records are catalogued and made searchable at the website www.arkivportalen.no. Some of the material has also been digitized, although this is just a small amount so far. Statoil has agreed to have the first year of Board Meetings in Statoil (1972-1973) digitized and made open to the public. These documents can be found on our website 'Digital Archives' (<http://www.arkivverket.no/eng/content/view/full/10740>), and gives a unique look into the establishment of a state owned oil company. The Statoil Corporate Historical Archive is large and diverse, and it is difficult to say anything general about it. What is well documented is the time between the establishment of the company in 1972 till mid 80's, the so called pioneer days. Here we can study decision making processes, day to day activities, extraordinary activities and internal procedures.

The archival records can also reveal relations between employer and employees, the company's relations to society, government, local communities and other companies. What we lack is more documentation of social life, both on- and offshore. We hope there are platform logbooks kept somewhere, but have not yet been able to locate more than two. And we know there are a lot of archival records still left in various units of Statoil, for instance with Legal and E&P International. Statoil has also recently sold their downstream branch - which poses new questions and difficulties in retrieving this type of material.

3. Method

3.1 Stories, Narratives and Epics in an Organizational Perspective

Storytelling exists in the intersection between orality and literacy (Ong 1982). It may be regarded as the process of conveying stories. The distinction between a story and a narrative is not an obvious one. In literary theory a narrative is defined as a story, whether told in prose or verse, involving events, characters, and what the characters say and do (Adams & Harpham 2009). A story, then, may be used as a description merely of the sequence of events in time (Adams & Harpham 2009). The story is the raw material from which the plot is constructed (Murfin & Ray 2003). A narrative may then be a story or a telling of a story (Murfin & Ray 2003).

One possible slightly different stance is described by Gabriel (2000) defining stories as emotionally and symbolically charged narratives, which do not present information or facts about events, but they enrich, enhance, and infuse facts with meaning. Another, more neutral definition, is story as the telling of a happening or connected series of happenings, whether true or fictitious (Agnes & Guralnik 2004).

Living stories in organizations show several similarities with traditional epics as they explicitly, or perhaps more often implicitly, narrate the deeds highly valued in the social settings where they are told, even though they do not carry the formal, often archaic, structures characterizing traditional epics. Corporate storytelling thus may be regarded as the tangible representation of an organizational culture actively exposing values, norms and activities through any kind of narratives.

Individual and organizational life stories are established and become meaningful in a similar manner as literary narrative. As individuals we tell about our lives in ways supporting the image we want others to perceive. Those images are not constant. Our narratives change not only with time and place, but even with changing audience and social conditions. We will expect that corporate narratives also show such variations, e.g. the internal narratives are not identical with those presented externally. Filstad and Blåka (2007) claim that morality in such stories is connected to time, place, situation and people, and the recounting of such stories puts morality into play in such a way that we are able to see the premises and the consequences of the actions.

Using storytelling as a strategic means therefore requires at least that all employees should be able to relate to the company values through the narratives that are prevailing in the organization. Especially narratives focusing core values should be regarded as conveyors of the fundamental normative assets of the organization. This is how Helge Lund, president and CEO at Statoil can be interpreted when he says: *Commitment to our values, in words and actions, is not negotiable* (Note 2).

Different authors have pointed out at set of possible effects of corporate storytelling, such as their ability to change perceptions, influence and motivate, create legends, break down barriers, capture the imagination and establish personal connections.

To be effective, the storytelling should live up to certain standards characterized by being authentic and relying upon facts (not merely fiction) (Simmons 2013). Ultimately it comes down to the ability of the management and the employees to discover or recover the narratives and use them from within.

3.2 Multimodal Texts as Narratives

Narratives are often presented as multimodal texts. In literacy research today it is commonly acknowledged that the concept of *text* may include other things than written words composed as sentences and paragraphs. A multimodal text combines two or more semiotic systems and may be presented through different technologies or methods. It is created not only by using words written by hand or in print, but with combinations of different means or modalities, such as live speech, retrieved sound files, still or live pictures, diagrams, maps etc.

An example on corporate storytelling by means of images is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. A drop of oil becomes a shining star. The change of Statoil-logo in 2009

A deep blue drop of oil surrounded by a golden glory tells another story than a shining, clean and pink star. But multimodality often opens up for multiple interpretations, such as presented by the daily newspaper Stavanger Aftenblad on their front page when a trade union is heavily criticizing Statoil's CEO for dividing the company into smaller units, cfr. Figure 2.



Figure 2. An alternative interpretation of the narrative represented by Statoil's logo. (Illustration made by Olav B. Svalland for Stavanger Aftenblad 22 April 2013.)

It is also of interest to note how Statoil use multimodal texts when presenting their values on the website, cfr. Figure 3.



