

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Finding a narrative for our time – the challenge for the world in general and conflict resolvers in particular continued...

Rosemary Howell (University of New South Wales) · Thursday, February 22nd, 2024



This is Part 2 of a two-part blogpost. [Part 1](#) was published in January 2024. This blog explores what narrative means for us in the field of conflict resolution as we navigate an increasingly complex global context.

Where are we now?

The conflict resolution field has also been active in the task of challenging and changing the narrative. A [useful literature review](#) by Cobb, Castel and Sultanli , which explores the implications for Strategic Narrative Practice, has produced important findings about the complexity of the conflicts facing the world and where the narrative might fit in exploring opportunities for conflict resolution.

The research opens with the following dark summary of the global situation:

‘Polarization, violent conflict, fractures, and divisions across and within societies are on the rise globally. Marginalized groups bear the consequences of structural inequalities... compounded by [the] increasing politicization of issues. [R]esentment, anger, and uncertainty can be harnessed by politicians for short-term political interests and for consolidation of power... Social media and technology further drive these trends by amplifying divisive conversations, erasing nuance, complexity, and civility. The result is societies and communities which are at war with each other—conversation, deliberation and discussion become less possible..’

The authors recognise that while the narrative is a tool that can be used to foster collaboration, it

can also be used to foster conflict, and while all storytellers should be valued, not all narratives are equally valuable in terms of building collaborative practices.

Hyperpolarization

This is the state of the world we currently inhabit. Taken from the field of science, hyperpolarization refers to the change in the membrane of a cell to make it more negative. In the context of world conflict, hyperpolarization refers to the changing forces alive in the world which make interactions more negative and conflict more certain.

Heidi and Guy Burgess together with Sandra Kaufman have provided a volume of thoughtful work which applies [conflict resolution insights](#) to hyperpolarized conflicts that are global. They see it leading to four possible futures including:

- Political dysfunction
- Domination and oppression
- Authoritarianism and
- Large-scale civil unrest

All this in a world with increasing susceptibility to hyperpolarization, stimulated by a surprising number of bad faith actors.

As a conflict resolution professional, it feels very bleak.

So what does the world need now?

I am an unashamed music fan and for me it remains the best antidote for depression that I know. You won't be surprised to know that while I was thinking about what would be an important topic for this blogpost, my music was playing in the background and I heard an old song from long ago ...'What the world needs now..' That is what prompted this post and the deep dive into literature and research that followed.

Unsurprisingly, I don't know what the world needs now. However I am hopeful that those of us committed to conflict resolution will find an effective way to engage in some systems thinking. This is a work in progress and finding a way through the conflicts in the world right now which are so frightening is going to require extraordinary collaboration.

However I have started my own list of what might be a good place to begin.

Getting started

1. Seek out multiple stories

Another helpful Ted talk this week presented by [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](#), a Nigerian author and sponsor of cross-generational communication, helped identify a good place to begin. Whilst her focus was exploring the dangers of the pressure to create a single, unified narrative, the emerging message was for us to seek out multiple stories – to choose 'to engage properly with a place and a person' by seeking out and engaging with all the stories.

2. Question the pressure to make binary choices.

When we are prepared to move to an ‘and, and, and’ world we move beyond black and white, win and lose and good and bad. Not only can we seek out multiple stories but we can respect the frame that each of the stories represents – even if we do not agree with them. Every storyteller deserves respect, whether we choose to endorse the story or not.

Be encouraged by Carrie Menkel-Meadow and her recent commentary – ‘When will (we) ever learn?’.

Like me, she turns to music, borrowing from the wonderful Pete Seeger in order to challenge us to do things differently and better as we tackle hyperpolarization. She tells us that ‘Conflict resolution professionals must be optimists.’ Her recipe is insightful and constructive:

1. Interdependence, not win-lose
2. Curiosity and learning to replace debate
3. Be context sensitive and adopt diverse processes
4. Education with a focus on conflict resolution, dispute systems design and decision-making.

Menkel-Meadow tells us that the optimist in her is still hopeful and I am encouraged to be hopeful too.

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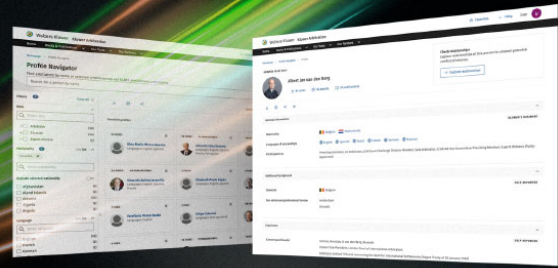
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