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# Evolution of Strategy Narration and Leadership Work in the Digital Era

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# Introduction

The boom in social media use by current leaders in various occupations has raised concerns in both academic and public discussions (see Fuchs, 2017; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). A recent article on *forbes.com* (2017) forcefully calls for leaders' responsible use of social media. Pointing to the Trump era characterised by frantic tweeting spiced by "alternative facts", the article asks readers to consider how they wish leadership engagement to be manifested. The call for responsibility in social media use by leaders—whether business or political—is timely. The intentional production of alternative facts by the superpowers' political leaders has given rise to an era generally referred to as post-truth (Spicer, 2018).

Organisational leaders are increasingly using social media for organisational purposes, such as gaining competitive advantage (Grafström and Falkman, 2017), and this type of use is attracting increasing numbers of leaders (Abrahamson, 1991; see also Spicer, 2018). Following this trend, corporate leaders are increasingly using digital platforms. According to Gaines-Ross (2015), 80% of the chief executive officers (CEOs) of the 50 largest companies worldwide were engaged online and on social media in 2015, whereas in 2010, only 36% of CEOs were "social". However, the question remains whether such change is or will prove to be beneficial or merely a fad. As noted by Abrahamson (1991) over a quarter of a century ago, managerial practices are not adopted solely because they work but because they are fashionable.

Given the above considerations, the demands for responsible communication by political and business leaders are reasonable. Furthermore, people's understanding of leadership and of its practice is changing due to digitalisation (e.g., Eskola, 2018: 3–7). Theorising on leadership has been transforming from a modern, static leadership theory emphasising the embodied leader-person (e.g., traits) to increased acknowledgement of the discursive resources and the organisational relationships involved in leadership practices (Northouse, 2016; Raelin, 2016; Salmon, 2017). This transformation is epitomised in storytelling literature distinguishing leadership power from an embodied leader-person to a discursive construction (e.g., Auvinen, 2012; Boje et al., 2011; Parry and Hansen, 2007).

Moreover, as the digital environment makes organisational practices more visible to potential masses through employee engagement on social media, a growing interest in discursive and relational aspects of organisational life and stakeholders' expectations for increased organisational transparency have heightened the relevance of storytelling and the use of narratives in leadership work (Auvinen et al., 2018: 95; Denning, 2006). While leadership practices stimulating creativity, such as those aided by artificial intelligence, have entered discussions lately (see Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Eskola, 2018), the age-old challenges of exercising leadership power to accomplish organisational objectives still prevail in the era of digitalisation (e.g., Auvinen et al., 2018). While digitalisation has entered leadership discussions, many leadership practices remain unchanged. Building collaboration and consensus, identifying strengths of individuals and providing meaning and purpose, together with enticing visions, remain necessary for organisational effectiveness in the digital realm (Bennis and Nanus, 2003: iii; Sahay and Baul, 2015).

Leadership influence involving “bullshitting” or manipulative intentions (cf. Auvinen et al, 2013; Spicer, 2018), the symbolism embedded in such leadership and eventually, the meanings constructed in storytelling, have long been studied. As stated by Plato, “those who tell stories also rule the society” (Fisher, 1985: 73). For instance, this idea resonates with the Trumpian tweeting culture and is noticeable in practices that blur the boundary between fact and fiction by storytelling (cf. Salmon, 2017: ix). Such narratives are intentionally constructed to evoke leadership power (e.g., Jameson, 2001; Sintonen and Auvinen, 2009), making them function as symbols of leadership influence, increasingly built in the digital realm (Grafström and Falkman, 2017). Therefore, it is important to gain a better understanding of the nature, representations, and practices of leaders’ use of narratives in an increasingly digitalised communication environment as an integral part of their leadership work.

The idea of post-truth needs elaboration from the narrative standpoint, however. First, a story’s or narrative’s “truthfulness” is problematic: what kinds of traces or evidence should be followed to demonstrate that someone’s story represents lived reality more accurately than other stories? Second, stories and narratives do not solely reflect reality but create it (e.g., Fisher, 1985; Gabriel, 2000; Weick, 2001). Therefore, the question is how to distinguish between fictive and historical elements in the stories encountered by people because of the difference between fictional and historical narration. While historical narration aspires to “reveal” and convey past events based on archival or other evidence, fiction is free of the burden of evidence as it is not referential (Cohn, 1999; Ricoeur, 1984). Hence, alternative facts and other elements of the post-truth era challenge how people interpret truthfulness. This issue makes relevant the question regarding the risk of alternative facts becoming the “new normal” in organisational storytelling. Equally relevant, what are the consequences?

As digitalisation is such a pervasive phenomenon in contemporary societies, the prefix “digital” has become attached to organisational storytelling and leadership, too (Avolio and Kahai, 2003; Dreon et al., 2011; Petry, 2018). Nonetheless, empirical studies at the intersection of digitalisation, leadership and organisational and strategy narration remain scarce. In this study, we are interested in the interplay of digitalisation and leaders’ strategy-related construction of meaning in the narrative form (e.g., Auvinen et al., 2018; Fairhurst, 2011: 496; Jameson, 2001), that is, strategy narration (e.g., Barry and Elmes, 1997; Sintonen and Auvinen, 2009). Our research questions are the following: 1) How has strategy narration in the leadership context transformed in the recent past? 2) What are the implications of digitalisation for strategy narration and leadership work? While we focus on the evolution of strategy narration in the context of the finance industry’s organisation, our occasional use of the closely related and overlapping concept of narrative is unavoidable when dealing with our findings. When using the concept, we follow Gabriel (2004: 4) and take narratives to be characterised by a temporal chain of chronological events or actions that are undertaken by characters.

