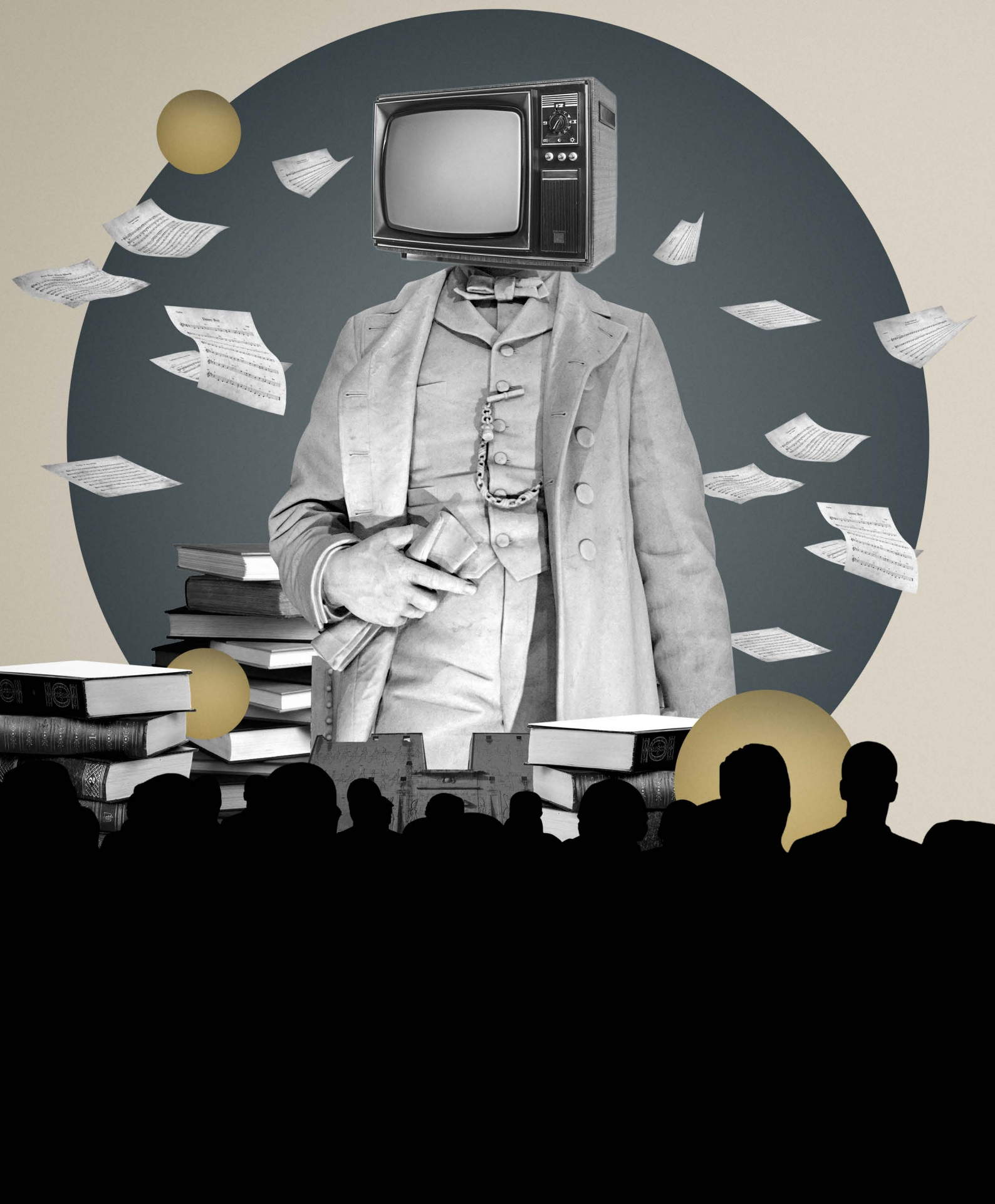


# THE POWER OF A STORY



## DWIGHT WILSON

EUROPEAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES OF UKRAINE

- Email: [dwtracker@gmail.com](mailto:dwtracker@gmail.com)

Dwight Wilson is a Corresponding Member of EUASU. He has spent over a decade working in the private security industry protecting high profile clients and working in high risk areas. He currently works for Valor Force as a security professional. He is an author of two books on human and wildlife tracking, *Following Tracks Vol 1 and 2*, and has contracted with several government agencies as a professional tracker and instructor. Dwight is a Guro of Filipino Martial Arts with Rister International Martial Arts for more than 20 years experience.



