Perspectives

Interview with Patrizia Barbera

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Telling a story with Patrizia Barbera

PeaceWorx is collaborating with freelance storyteller, creative communication strategist, and former academic advisor for refugees, Patrizia Barbera. After years of working as a journalist and communication specialist, she has set her heart and mind on using all her experience in the media sector to help give good causes a voice, using all the latest possibilities of storytelling and design thinking. Her most recent projects are media literacy and creative writing workshops for children and teenagers. We worked together in the Hack4Refugees Hackathon that Peaceworx organized alongside Techfugees Barcelona

Patrizia Barber, Storyteller

Some people may not know what you mean by storyteller. Could you describe what you do in a summary?

Being creative, coming up with ideas and scenarios that conclude in a story, and writing more generally are my passions.

Being a storyteller can mean many things, but for me it's both a profession as well as my own personal way of seeing and experiencing the world. When I meet new people or go to new places, I can't help but imagine the story behind the scenes. I am curious by nature and always end up asking tons of questions. I guess it's my way of understanding the world.
In the past, this has often led to in-depth conversations and discussions that often ended with the question "Wait... are you by any chance working as a journalist?"
I am. But it's more than that. Being a storyteller means that you see and connect the dots that are hidden in the invisible world behind the words, actions, and things you see, and that you tell the story in a creative way.

You might start with an idea who a person is or what a cause you want to write about could do for other people and then you empathize, research, ask questions, and make sure you see all the sides of the story – be it personal or for a feature or portrait; and then you write and visualize the story in a way in which your reader or viewer is also able to feel and see the points of the story you found so touching and interesting in the first place. If you succeed to make people care and learn something new about a cause or person, then you've done your job right, I think.

So, to sum it up: professionally, I'm a writer and creative mind for the visualization and realization of stories. That could mean I write articles as a journalist, as which I'm trained, or I help organizations build their creative concept or social media and communication strategy.

On a personal level, I love to write and play around with ideas. I just finished my latest project, which I'm still very excited about: My first children's book for highly sensitive children, called "Der kleine Pfau und das große Geheimnis" ("The little peacock and the big secret), which will hopefully come out by the end of this year.

Patrizia at the Hack4Refugees in Barcelona, hosted by Techfugees-Barcelona and co-organized by Peaceworx

Do you see overlaps with other disciplines and sectors?

Yes, absolutely! think there are a lot of overlaps. Storytelling is always connected to the cause and intention behind a project. So let's say for example you are building an app that aims to empower refugees to speak up in the public discussion. If you want to be successful, you will want to make sure you know exactly why you care about this app and who you think your audience and users are and also make sure you know what they really need. So: Don't just imagine what you think refugees need – ask them.

In that sense, storytelling is the first step of a (business) journey because these are questions that influence everything else that comes afterwards – be it the technical programming of a project, the business model, the creative concept, or of course in the end the communication strategy. Good storytelling is about truly and objectively determining what it is you want to do with your project and why other people should care. Of course, there are also overlaps with all the visual arts like graphic design and above that with design thinking in general.

Your experience as an advisor in the Refugee Program is interesting. How did you get involved?

The dynamics of representation, migration, and how it is perceived in societies have always fascinated me. I did my master's thesis on an interdisciplinary research topic about immigration and the depiction of immigrants in literature; but apart from my academic research, I think it's also so intriguing to me because it's part of my personal story.

I wouldn't be here without my Italian grandfather's immigration to Germany. Today, Italians aren't seen as a "problematic" migration group in Germany, but back in the 1970s they sure were. It was a scandal to go out with an Italian, and my mother and a lot of her friends were called out to be associating with "dirty Italians." Of course, my dad faced even harsher discrimination in his daily life. Today, that perception changed into the complete opposite. If you compare stereotypes about migrants from different countries, Italians are perceived as open, friendly, funny, have a good taste for food, and so on. To me, that's amazing and shocking at the same time. It means that the perception of society with respect to a certain group of people can change and is completely random – and most of the time of course also very unfair.

Which brings us to your question and the subject of refugees and the public discussion about them. Storytelling is a powerful tool and, as I said before, it can of course also be misused to build certain storylines and pictures in people's minds about something or somebody.

I think that's what's happening all over Europe and in the world right now – people look for scapegoats to blame their problems on and right-wing parties and opinions get into the public's mind via biased storytelling and fake news (immigrants as bad and dangerous and criminal). As I said, I love storytelling and all the good it can (and has to) do, but I hate it when it's misused and makes people suffer, especially those people who have suffered already and would need help and sympathy the most.

It bothered me so much that I started with personal activism and got trained as a communication coach for schools and teenagers. The workshops I worked on focused both on information about sexism, homophobia, racism, and discrimination as well as on strategies how to talk to people that have completely different (maybe even racist) views than yourself and how to get them to reflect those views. Eventually, I ended up working as an academic advisor for refugees at a German university, where I helped bridging the gap between different cultural university systems and gave advice on everything – from housing to every aspect of daily life in Germany.

Social media and digital strategies can be powerful ways for the communication of causes and stories. In their core idea, these new tools enable users to take part in the conversation. We just also have to learn to be mindful about our devices and social media apps and inform ourselves (and teach children and teenagers) about media literacy, data privacy, and how to deal with the negative sides, like online harassment and fake news. Businesses should have a clear strategy and thought-through content strategy and plan how to realistically be able to reply to answers and discussions.

I'm very interested in the up-and-coming field of Digital Ethics and all the inspiring ways in which programmers work on a more inclusive, diverse, and open source web.

What do you think the power of stories is? Is there a personal experience that connected you to it? Do you have a favorite story for example?

If I had to name my biggest influence in the past years, it would be the collection of stories of one of my favorite upcoming writers, Maria (I'm more than sure you'll hear about her in the future!).

Maria is 8 years old and was 6 at the time when she asked me with big, curious eyes "What are you doing?", while I was scribbling down some thoughts into a notebook on a vacation I went to with her mother – my best friend. When I told her that I am writing a story, she was mesmerized by the realization of how books and stories are made and that *people* make them. I told her: "You can create stories too!" This then was followed by a spontaneous storytelling workshop in the hot Italian summer sun that ended with 13 short stories that she came up with during just one single afternoon, all of them extremely funny, unexpected, and heart-felt. I still have to smile when I think about them. I think children are the best, most imaginative, and free storytellers there could be! The spark in her eyes when I gave her the book that I self-published for her months later inspires me till today – and I learned a hell lot about dinosaurs!

I absolutely fell in love with the idea of storytelling workshops for children, and I'm currently working on ideas and concepts to make that happen soon – and maybe even as a combination of a digital and a print project.