## Theoretical and conceptual framework

## Leadership in organisations—from homo economicus to homo narrans

An overview of leadership theory reveals an evolution from rationally oriented, static and individual-centred perspectives to more complex views, taking into account relationships and various contexts of leadership and its practice (e.g., Bolman and Deal, 2017).

Traditional leadership approaches typically operate on the basis of scientific-logical reasoning to control the behaviour of homo economicus (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). Among others, Fisher (1985, 1987) has argued that reliance on logical arguments only results in an overly narrow perspective of human rationality.

The symbolic-interpretive paradigm challenged this narrow conception of the human being (Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006) and replaced homo economicus with homo narrans, especially within the narrative paradigm (e.g., Fisher, 1985; MacIntyre, 1981). The narrative paradigm builds on the notion that a leader's fundamental role is to provide compelling visions, inspiring followers to act towards the visions' fulfilment (Parry and Hansen, 2007). Often, this task involves the leader's sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) through the use of narratives (e.g., Salmon, 2017; Sintonen and Auvinen, 2009).

The central claim of the narrative paradigm is that instead of "verifiable facts", narratives are the basis of communication and rationality, informed by the story's fidelity and coherence (Fisher, 1985). Therefore, a narrative's truthfulness is not solely based on the relation between the story and the reality to which it refers; the crucial factor is how the story is construed and what kind of rationality it encompasses (Fisher, 1987). This feature of narratives resonates with the post-truth era; the tellers of the most plausible stories hold enormous power, not only in politics, but also in business (cf. Spicer, 2018).

In terms of leadership power, action and reaction are not results of presumably objective facts and neutral rational consideration (Weick and Browning, 1986) but of persuasive stories that allow the construction of meanings based on which people decide whether to follow or reject the propositions involved. We therefore agree with Parry and Hansen's (2007: 282) proposition that "organizational stories demonstrate leadership as much as any person demonstrates leadership". Rather than following the person (leader), people follow the meanings emerging from the teller's stories.

## Organisational storytelling—from cave paintings to tweets

Oral narration is an age-old human trait transformed by technological advances—from cave paintings, clay slates, papyrus and eventually to paper-based leaflets and books—affecting the transmission of narratives to communicate meanings among organisational members (Edwards and Sienkewicz, 1990; Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory, 2005). The rapid adoption of digital communication technologies is influencing the ways that meanings are constructed and conveyed through narration.

Commentators on digital storytelling vary in their perceptions. For some scholars, digital storytelling is a new genre of its own, breaking away from the confines and the conventions of traditional storytelling, aiming at self-expression, empowerment and

liberation (Hartley and McWilliams, 2009: 4–5). Others take it as just another means of communication based on “new” technology, not having reinvented storytelling as people know it (e.g., Wong, 2015). However, storytelling on digital platforms, such as enterprise social media, affects the functioning of contemporary organisations through digital narration (Leonardi et al., 2013).

The profound change in organisational communication relying on social media relates to its participatory nature. Some scholars argue that corporate communication has been democratised, and communication power has shifted from an organisation’s headquarters to its individual members (Kietzman et al., 2011). Enterprise social media allows individuals to 1) communicate with specific coworkers or broadcast messages to everyone in the organisation; 2) explicitly indicate or implicitly reveal particular coworkers as communication partners; 3) post, edit and sort text and files linked to themselves or others; and 4) view the messages, connections, texts and files communicated, posted, edited and sorted by anyone else in the organisation at a time of their choosing (Leonardi et al., 2013: 2). Furthermore, digital narratives have been posited as simplifying and stressing collaborative processes in which an organisation’s narrative comprises multiple interconnected narratives (Grafström and Falkman, 2017) by individuals possessing “narrative power”—referring to their skills, means and positions to articulate changes in the organisational environment (Laaksonen, 2013). Digital communication has thus changed the organisational narrative architecture by affecting the meaning-creation processes across organisational boundaries, as well as heightened the participation potential of unintended and undesired audiences in the narration (Couldry, 2008).

The advent and the proliferation of social media have heightened the importance of digital storytelling by allowing individuals to shape and share images of themselves and their organisations through narration (Lundby, 2008: 363). Robin (2008) defines digital storytelling as the art of combining narrative with digital media, such as images, sounds and videos, to create a short story. Similarly, Davis (2004: 1) points towards brevity as an integral feature of digital storytelling:

a form of short narrative, usually a personal narrative told in the first person, presented as a short movie for display on a television or computer monitor or projected onto a screen.

Nonetheless, Lundby (2014) frames digital storytelling as a social and a cultural activity that becomes “mediatized” as it turns digital—just as it would regardless of media type. However, the digital setting creates certain traits, such as the multimodal capacity of online storytelling. In addition to multimodality, stories in the digital space are often stored, allowing them to be searched afterwards (Lundby, 2014: 21). These characteristics mean that social media is blurring the boundaries between presence and absence, time and space, control and freedom, personal and mass communication, and private and public, as well as virtual and real (Baym and Boyd, 2012), all affecting the process of creating meanings through storytelling.

Digital storytelling has lately gained increased interest because it represents a novel distribution of a scarce resource—the ability to represent the world around people—by utilising social media platforms (Couldry, 2008). The fact that anyone with basic

knowledge and tools can effortlessly combine various formats, whether text, imagery or sound, is unique to digital storytelling. Only a smartphone is needed to participate in digital storytelling as an author or an audience member, making the activity a form of self-expression that is accessible to the far larger public than any traditional media may have been.

