

How narratives shape our reality

By [Mimi Kalinda](#)

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Media, PR and communications all add up to one specific and vital skill: the ability to tell a story in a way that moves people and makes them want to engage with a product, service, concept or idea one is bringing to their attention.



Mimi Kalinda, Group CEO and Co-founder, Africommunications Group.

I believe women's brains are especially well wired to be both great storytellers and listeners. Some researchers argue that we have four times as many connections between the left and right hemispheres of the brain as men- the home of emotional memory, intuition and experience. That's a great thing. We adore stories. And therefore, no wonder, media, PR and communications are sectors that fit many of us like a glove. We thrive in them. We work hard at them. We succeed in them.

So how do we “empower” more women to rise to the top of their profession in the industry? I both challenge and support the idea that this is a reasonable ambition.

We are naturals

I think storytelling comes naturally to most women, but especially to African women. From the cradle, the way we learn about the world, who we are in it, how it has shaped our lineage and what to expect from it, is through the stories we are told. Our grandparents and great-grandparents, in many of our cultures, speak in parables. Stories are an integral part of how I make sense of the world, and I bet that for the majority of us, this is the case.

Who then needs to empower us to do what comes to us so naturally? Because I am a storyteller, words matter a great deal to me. How can we still be using “empowerment” as a defining term for feminism? What does it mean to be empowered? The term presupposes that we are powerless to begin with. It literally means to give power or authority to. To give. Who is giving? I am assuming, the current source of power, the patriarchy. They give, and we politely receive, is that it? Surely not. I think the concept of “empowerment” is well intentioned, don’t get me wrong. But it’s flawed. When I look at my industry, I don’t see a bunch of little women sitting in a corner waiting to be empowered. I see:

1. Women who have the natural ability to be great at what they do because what we do naturally is tell stories. Media, PR and comms were made for us. According to the world PR Report, women already hold approximately 70% of all PR jobs, and 59% of all PR managers are female.
2. We have the numbers. We make up just over half of the population of Africa. We literally have power in numbers already. It’s about how we use it.
3. It’s been proven over and over again that women-run businesses thrive. But only 30% of all global PR agencies are run by women. This gender gap in PR is unnecessary. Companies with the highest representation of women in senior management teams had a higher return on equities and returns to shareholders— by more than a third. This is power.

The question is not how we can be empowered but how we use the power that we already have.

The narratives we buy into

If you follow my work or happened to read anything I’ve written, you will know that I am in love with the idea of “narratives”. How they are shaped, to whose advantage and disadvantage, for what purpose, and the impact they have on the world. I define narratives as the stories we tell ourselves and the world, and the stories the world tells us about who we are, what we’re capable of and what our future looks like.

I have grown to notice that narratives can be dangerous. Often without noticing it, the people whose narratives are told, even as those narratives speak negatively of them, begin to buy and embody those narratives themselves.

There is a narrative that pervades our midst which says women are their own worst enemies because we don’t support other women, especially in the boardroom. I think that narrative is complete nonsense. Most of the major opportunities I have had in my life and career were handed to me by other women. But some of us have bought into that narrative so much that we march into those boardrooms sometimes *expecting* that the women we find there will naturally be against us being in the same room.



It's time for Africa to tell a new story

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The same goes for “empowerment”. When we tell ourselves that we need to be empowered, a concept that, as we’ve seen, means we have no power to begin with and it needs to be given to us, what happens in our brains and in our industry? We begin to have low self-esteem and high levels of self-doubt, and we become stuck, waiting politely for power to be handed to us instead of having the courage to claim it. I think we need to relook at the narrative around “empowerment” and rewire our brains accordingly.

We should own stuff

Once we’ve started deconstructing how we think about empowerment and ourselves, how do we mine and leverage our power as women in media, PR and comms at a practical level? For starters, I think we need to start working towards

ownership. Entrepreneurship is not the solution to everything but it is one of the best solutions to the balance of power we are seeking.

Some of the biggest companies in the world that have emerged over the past two decades have been communication-centric. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter all revolve around storytelling, communication and connecting with others. If we want to increase our power (notice I didn't say empowered) in media, PR and comms, we need to work towards owning more of the platforms and companies that lead the industry, either creating them or acquiring them. This will do two things that I believe will strongly shift the balance of power in the industry:

1. It will fundamentally start to reshape the industry's landscape.
 2. It will fundamentally change the stories that are told about women because whoever holds the mic owns the message.
- We can use these platforms and companies to tell stories about women that are more true, fair and balanced.

We need role models

There's a growing body of research on leadership in the PR industry and a recent survey of 222 public relations executives in the US, suggests that the greatest value of leaders and mentors may lie in their power to "model the way". The younger generation coming up in the industry needs exposure to inspirational female leadership and role models. Let's also offer them opportunities for exposure and growth - groom them and let them lead client accounts and build relationships with stakeholders. Let them experiment with their ideas. Let them disagree with you and innovate on your business model. Give them space to grow.

On a personal note, I deeply relate to what Shonda Rhimes said about the glass ceiling. When *Time* magazine asked her about how she felt about breaking the glass ceiling for women in television, she said, "I do not feel like I came up against obstacles. One, because my parents raised me to believe that there weren't any. If you believe that there are obstacles, that's why there are obstacles. And two, because I came along at exactly the right time in history. That glass ceiling had been cracked just enough so that when I hit it, it shattered."

The glass ceiling has been cracked. Now, in our own companies and in our own ways, we just have to shatter it. We don't need to be empowered. We need to figure out how to use the power we already have to effect change.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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