### ABSTRACT

What role do stories play in culture? How do stories shape collective identity, values, and behavior? Who are the storytellers, and through which media do narratives circulate and acquire power? This article examines storytelling as a foundational mechanism of cultural formation, communication, and influence. Drawing on historical examples, media theory, and reflective observations, the study explores how stories function across time — from early oral traditions to contemporary mass and digital media — and how they are used in religion, politics, propaganda, and psychological operations. The article argues that stories are not merely cultural artifacts but active forces that shape perception, social cohesion, and conflict.

#### Keywords

stories, storytelling, media, politician, culture, communication

### INTRODUCTION

Culture is commonly defined as the beliefs, customs, and practices of a social group, place, or time (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). From an anthropological perspective, culture encompasses “the combined pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends on the transmission of knowledge to succeeding generations” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Culture may be shaped by geography, language, belief systems, social practices, and religion. Culture is something most people never give much thought to unless they travel outside of the area of their culture.

Subcultures are much smaller groups of people within a larger culture and usually very specific. An example of this would be where I currently live in the United States. The state of Texas has a rich Tex Mex culture. You can see it represented in the people, architecture, celebrations, music, art, dance, customs, food and even the language. Traveling from the east to the west, the piney woods, to the plains, Trans Pecos desert, or mountains, and the south to the north, the gulf coast, swamps to the hill country, you will experience many variations of Texas culture.

Among the many elements that shape culture, communication plays a central role. I have always enjoyed communication, including languages, stories and storytelling. In some cases, misunderstanding between nations arises due to miscommunication and cultural differences. In my experiences with the European Academy of Sciences of Ukraine I have had the pleasure to work with Interpreters which have opened my understanding of different cultures.

As a young soldier, I was not only indoctrinated into a military culture, but I also had the opportunity to live for several years in what was then West Germany and experience a variety of cultures. A skilled interpreter must be able not only to convey the meaning of spoken words, but

also to understand cultural nuances and body language.

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach combining historical analysis, media studies, and reflective autoethnographic observation. Primary sources include historical records of storytelling practices, media theory literature, psychological research on persuasion and propaganda, and documented examples from religion, politics, and military psychological operations. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, encyclopedic references, and media studies analyses.

The methodological framework is exploratory rather than empirical, aiming to synthesize interdisciplinary perspectives on storytelling as a cultural mechanism. Reflective observations drawn from lived experience are used to illustrate broader theoretical points, consistent with qualitative cultural analysis.

## RESULTS

### *History of Storytelling*

A brief history of storytelling is, in essence, a history of humanity on Earth. Long before the development of written languages — and even before fully articulated speech — early humans communicated through gestures and movements as they explored their environment. Over time, grunts and vocalizations evolved into the first rudimentary languages. To this day, some of the oldest known languages, particularly in parts of Africa, incorporate clicks and other distinctive sounds (Traill, n.d.).

In 2002, I had the opportunity to attend a screening of *The Great Dance: A Hunter's Story* (2000), a film depicting the lives of tribal men in the Kalahari Desert, Africa. My interest in the film was informed by my background as a wildlife tracker and hunter. The art and science of tracking are deeply connected to the early human ability to procure meat, representing a critical de-



velopment in the survival of the species — alongside tools and fire. The film illustrates how these hunters communicate through gestures while interpreting tracks and signs, and it depicts them gathered around a fire, recounting the events of the day.

Cave paintings, such as those found in Chauvet Cave, France, dating back approximately 36,000 years, represent some of the earliest records of human storytelling. These images mark the beginnings of visual storytelling long before the advent of written language, depicting scenes of hunting, conflict, and human interaction with the environment. Today, we continue to tell stories through city layouts, architecture, and design. Visual signs surround us constantly, if we are attentive enough to notice them.