The ease of creating, revising and moulding content in the digital realm also opens the door for post-truth debates. As organisational reality and leadership power are constructed in increasingly plurivocal storytelling processes (Boje, 2008) on digital platforms, they offer unprecedented opportunities—even encouragement—for creating subjective “truths” or alternative facts. Since digital storytelling allows reach, immediacy and new forms of persuasion and influence, this makes assessing truthfulness challenging.

## Research site, strategy and data

Our empirical data originate from the largest Finnish-owned financial organisation, the OP-Pohjola Group Central Cooperative (OP Group), along with individual cooperative banks that belong to the group. The OP Group (2018) employs approximately 12,300 people and has total assets amounting to €1,372 million.

Our research strategy is qualitative. We apply qualitative thematic analysis (e.g., Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008) to the data, which were collected through semi-structured thematic interviews. The interviews (179 in total) were conducted between 2005 and 2018 as part of an ongoing research project dealing with strategising (see Whittington, 1996), leadership, organisational change and effects of digitalisation on our focal organisation.

Due to our interest on the evolution of strategy narration, the period under scrutiny should be sufficiently long. This was made possible by our full access to the organisation since 2005. While the events in the mid-1990s were discussed with the then serving CEO and his followers as part of the data collection in early 2005, since then, the research team has been able to observe the events unfold in real time, making our approach longitudinal and rich in data.

During our earlier study on strategising in the organisation (Auvinen et al., 2018; Sajasalo et al., 2016), we realised that not only the processes related to strategising, but also the top management’s leadership practices related to strategy narration evolved. To access in-depth information regarding our phenomenon of interest, we applied purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) and selected 30 interviews involving CEOs/presidents and their followers, who discussed strategy narration and leadership, for a more detailed analysis. The interviews lasted for 30–60 minutes each, with a total of approximately 400 pages of transcripts. The data mainly consisted of interviews with the top management (17), augmented by those with middle managers and experts (13). In addition to the interview data, our analysis was supported by media texts (news, public presentations, discussions on social media and intranet discussions).

In the contexts of the finance industry and the focal organisation, it is particularly interesting that during the timeframe covered by our study, the industry had to deal with the fallout of two massive recessions and most recently, the building momentum of digitalisation. These instances were notable turning points that the focal organisation, with other industry incumbents, had to tackle and the responses took place by means of strategic realignments, implemented through leadership work involving strategy narration.

Our analysis is organised chronologically. The data have been organised according to their temporal order to identify the changes in the means and the technologies involved in strategy narration and consequently, to answer our research questions. The analysis process followed the idea of Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative analysis; the researchers constructed episodes from a large data pool (cf. Lämsä et al., 2018), covering information on strategising over three decades, from the mid-1990s to 2018. In the following sections, we present four episodes—each revolving around the means and the mode of strategy narration—forming a chronological continuum on which our analysis is built.

## Findings—evolution of strategy narration

### Episode 1: “Mt. Hope” —narrating strategic goal for recovery after crisis

Our first episode occurred in the mid-1990s, in the aftermath of the major banking crisis of the late 1980s. The prevailing mode of communicating strategy throughout the organisation at the time was to set up a dedicated strategy day for all personnel. The event took place at a heralded national monument, the Finlandia Hall in Helsinki, designed by the well-known architect, Alvar Aalto. Practically every member of the organisation's top and middle management attended the event and was expected to do so.

The setting was clearly chosen to stress the importance of the gathering and the status of both the strategy and the main performer (the CEO). The CEO explained the situation surrounding strategy narration and its delivery as follows:

The strategy day was set up in the fall of 1996. At that time, the bank was still in the making. Over a hundred people were involved with the project. While narrating the strategy, I crafted an illustration of our vision, resembling a triangular shape of a mountain with slopes and plateaus and the sun shining atop. I then drew our employees on the mountain with their backpacks, working their way towards the summit, all of them connected by a safety rope, which they held onto. During the strategy day, our slogan became “We will do it”.

The symbolic “Mt. Hope”, sketched by the CEO, visualised the challenges of the pressing banking crisis on the bank's personnel. The CEO constructed it to represent the situation at hand—the organisation's survival. The steep mountain symbolised the threat of a possibly fatal fall, against which the climbers balanced themselves on the edge to hold onto their jobs. The sun above signified the glimpses of hope related to the future, the rope joining the climbers together symbolised their will power and combined effort, while the

backpacks stood for organisational support in coping with change. In this case, the expression about a picture being worth a thousand words appears fitting.

Mt. Hope, together with strategy narration, offered the followers a means of understanding the gravity of the prevalent situation and allowed them the opportunity to place themselves in the emerging narrative as the lead characters (mountaineers), while reflecting the future outlook from their personal viewpoints. From the leadership perspective, this kind of organisational narrative is interesting in aptly demonstrating how a strategy-related meaning constructed by a leader may assume a rather autonomous existence in the organisation and start shaping behaviour without the leader's active involvement.

Besides gaining narrative coherence, the symbolic Mt. Hope materialised within the organisation as the followers actively engaged in working with the meanings they attached to Mt. Hope. Mt. Hope ended up assuming "a life of its own" as an artefact within the organisation. It appeared in presentation materials; it was printed as a "catechism" office poster, reminding the personnel of the moral of the narrative: surviving together by defeating the crisis. Subsequently, it even inspired triangle-shaped pastries served at the CEO's anniversary party, making the metaphorical Mt. Hope a shared positive organisational symbol.