Figure 3. Core values of Statoil presented as multimodal texts

4. Results

'Does the past exist concretely, in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects, where the past is still happening?' 'No.' *'Then where does the past exist, if at all?' 'In records. It is written down.'* *'In records. And-?' 'In the mind. In human memories.'* *'In memory. Very well, then. We, the Party, control all records, and we control all memories. Then we control the past, do we not?'* (Orwell 1948)

4.1 The Past Surviving in Records

The past is changeable, not the underlying facts, but the interpretation of them and thus the following narratives. Minutes of meetings, correspondence, reports, project plans, budgets etc. can be perceived differently. For historians knowledge of methods for critical appraisal of different types of sources is part of their scientific craftsmanship. But for management wanting to use archival records as a basis for strategic development there is no acknowledged method presented.

Corporate storytelling might not need the strict methodological approach that is required by historians. However, as mentioned earlier, the prevailing narratives should be built upon facts. Thus the quality of the archives used is of importance, as well as access to them, and knowledge of practical ways of approaching archival records for strategic purposes.

Here we shall just show how we have used the four Statoil values as a key for searching for evidence in the archives. In short: Do we find evidence that the presented values have been of importance through the life of the company?

Open. Perhaps the most striking evidence of openness is that the company has been willing to deposit the archival records in a public archive, and in addition made the earliest part of it accessible to everyone. Further then, even in documents from the pioneer days we can spot clear evidence on willingness to be open. For example in a log from a major accident on Statfjord A (25 February 1978) we can see the following notice (translated from Norwegian, cfr. Figure 4 (Aftenposten is a major Norwegian newspaper)):

0237 Phone call from Aftenposten. They were preliminary informed by A. Halvorsen regarding present information. (Note 3)

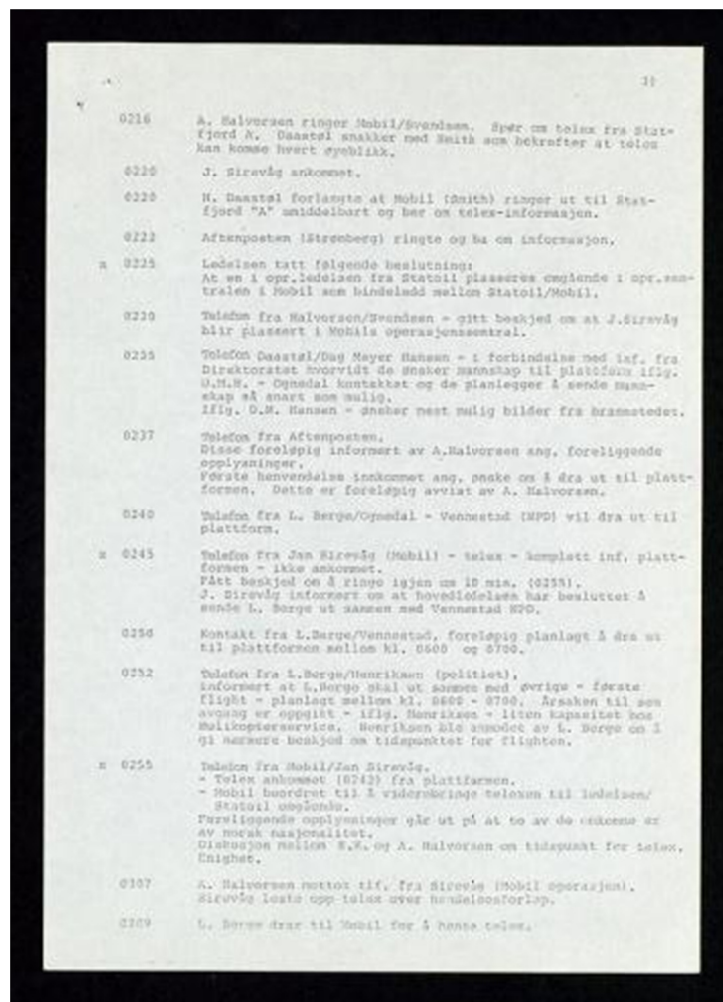


Figure 4. Log from the accident 25 February 1978 (Dm, k L0410)

Courageous. One can easily find stories of great courage in the archives. Deepsea diving, for instance, battling the Norwegian trench, going where no humans have ever been before, are examples that are well documented in the archives. Innovation and technological advances are described on various projects and assignments. The planning, construction, completion and operation of the three Gullfaks platforms was one such achievement that became a reality due to the courage of decision makers and workers on the project.

Hands-on. The material from the pioneer days, and the establishment of the company, is always a good source for storytelling. The visions and decisiveness, dedication and endurance of the top manager are the makings of great stories. Arve Johnsen was the first CEO of Statoil. The company's first book of expenses from 1972 is kept in the archives, Figure 5.