The development of writing systems marked a significant shift in storytelling. Cuneiform writing in Mesopotamia around 3300 BCE and Egyptian hieroglyphs shortly thereafter enabled stories, laws, and beliefs to be recorded and transmitted across generations. The invention of alpha-

bets further expanded communicative capacity by linking symbols to sounds, facilitating more precise expression (Students of History, n.d.).

Oral traditions and spoken language are equally central to this history. Homo sapiens are believed to have emerged approximately 230,000 years ago. According to an article from MIT on human language, "Language is both a cognitive system and a communication system," Miyagawa notes. "My guess is that prior to 135,000 years ago, it did start out as a private cognitive system, but relatively quickly that turned into a communications system" (Dizikes, 2025). This suggests that while early language may have initially served individual cognitive purposes, it rapidly evolved into a shared system for communication, laying the foundation for storytelling and cultural transmission.

What I find particularly interesting is the cognitive development involved not only in understanding language, but also in communicating it effectively so that others can comprehend it. Individuals capable of conveying ideas, beliefs,



and traditions within their social groups were able to shape and develop their own cultures. It was through the stories they told and passed down that these cultures were preserved and transmitted across generations.

The oral tradition of storytelling had begun.

“Storytelling is one of humanity’s oldest and most powerful tools. From oral myths and epics to modern novels and digital narratives, storytelling has evolved to reflect culture, society, and human psychology. Understanding its history reveals how language, culture, and creativity shape literature, entertainment, and social values” (Popular Social Science, n.d.).

A federal agent once told me that all human interaction is based on manipulation. I had to research and ask questions about this statement. What I discovered opened my eyes and gave me something to think about. When we use the word *manipulation*, it tends to carry a negative meaning; however, we are often manipulated in various ways by friends, family, and loved ones. It can also take a negative form. Manipulation can be broken down into persuasion or coercion. Take a minute to think about this: “all human interaction is based on some form of manipulation.” Deception, threats of violence, even praise.

### *Media and the Transmission of Stories*

The medium through which a story is conveyed significantly shapes how it is perceived and interpreted. Over time, storytelling has evolved from oral narratives and cave art to manuscripts, print media, broadcast technologies, and digital platforms. Looking at a timeline from the earliest storytellers — early humans — to the present, it becomes clear how quickly information now travels across the globe. Stories have been shared in many forms: from word of mouth to early stone inscriptions, to parchment and scrolls, then newspapers, the telegraph, telephone, radio, television, satellites, the internet, and now smartphones and social media.

“Going viral” refers to information that can be seen by millions of people on social media in a very short period of time. The social media medium allows users to interact, share, and respond, which is why it is essential to be cautious about the information you consume and distribute. Always check the source. Misinformation and disinformation are not only tools used by govern-

ments, but also by individuals or groups who take pleasure in creating chaos and spreading fear. It is essential to verify sources.

As noted, “It (referring to the medium) plays a crucial role in how the message is perceived, interpreted, and understood” (Abbas, 2024). “Modern storytelling increasingly blends technology, interactivity, and multimedia, expanding the ways humans share and experience narratives” (Popular Social Science, n.d.).

For generations, mass media — including newspapers, radio, and television — have been trusted sources of information for the general population. However, history and experience suggest that audiences have, at times, been deceived or manipulated. As a quotation attributed to Edgar Allan Poe on Goodreads warns, “Believe nothing you hear, and only one half that you see” (Goodreads, n.d.).

### *Religion, Politics and the News*

These are the “hot button” topics that are often avoided in the workplace. I have always been advised to keep my opinions to myself. However, to understand the power of stories and skilled storytellers, one need look no further than religious leaders, politicians, or the nightly news.

Politicians, for example, not only promote themselves but also convey a narrative designed to secure elections and maintain influence while in office. In many cases, these narratives may contain only partial truths, with the remainder reflecting opinion; yet they shape public perception, motivate the masses, and can even mobilize a nation into action. Over the years, numerous leaders have delivered speeches that exemplify this power.