The followers had the liberty of utilising the Mt. Hope narrative to their liking. Nonetheless, since its meaning and inherent symbolism had largely solidified at the time of its narration, it seemed that engagement in meaning construction, interactive participation and involvement (cf. Weick and Browning, 1986) in narration remained rather superficial. However, the data indicated that the organisation's members clearly took ownership of the core ideas symbolised by Mt. Hope, which held substantive meaning for them.

Episode 2: "The Leading Bank in 2025"—narrating the gospel of growth

Our second episode unfolded in the early 2010s. The newly appointed CEO implemented a new strategy with an ambitious growth objective with the dominant theme of the "leading bank in 2025". At the same time, the CEO took centre stage in strategy narration. However, in contrast to his predecessor, the new CEO, together with an executive vice president (EVP), took the strategy roadshow to every single branch (35 in total) and narrated it to the followers to maintain coherence. While opposite to the previous approach, which mobilised the followers to a single event, the roadshow also engaged every member of the organisation in real time, with a personal interaction in a shared physical space. Instead of one physical space, there were many this time.

The strategic goal—becoming the leading bank in the metropolitan region in 2025—was outlined in the strategy narration of both the CEO and the EVP, backed by a visual illustration of the OP Group's market share surpassing that of its main competitor in 2025. This appeared as an almost inevitable and self-evident image throughout the organisation, representing a firm belief in the future unfolding as depicted by the leaders. The EVP

described the content and the mode of the strategy narration, simultaneously sketching on a flipchart:

My story took about 30 minutes and resulted in an illustrative graph. At the bottom [of a flipchart] is "2025", which has been so affixed on people's minds over the past two years that mentioning 2025 is enough; everybody knows the rest of the story. In the middle, I wrote the words "commission earnings". At the top, I placed "Loyalty Customer" ... the essence of the story boils down to [20]25 being the strategic goal of HOP Bank. It has not changed a bit ... I always begin my story with the growth objective, and I end with it.

In terms of leadership work, the strategy narration focusing on the goal of becoming the leading bank and the centrality of one numerical expression was clearly an effort of sensegiving by the leaders (cf. Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). Thus, the leaders highlighted 2025 as the only trigger required for the followers' sensemaking to concretise the goal and the path to it, without needing to delve into details. The illustration, accompanied with the leaders' narration, served the purpose of emplotting the strategy by outlining the actors involved in its execution (the followers), the temporal dimension (2025) and the outcome (leading bank), all aimed at supporting the sought-after sensemaking within the organisation to get things done (Thurlow, 2010).

In episode 2, the leaders' strategy narration involved some traditional devices of organisational communication, specifically on-site live oral presentations combined with "low-tech" flipcharts. Digital devices, such as PowerPoint slideshows, were also used. They contained highly recognisable and well-remembered visual elements for the organisation's members. A market share graph showing the OP Group surpassing the main competitor in 2025 signified the growth effort, and the site (the Helsinki metropolitan region) was represented by the majestic silhouette of the Helsinki Cathedral used as the opening slide.

Episode 3: The "Diversified Digital Player"—a narrative touchdown or fumble?

In 2016, the OP Group revised its strategy, and the aim was set for the organisation to "gradually change from a plain financial services provider to a diversified services company of the digital era with a strong financial services expertise" (OP Group, 2018). The revised orientation may be attributed to several forceful trends converging in the business environment at that time. Deregulation allowed the entry to the industry by both global technology giants (e.g., Apple, Alibaba, Google, Amazon) and financial technology startups, which was generally perceived to result in a major disruption (see, e.g., Sajasalo et al., 2016). The OP Group's President and Group Executive Chair summarised his apprehensions related to the future:

I cannot but think, what the heck do we need banks in the future for ... not a damn thing. Our basis of existence is being challenged as we speak. As the OP brand is so strong and appealing, we need to figure out something, some form of activity underneath it. The digital world changes at such a pace that there is a pressing need to converse with the personnel [about] what the implications are.

The rationale for the OP Group's transformation into "a diversified services company of the digital era" reflects the concerns related to future challenges, as well as leadership work in terms of constructing meanings and providing a new direction for the strategy work of the organisation through several new leads. For instance, the revised strategy outlined branching out to health and wellbeing services (private hospitals), mobility services (leasing of electric cars and car sharing), housing-related services (packaged services beyond loans) and management of finances (new services/technology platforms/applications for ubiquitous transaction management), each raising the digitalisation of service offerings as the key target. To allow the outlined transformation led by digitalisation, the organisation announced a €2 billion investment programme in service development and technology infrastructure to be carried out by 2020.

The digitalisation-led transformation marked a major shift in leadership work as well, in terms of communicating the strategy to the followers. For instance, the CEO of a regional bank (a member of the OP Group), apparently inspired by the changing format of the yearly strategy information event, resorted to mainly digital media in his strategy presentation to reach his followers. This marked a clear departure from the previously utilised approaches; the expectation was no longer the followers' physical presence in a collective event or the top management "bringing" the strategy to the rest of the organisation by arranging a roadshow to narrate the strategy in a live face-to-face interaction. This time, only a minority of the followers attended the actual event; the others participated by watching a live stream at their workstations or home offices, while the rest watched it afterwards as a webcast, at a time of their choosing.