DATE	TEKST	Bilag nr.	Totalt reiseutgifter
21/12	Oslo - Stavr. - Oslo		356,-
"	Dwr. droger		378,-
"	"		381,-
29/12	Oslo - Stavr.		716,60
15/1	Volantur Frankrike	83	1908,- 396,- 73
"	Droger		257,-
"	"		261,-
8/1	Oslo - Stavr. - Oslo		356,-
19/1	Oslo - Stavr. - Oslo		356,-
14/2	Oslo - Stavr. / R - frak	85/9	534,-
28/4	Bill. USA 1/3	182	11599,20
6/4	Oslo - Stavr.	202	356,-
11/6	Oslo - Stavr.		356,-
23/1	Oslo - Stavr.		356,-
5/2	Oslo - Tr. heim		378,-
2/2	Oslo - Stavr.		356,-
12/2	Oslo - Stavr.		356,-
14/2	Dwr. droger		488,50
21/2	Oslo - Stavr.		356,-
1/3	Dwr. droger		400,-
16/3	Oslo - Stavr.		356,-
20/3	Dwr. droger		232,-
6/4	Oslo - droger		35,-
9/4	Dwr. droger		121,-
14/4	Oslo - Stavr.		356,-
17/4	Droger		181,-
23/4	"		35,-
11/5	Oslo - Stavr.		356,-
22/5	Oslo - Stavr.		356,-
25/5	Oslo - Stavr.		356,-

Figure 5. Book of expenses showing travel costs for Arve Johnsen, CEO (Ra 2)

For Johnsen it shows a lot of travelling back and forth from Oslo to Stavanger. We can also see a trip to France, where he discussed the Frigg field with the French company ELF Aquitaine. According to Arve Johnsen, this was the initiative that culminated in Statoil's 50 per cent ownership in the Norpipe pipeline. The pipeline became operational in October 1975. Via the Ekofisk Center for transport of oil and gas, it connected various oil fields in the North Sea with receiving terminals in the United Kingdom and Germany. The book also shows a trip to the United States, whereby reading the memoirs of Arve Johnsen, we found he went to Houston to interview candidates for the position of head of exploration (Johnsen 2008). There were scarcely anyone qualified for that job in Norway at the time. The entries in the book of expenses also indicate that Johnsen spent most of his time at the main office in Stavanger. Thus, as CEO, Arve Johnsen displayed a hands-on approach in shaping and moving the company forward.

Caring. The change of logo in 2009 can be understood as a desire to emphasize this value. The multimodal text in figure 3 shows oil being handled in a clean and controlled environment, giving connotations to health and safety, environmental concern and scientific know-how, presenting Statoil as environmental friendly and caring. It is an image of the company's willingness to act responsibly.

In the previously mentioned accident, five people were killed. The operational log at that time also shows a genuine concern for the families of the deceased:

0545 A.H.H. Svendsen /Mobil phones. Statoil complains that information to the relatives does not function. Svendsen promises that they immediately will take care of this. Mobil shall confirm to Statoil when everybody of the relatives is informed. A.H.H.

5. Conclusion

Evidence-based management has become a popular and upcoming concept in many companies at the beginning of this century. Pfeffer (2008) describes that many organizations in today's world make policies and decisions without

any concern for the evidence that has been accumulated. We claim that corporate storytelling combined with active use of archival records can be conveyors of accumulated evidence and experiences, in raw as well as in interpreted fashion. Pfeffer (2008) further claims that to implement evidence-based management, companies must be committed to make decisions based upon facts, and employees must stop relying on their own judgments and insights.

How does this fit in with storytelling? Corporate narratives may be regarded as institutional judgments, at least when they build upon facts that can be documented and openly discussed. The interpretations that directly or indirectly are part of a narrative may be regarded as explorative ideas and constructions that in the aftermath should be scrutinized and tested. Again according to Pfeffer (2008) companies striving for evidence-based management should view their organizations as unfinished prototypes, and conduct experiments to see what works and what doesn't. Good corporate storytelling then should firstly be founded in facts and secondly be object for continuous criticism at all relevant levels in the organization.

We think that there is no big need to distinguish between a story and a narrative, though it may be sensible for analytical purposes to regard a story as a sequence of facts and a narrative as the interpreted telling of the facts. Sticking to this structure, members of the company management could easily train themselves in an everyday approach to analyzing corporate storytelling. The story ideally could be verified on basis of archived records, and the corporate discussions could concentrate upon the interpretations.

A first step for increasing own competence in critical analysis of corporate texts and corporate storytelling could be to read the minutes of meetings of the top management group and the last annual reports searching for traces of facts or judgments related to the company's core values, more or less like we have done with a few texts from Statoil in this article.

To achieve this situation the company must have a strict and predictable culture for selecting and storing texts of different types. This does not only require that defined procedures are followed. The status of the archives has to be acknowledged by the management and the employees. It is possible to get an indication of the status of the archives when trying to identify it in the organizational chart. Often it is not possible to spot the archives there.

The archives should not only be associated with documents stored in boxes or in electronic files. Rather, they should be regarded as sources nourishing the creativity of the company, not least by triggering explorative storytelling.

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Notes

Note 1. http://arkivverket.no/URN:db_read/db/22486/24/?size=medium&mode=0

Note 2. <http://www.statoil.com/en/About/EthicsValues/Downloads/Our%20values.pdf>

Note 3. http://arkivverket.no/URN:db_read/db/38834/