Religious leaders operate in a similar manner. Holy texts contain the word of God and tell stories that provide guidance on how to live. These narratives have shaped behavior and influenced culture for generations. Questioning these stories is rare, and the authority of the text itself reinforces its influence. This observation is not a critique of religion or its followers, but rather a reflection on the enduring impact of storytelling.

Similarly, storytellers on the nightly news, even while reading from a teleprompter, are able to capture and maintain audience attention — much like actors in a film or theatrical production. They understand how to engage and relate to viewers. The question, then, becomes: what is the message being conveyed?



During the Cold War era in the United States, the CIA initiated Operation Mockingbird, a program through which elements of the news media and journalists were used to disseminate propaganda (U. S. Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, 1996). Through slogans, headlines, and news reports, public perception was influenced, and, to some extent, the way people understood the world was shaped and controlled.

### *Changing the Story*

If we accept that stories shape culture, then an important question follows: are all stories real and truthful? I was often told that every conspiracy contains a thread of truth. Propaganda represents one level of influence; the next level is the deliberate creation of a narrative.

As one character states in the 2007 film *Shooter*, “The truth is whatever I say it is” (Shooter, 2007). This line, though fictional, reflects a broader concern about the power of narrative control.

Militaries around the world have long used stories to shape the battlespace. This may involve efforts to “win the hearts and minds” of opposing forces, as well as to influence public opinion on the home front. Soldiers working in public affairs and civil affairs units routinely engage in this form of strategic communication. A less frequently discussed dimension of this process is Psychological Operations (PSYOP).

According to the U. S. Army, “PSYOP soldiers build relationships with leaders and civilians around the world to gain trust and influence. The information is meant to help shift beliefs and behaviors in America’s interest, influencing behaviors, beliefs, emotions, motives, and reasoning of governments and civilians using all forms of media, including cyber warfare and deception” (U. S. Army, n.d.). These soldiers directly support military objectives by creating narratives intended to influence both opposition forces and civilian populations.

In a conversation I had with a soldier working in PSYOPs, I asked, “What will you do after your service?” He replied, “Do what most do with my experience — work in politics or advertising.” This was not the answer I expected. During his combat rotations in the War on Terror, he explained that his team’s mission was relatively simple: “Find out what is being said within the battlespace. Create our own talking points to counter the enemy’s narrative. Spread information within the battlespace to shape outcomes in our favor.”

It is important to recognize when one is operating within a psychological operation. There are several key points to consider. How does the story make you feel? Are specific words being used as emotional triggers? Always analyze the source of the information and examine the available evidence. Are the headlines sensationalized? In many cases, headlines have very little to do with the actual content of the story. It is also important to question the timing, intent, and motives behind the narrative. I was always taught to avoid single-factor reasoning and to ask questions. Look for the presence of heroes and villains, and for simplified “good versus evil” dynamics.

**As Chase Hughes argues, “if the opinion that’s coming out needs people to be silenced, it’s a psy op” (Hughes, 2025).**

### DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that storytelling functions as both a cultural foundation and a strategic instrument. Stories unify groups by creating shared meaning, but they can also divide societies when used to manipulate perception or legitimize conflict. The distinction between persuasion and coercion is often blurred, particularly in political and media contexts.

Understanding narrative mechanisms is essential for recognizing when individuals and societies are embedded within psychological operations or propagandistic frameworks. Emotional triggers, simplified moral binaries, sensationalized headlines, and selective framing serve as indicators of narrative manipulation.

### CONCLUSION

Understanding how, when and why stories influence us and our culture should help us in understanding our history and how we interact with each other. Stories are not neutral. They shape culture, influence behavior, and define collective memory. Cultural misunderstanding often arises not from malice but from failure to recognize the narratives that shape perception. Cultural differences bring up difficulties in every aspect of our life even on a global scale. It affects international relations and commerce. Not understanding the culture means not understanding the people. Failing to learn to communicate effectively can lead to conflict. Stories can move people. Stories create cultures. Stories have power especially in the hands of a storyteller.

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