A senior vice president (SVP) of the same regional bank further described the transformation of the nature of work in the bank and reflected on how it had affected leadership:

Having branches all around the region means that several weeks may pass by without the leader being physically present. We keep in touch over the intranet, digitally. We now arrange performance appraisals over Skype, too. In general, due to digitalisation, the leader is no longer physically present to analyse and solve your issues. In an expert organisation, you need to manage your own work. Over the past couple of years, folks have become significantly more independent in their work.

The SVP further explained how technology had transformed the ways that information needs were fulfilled and how communication and collaboration within the organisation occurred. He clearly believed that the intranet and the embedded chat forums were beneficial for the organisation and leadership by allowing interactive collaboration:

The intranet is a mind-blowingly good medium; all you need is to check the intranet newsfeed twice a day instead of the former 25 mailing lists to stay informed. Major news now appears on the start page; branch-related important communication appears there, too .... It promotes dialogue and encourages active commenting on issues. Just as we speak, someone posted a question related to branch-related information, to which an expert in the field posted a clarifying reply, thereby making it clear to everyone at once.

Thus, digitalisation had clearly entered organisational processes and affected how work was organised and supervised, as well as how leadership and strategy work were carried out. Contrary to the previous episodes, however, the strategy discourse here did not employ typical elements of narration, such as characters and clear-cut emplotted organisational strategic goals. This approach was due to the top management favouring the idea of digital technology-assisted strategy communication by promoting dialogue. Instead of the traditional (embodied) leader-centred orientation, leadership was perceived as better and more efficiently performed through digital channels because the senior executives believed that it allowed better reach of the intended strategy-related sensegiving.

The trust in digital technology-assisted communication was emphasised by the president himself, who stated, “If you [the leader] want to be present in social media, you need to do that wholeheartedly” (OP Group, 2017). The leading Finnish news service, Iltalehti (2017) reported a fitting example of the president’s wholehearted social media presence on Twitter: “The President [of the OP Group] took customer service in his own hands to save a little boy’s Christmas—‘Please text me your number’”. The news story provided the following subtext: a customer had tweeted about her disappointing service encounter with the bank to the OP Group’s official account. The president had personally replied with apologies, and having received the disappointed customer’s phone number, called her in person to sort out the issue.

This widely publicised story is just one example of the president’s visibility on social media, boosting his status as one of the most followed Finnish leaders on Twitter and positively reflecting on the organisation in the public opinion. The instance is also a fitting example of leaders’ use of social media to gain competitive advantage for their organisations (cf. Grafström and Falkman, 2017). While the incident was a media triumph for the OP Group and its president, internally, it raised some bewilderment; as a senior manager commented, “Is the President in the right place and engaged in the right tasks if he is handling a customer service advisor’s duties?” Furthermore, some members of the organisation clearly thought that as the president had become active and highly visible on social media to various external stakeholders, he had simultaneously “vanished into the depths of social media and never came back.” A senior expert commented on the situation:

I’m not sure what came over him. He just shot off to orbit with tweets ... a while ago we had a group of college students over. The president told us in a later event that it had been his best day in the office ever—he felt invigorated afterwards, bursting with ideas by having tweeted with them ... I couldn’t help thinking, Hello..! Were you sometime around to hear what we think, you might find out that there are legions of know-how in the organisation, too.

It is difficult to determine whether or not the president’s fading out was a conscious choice, following Kellerman’s (2012: 43) suggestion that leaders would need to “recede from [the] foreground into [the] background”, instead of acting as an uncontested authority. However, as the president apparently did the former action, from the point of view of his followers, the coherence of the narrative also suffered. While fascinated with the idea and the prospect of their organisation transforming into a diversified services

company of the digital era, the followers were uncertain about whether the leading bank strategy remained valid or had been replaced with the revised strategy aimed at diversification. In addition to the apparent confusion regarding the goal to pursue, a leadership vacuum emerged, especially among some senior professionals, due to the leader immersing himself in social media.

From the leadership work perspective, digital technology-assisted strategy communication offered a new means of participation and engagement in strategy work. A live chat enabled viewers to ask questions and challenge the leader virtually, encouraging more active follower participation than attendance in the actual event. Furthermore, as the event was recorded, even those who were unable to participate (in person or online) did not have to rely on hearsay alone but could see and hear for themselves what had occurred. Based on this information, they were able to draw their own conclusions and assess the “truthfulness” of the strategy narration, without others providing their interpretations of the “facts”. Thus, the recording provided a collective, virtual organisational memory of the ongoing strategising to which anyone could refer for verification or recollection retrospectively. However, the strategy narration utilising a digital platform appeared less memorable, lacking an emotional appeal due to the missing embodied narrator.

Episode 4: “Narrating Refocus”—back the diversification truck up!

Episode 4 marked a notable leadership-related change for the organisation; the long-standing president stepped down due to retirement and was succeeded by a new President and Group Executive Chair in early 2018.

When the new president was taking over, confusion regarding the direction of the organisation remained. However, an apparent belief in the organisation being firmly on track towards becoming—if not on the verge of being—a diversified services company of the digital era prevailed among followers. Two wealth management professionals testified to this belief, with some slight hesitance, as shown in the following excerpt:

We are this kind of diversified service company ... we create new business lines ... new hospitals are now ready, you see electric cars and car-sharing vehicles in traffic. It's hard to tell how big these businesses are; I mean, no one has presented us with numbers or anything, but there is a lot of buzz about how much people are adopting mobile services and such. But what's the share of health or mobility services? Someone must know. We don't.

While the sentiments were that the organisation was close to being the aspired-for diversified services company and that the digitalisation hype appeared to have been adopted from top to bottom, the actual extent of diversification, as well as its concrete direction, had become blurred. For the organisational members, anything related to “digital” appeared to be a worthwhile endeavour to pursue because concrete goals and milestones were missing.

As the new president took office, he first addressed the whole organisation, calling for a sharper focus on renewal. His strategy-related sensegiving centred on two themes: the

paramount importance of the customer and of the core business. He stressed both issues in his video address to the followers, accompanied by an organisation-wide e-mail, stating that all activities need to offer perceptible and concrete benefits for each member/owner (see Groeneveld, 2016) of the cooperative, in line with the cooperative mission. This meant that all services should be designed based on the customers' needs or the problems they faced.

The new president further reminded the followers of the need to crystallise the organisation's strategic focus and to improve its core business performance. He also stressed that well into the foreseeable future, the vast majority of the OP Group's revenues would come from financial services—banking, non-life insurance and wealth management. To further emphasise his point, he stated in an interview with the most widely circulated Finnish newspaper, "The core business generates 99.9 percent of the group's revenue" (Helsingin Sanomat, 2018). Overall, the strategy narration of the new president's initial address may be viewed as his attempt to dampen the rampant digitalisation hype that had emerged, both in public and within the organisation, and instil coherence in the organisational discourse.

While the new president underscored the need to clarify the organisation's strategic focus and put matters in proper perspective regarding the extent of targeted or attained diversification, he nevertheless left the door open for future expansion. Such decisions would need to be closely aligned with the group's core business—financial services. Additionally, while the refocus strategy narration centring on the need for crystallisation of focus was construed in the news media as breaking away from the former president's legacy, likely nullifying it and leading to divestitures, the new president categorically denied such intentions: "I have never said anything of the sort". Further stressing the need for new businesses to closely connect with the core business, he stated, "healthcare does so" by connecting with insurance; likewise, mobility services "connect with financing and insurance" (Helsingin Sanomat, 2018).

To elaborate on our findings related to episode 4, it offers a thought-provoking illustration of how ambivalence may work to contrive "alternative facts" in the organisational discourse through competing interpretations and reference points, without anyone's deliberate intention. Besides the refocus narrative initiated by the new president, two alternative strategy narratives containing organisational goals coexisted in episode 4. First, the diversification strategy narrative initiated by the former president (episode 3) still powerfully appealed to the followers. Second, the "leading bank" growth narrative (episode 2) lingered within the organisation. As a result, three alternative strategy narratives cohabited the organisational discourse, feeding into the apparent confusion regarding which one to follow.

The alternative strategy narratives' coexistence may be attributed to the change of presidents, as well as the differences in their strategy narrations. As the main architect behind the digitalisation-driven diversification strategy, the former president emphasised the importance of quick decisive steps towards digitalisation, which formed the core agenda of his leadership work. In the process of fulfilling the digitalisation vision, he

immersed himself in the digital realm and social media by adopting a strong digital presence, to the extent that from his followers' perspective, his leadership seemed to dilute and even disappear. In terms of leadership work and presence, the new president's entry may be perceived as the return of both the leader and leadership. However, this change occurred mostly virtually; strategy narration relied on digital platforms as he took charge and outlined a six-point task list to be addressed by the organisation to restore its focus after the digitalisation and diversification hype.

To summarise, besides meaning construction, the dissolution of emerging juxtapositions related to organisational goals formed a fundamental part of leadership work. The coexistence of diversification (episode 3) and focus narratives (episode 4) caused a lack of both coherence and concreteness in goal setting among the followers, eventually leading to confusion. Moreover, while the coexisting growth-oriented narrative (episode 2) resulted in a lack of coherence, it brought about a seductive notion of concreteness by offering a fixed timespan. Thus, the strategy narratives in episodes 2 and 3 respectively supported and resisted the new president's goal setting.

## Discussion and conclusions

We have scrutinised the evolution of strategy narration in the leadership context through four episodes revolving around the internal strategy communication by the top management of our focal organisation. The global digitalisation trend also led the OP Group to adopt digital platforms as part of the leadership work in its various businesses, similar to many incumbents of the finance industry (see Sajasalo et al., 2016). Furthermore, similar to many of the leading companies worldwide, in our focal organisation, digital and social media emerged as everyday forums for internal leadership communication (e.g., Gaines-Ross, 2015). This led to the narratives' increasing distance from the narrators, thus breaking away from the age-old oral storytelling tradition marked by the corporeal narrator, the story and the audience, as well as the time and the place being intimately tied together (cf. Edwards and Sienkewicz, 1990).

Episodes 1 and 2 represent highly leader-centred strategy narration; the CEO occupied a privileged position in setting the tone and the agenda for strategising within the organisation. While the rest of the organisation's members were involved in strategy narration and sensemaking about the organisation's situation (cf. Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick, 2001), their role could be characterised as a "proximate audience" because their leader summoned them to hear about the outlook for the organisation. Thus, while physically present in the situated narration by the embodied leader, the followers were passive in situ despite being granted some co-authorship or reuse privileges (as in episode 1).

Episode 3 represents a change in orientation. The strategy narration shifted away from the leader-centred orientation, to the point of both leader and narration fading into the background. Additionally, the intended meanings of strategy narration assumed unwelcomed undertones in both internal and public retelling, which Couldry (2008) warns

as the risks of digital storytelling. Digital technology-assisted strategy narration overtook synchronous face-to-face narration, both internally and externally in episode 3, making social media-based asynchronous strategy narration widely available for various audiences, with infinite opportunities to interpret, reinterpret and republicise it or even distort its meanings. As noted, retelling may easily transform an intended meaning into an alternative fact, either intentionally or unintentionally, as shown in the transition from episode 3 to episode 4. The need to straighten out the uncontrollably evolved storyline by the new president marked the return to a more leader-centred orientation in both strategy narration to internal stakeholders and communication to various external stakeholders. Moreover, the pressure on the new leader to make his mark on the organisation set (at least partly) the tone and the agenda of strategy narration.

Thus, episodes 1 and 2, on one hand, and 3 and 4, on the other hand, formed two epochs with their own distinguishing features. The strategy narration of episodes 1 and 2 may be labelled as “analogue”; the leader physically came with his followers in real time to attend events that were specifically arranged to communicate the organisation’s strategic goals and the path towards them. The leader-centred approach was further manifested by the CEO as the active narrator, with the followers merely being the passive audience, even if the leader adopted a servant role in episode 2. Episode 3 represented an epoch change in the strategy narration turning into a digital format. Due to the top management’s digitalisation fascination, the strategy narration was transferred to the digital realm and detached from the embodied leader, turning into what could best be characterised as “leader-distanced” asynchronous digital narration (cf. Avolio and Kahai, 2003; Parry and Hansen, 2007). This transformation was due to the shift of practically all strategy narrations to digital communication channels and the top management’s reliance on digital platforms to allow effective and efficient meaning construction.

However, as demonstrated by our findings, digital narration did not result in effective meaning construction but in a leadership vacuum and confusion as the leader and his leadership detached from the corporeal organisational reality. Although episode 4 brought back the leader and leadership, both were only virtually manifested on digital platforms for the majority of the followers, similar to episode 3. Thus, episodes 3 and 4 together formed an epoch, sharing the belief in the efficiency of digital narration as means of meaning construction and a feature of detachment between the narrative and the narrator. In effect, the leader was reduced to a talking head although an organisationally significant one.

From an agential perspective on the strategy narratives, episode 1 contained a clear idea about organisational members as central actors in a survival narrative, while the strategy narrative in episode 2 depicted organisational members as creators of a glorious destiny. Both narratives provided at least an impression of concreteness with stated milestones, allowing tracking of the progress towards the goal. In contrast, the strategy narrative in episode 3 lacked agency in terms of personal involvement (no explicit role assigned for organisational members) and concreteness in terms of the timespan (none outlined), resulting in confusion. The strategy narrative in episode 4 brought back the central actors—the members of the traditional core business—and assigned them a strong agency

as the growth champions. Their role was reinstated by the strategy narrative that demanded a sharp focus on the core business after a period of rampant digitalisation hype, having taken over both external and internal discourse regarding the future of the finance industry.

Figure 1 condenses our main findings about the evolution of strategy narration in the OP Group.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

To discuss the implications of digitalisation for leadership work, we outline a few lessons learned based on the practices adopted by our focal organisation. The analogue to digital epoch change suggests the emergence of digital leadership storytelling involving leadership work that utilises digital technology-assisted platforms (cf. Couldry, 2008; Leonardi et al., 2013) for narrative meaning construction to influence the followers' sensemaking, similar to Gioia and Chittipeddi's (1991) framework in their study on strategy-related sensegiving.

Leadership storytelling—analogue or digital—is portrayed in the literature as a particular form of leadership work (e.g., Harris and Barnes, 2006). For instance, Denning (2006) considers leaders' narratives as central in addressing many of the key leadership challenges, including articulating risks and opportunities, communicating strategic plans and helping in dilemma resolution. Likewise, the leaders of our study aspired to bring coherence to the emerging meanings of organisational discourse related to strategy, as well as to steer organisational behaviour towards desired goals through strategy-related storytelling, increasingly relying on digital platforms.

In their work on e-leadership, Avolio and Kahai (2003) argue that a quiet revolution has occurred, marked by human interactions mediated through information technology. E-leadership involves the utilisation of digital platforms, such as the intranet, in leadership work, claimed to promote participation in dialogue and decision making by followers through digital platforms in ways that traditional hierarchies do not permit (see Avolio and Kahai, 2003; Avolio et al., 2014). While several features of e-leadership emerged in our focal organisation, with digital platforms as the primary channels for organisational communication, some salient qualities of e-leadership were lacking. First, neither the strategy-related leadership storytelling nor the strategy narratives enabled an initiative role for the followers in strategy work. Second, the followers did not possess any meaningful decision-making power related to strategy work. Therefore, while e-leadership holds potential for democratising organisational interaction, in our focal organisation – for the time being at least – it falls short of the promise.

The reason is that organisational members outside the top management are not co-narrators but mere re-narrators concerning organisational goals. Thus, the epoch change resulted in the digital technology-assisted strategy narrative supporting strategy

implementation but represented no change in strategy-related leadership work. Instead of strategy-related dialogic and participative organisational storytelling, the result was a more traditional, one-way strategy narration. A case in point was the new president's strategy speech, the "inaugural address" webcast that lasted nearly 45 minutes. This strategy narration failed in terms of engagement by offering no real-time participation in a dialogue or a strategic initiative by followers (cf. Avolio and Kahai, 2003) but only a retrospective discussion on the intranet. Based on our findings, the duration of webcasts and live streams needs careful consideration because a central requirement of digital storytelling is brevity (cf. Davis, 2004; Robin, 2008). This important quality seemed unnoticed in our focal organisation. Furthermore, as the webcast was unedited, many followers did not bother to watch it in full, or did not find it at all due to too many digital platforms to follow to keep informed. The low viewing rate of the inauguration webcast (below 5%) may be a telling sign of the excess of digital platforms in use.

While the future of leadership work appears increasingly digital (e.g., Avolio et al., 2014), some challenges are involved in digitalising leadership influence, as indicated in our findings. As noted, a leadership vacuum emerged with the epoch change in our focal organisation, eventually filled by the return of the leadership on digital platforms, which was met with satisfaction. Our data emphasise the leader's presence (by whatever means) as important for the followers' feeling of being led. Thus, rather than constructing leadership influence, digital platforms function simply as communication devices for leadership work related to strategy narration. Therefore, at least for the time being, the more traditional leadership practices involving presence have value for followers, as testified by the powerfully resonating words of a seasoned practitioner in our focal organisation:

[W]hat I see going on around me has made me even more convinced that presence and face-to-face interaction are paramount to leadership. It cannot be just social media and Skype alone.

Whether this is the case in the future remains to be seen. However, building collaboration and consensus—and above all, constructing meaning, purpose and captivating visions—to mobilise the members to fulfil their organisation's goals remain as irreplaceable elements of not only organisational effectiveness (Bennis and Nanus, 2003, iii; Sahay and Baul, 2015) but also leadership itself. While technology-assisted leadership makes strides in business practice that transforms leadership, leadership is clearly not solely a change recipient in this relationship. Rather, the process has a co-evolutionary nature, as demonstrated by our findings (see also Avolio et al., 2014). We consider this an important implication of digitalisation for leadership work; instead of a force of nature, technology in the leadership context is and should remain under the control of organisational actors. While the prospects of technology for leadership work may seem limitless and enticing, they should be kept in check to prevent spiralling out of control with unanticipated repercussions. While digitalisation of leadership work may be around the corner, fundamental leadership roles, including interaction and support, as outlined by Stogdill (1950) nearly seven decades ago, may turn out to remain unaltered.

To establish links between our findings and their implications for post-truth discussions, we devote the remainder of the discussion to this topic. While digitalisation opens the door for post-truth debates with storytelling manifested on digital platforms, our findings did not indicate attempts at intentional truth bending; fabrication of alternative facts by leaders in their strategy-related storytelling did not surface. However, our data showed occurrences bordering on post-truth. A case in point was when the followers were drawn by the idea that the organisation had achieved the status of a “diversified digital player”.

This apparent conviction among the followers could partly be attributable to the leadership vacuum that emerged, compelling them to hold on to the clues left by the former president in the strategy narration, together with visionary presentations on several digital platforms, as the basis of their sensemaking (cf. Weick, 2001). Coupled with the omnipresent digitalisation discourse of our time, the result was what could be called “organisational autosuggestion”. As internal narratives revolving around digitalisation coherently converged with those circulating in the business environment, they jointly created the plausibility of the interwoven narrative and allowed the hoped-for future state to be projected into the present (cf. Auvinen et al., 2018). Thus, instead of intentionally misleading the followers, the leadership work involving narration that contained seductive disinformation (cf. Auvinen et al., 2013) regarding the future, mixed with the present, resulted in the firm belief that the vision had been realised despite the facts.

It is common for strategic goals and leaders’ visionary statements to contain symbolic fantasising in order to create inspirational meanings among the followers, with the intent of achieving organisational goals (e.g., Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984). An important implication of our findings about visionary leadership storytelling—whether analogue or digital—is that the post-truth framework of alternative facts is ill suited as an evaluation basis. Because such visionary storytelling does not represent a historical narrative genre aimed at revealing “truths” or referring to archival evidence but exemplifies a fictional narrative, it instead represents the “common” business bullshitting genre with bona fide manipulation and fantasising (Sajasalo et al., 2016), freed of the factual burden (e.g., Ricoeur, 1984). Furthermore, leadership storytelling has always contained fictive elements, such as strategy jargon, and other forms of business bullshitting (Spicer, 2018). While for instance Salmon (2017) argues such behaviours have become more commonplace recently, even with malicious intent, the kind of business bullshitting dealt with in this paper – fantasising – is an irremovable aspect of strategy work. Because strategy is fundamentally future oriented, it inescapably contains fictive elements related to forthcoming events. For this reason, strategy-related leadership storytelling does not easily fit into the fact—an alternative fact dichotomy.

Overall, it may be stated that strategy-related leadership storytelling has evolved over the past three decades. This evolution, aided and simultaneously pressured by advances in communication technology, has changed leadership storytelling from the traditional, leader-centred and embodied type, with the univocal leader playing the main role, to a more widely dispersed storytelling, characterised by being distanced from the traditional embodied narrator. Our findings imply that leadership storytelling, by becoming increasingly digital, may be transforming towards more plurivocal narration: once the

organisational stories enter the digital realm, there are potentially infinite numbers of external participants in their evolution able to spin them around at their will. This is likely to result in ever-increasing organisational “truths” instead of the singular “truth” preferred and aimed at by leaders. Dealing with such ambiguity and the exercise of leadership power requires leaders’ participation in goal attainment-furthering narration and capping counterproductive narratives in the flux of quickly evolving digital organisational storytelling.

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Figure 1. The evolution of strategy narration

