Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSi0kmqOBu4

Why storytelling is so powerfull in the digital era? Ashley Fell, 2017

I wonder what your favorite story was when you were younger. Perhaps it was a story that your parents read to you over and over again. Well, mine was "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" by Eric Carle. You see, it's a story that evokes emotion in me because it's the book that my mom used to read to me over and over again. You know, back in the day when we actually read books.

(Slide: Cheers to all of you who still read books)

But if you're familiar with this book, you'll know that, as the name suggests, the caterpillar is indeed born very hungry and he actually eats really well for the first week of his life. Monday he ate through one apple, Tuesday two pears, Wednesday three plums, etc. But then, if you're familiar again with the story, you'll know that on Saturday turns to splurge just a bit and I think it's really cute, at the bottom it says, "that night he had a stomachache".

Now, a good story is one that you can identify with and I identify with the protagonist of this book. You see, sometimes I'm like, "I'm gonna eat really healthy this week, it's gonna be awesome" and then it gets to a certain point in the day or it gets to the weekend and you kind of eat everything that you can see. But all this is to say, I guess, that we, again, identify -- and some of you might not identify with this, you might be really disciplined, so I thought perhaps for you it could be that we could maybe create an adaptation of this book and maybe we could call it "The Very Hangry Caterpillar" because I'm sure a lot of us have felt that emotion at one time or other in our lives.

(Slide: han·gry *(han-gree) adj*. a state of anger caused by lack of food; hunger causing a negative change in emotional state.)

But all this is to say that stories are extremely powerful.

Well, my name is Ashley Fell and I'm the head of communications at McCrindle research. We are a Sydney-based research agency. Now, I bet you're wondering what does research have to do with communications and I have been asked this question before in my life when I studied a Bachelor of Communications.

(Slide: Oh, you have a bachelor of arts degree? I bet that broadens your job prospects)

And any arts degree students out there will understand my pain. I think we get a bit of a bad rep sometimes. But I just want to say, in our research there's -- we discuss a lot about the future of work and the future workforce and what's going to happen with digitalization and automation and things like that. And a lot of that focus is on the STEM subjects: the Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths. And while I don't want to undermine what these amazing students do,

our research has shown that it is those that have the soft skills, the interpersonal skills, the communication skills, leadership, that are going to have a really great chance of withstanding automation when the robots come and things like that. So I was thinking, we'll let the Science students have the STEM and I reckon us, Arts students will just will take the CLASS.

(Slide: STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths; CLASS – Communication, Language, Arts and Social Science)

But really, communication, what does communication have to do with research? Well in our research we deal with a lot of data that looks like this: quantitative survey, statistics, numbers, etc. We also deal with qualitative data, which is long and wordy research and findings from surveys and in-depth interviews and focus groups. We also deal with the ABS.

(Slide: Australian Bureau of Statistics)

I'm not sure if anyone's had any experience with that, but we analyze this data because, frankly, not many people wake up wanting to pore over spreadsheets every single day.

(Slide: I love Excel)

So that is what -- that is our job, that's what we do. We analyze the data, we analyze this kind of data and we turn it into this. We turn it into infographics. And this is our passion, this is -- we are all about bringing research data to life. You know, important research sitting in statistics and Excel spreadsheets isn't going to get the kind of cut-through that it needs to get in the world that we live in, because our world is changing.

You see, we're living in a time of great change in Australia today, in the generation that we live in, you know, our education, our learning styles are changing, our classrooms are changing. We live in a world where the concept of sharing has changed. We live in a world where the concept of a story has changed and even for us, young adults out there. So much so that we're living in an age of digital disruption, we are living in what we call the great screen age.

You see, we are spending more time on our devices than we ever have before and it was two decades ago, in the year 1997, that the amount of time we spend on electronic media surpassed the amount of time we spent in face-to-face interaction. And so, in this great screen age, not only are we spending more time on technology but our attention spans are getting shorter.

Just to depict to you, visually, what is happening in our world today: So this is in 2005, outside the historic location of the Sistine Chapel, people gathering for the inauguration of Pope Benedict. Do you note the small Nokia phone in the bottom right hand corner? Fast-forward eight years later to the inauguration of Pope Francis in the exact same historic location, and this is what it looked like.

We are living in technologically integrated times. It's almost as if we are filtering the current through the technological lens. This is the world that we live in. Our world is changing and, as

I mentioned, our attention spans are contracting. The ABC content-rich website with multiple news programs and all that kind of thing – the average visitor is spending just 3 minutes and 55 seconds and that's one of the top-rated sites. You know, YouTube and Facebook up that average, but for content-rich sites, it's just 3 minutes and 55 seconds per day for the average user.

But how much has this changed for my generation, for your generation? You know, if you are a uni student and you're aged under the 23 kind of age, then you are classified as Generation Z, and I'm just above that, I'm Gen Y. And these are some of the other labels given to the emerging Generation Z: the Digital Integrators, the Screenagers, the Generation Connected, they're the iGen, Digital Natives, Dot Com Kids, Generation Gamers and the Click 'N Go Kids. What is the one central theme in all those labels? It's technology, isn't it?

And it's interesting because we know that Generation Z and all of us, we're global now, we're globally connected, as well as digital, social, mobile and visual. And our biggest fears, globally, are no longer spiders, snakes and heights, but rather we fear low Wi-Fi, we fear the buffering circle and, most importantly, we fear the low battery symbol, when all forms of communication and connectivity cease to exist. You see, we are living in times of message saturation and information overload. This is the world that we are living in.

But the key to understanding effective communication and cut-through is an understanding of how the brain works. You see, the brain responds to visuals, which makes sense because we live in a visual world. If we think about how we retain information and how we store it, you know, data like this isn't going to cut it anymore. If it has an important story to tell, which we believe, as researchers, that it does, then communicating it like this is no longer possible. It's just not going to get cut through. We know that the written word, text, goes into our short-term memory where we can retain around 7 bits of information, whereas visuals go straight into our long-term brain, where they are indelibly etched. And so it's important to know that 90% of information transmitted to the brain is visual and we process visuals faster, in fact, 60,000 times faster, in the brain than text.

And of course as data analysts, as researchers, it's more than just about creating an effective, fun, colorful story like "The Very Hungry Caterpillar". It's about meaning and data accuracy. And it's interesting, you know, the Oxford English Dictionaries each year releases its word of the year and it summarizes, kind of, and depicts what has happened in the year before.

In 2013 the Oxford English Dictionaries word of the year was "hashtag". It's not even a word, it's a symbol and it's where we find, you know, what's trending. We don't go to news sites, we just search what's trending on Twitter and Facebook.

In 2014 it was "selfie", possibly by this quite famous one here. Again, we're trying to show our lives through technology: what's happening, who we're spending our time with, the concept of sharing.

In 2015, again, not even a word but an emoji, specifically the face with tears of joy. Isn't this just depicting that we communicate visually? Our facial gestures communicate how we feel, or they don't, you know. So it's -- we're trying to show in our text messages how we feel and, I'm sure you've all been there, but if in doubt, you're not sure what the tone your text is taking – just put in a little smiley face, like, everyone does that. But this was the Oxford English Dictionaries word of the year in 2015.

And the word of the year last year, for 2016, was "post-truth". In the world of Brexit and Trump and all of that it was "post-truth". And so for us, as researchers, as academics, as those who really believe in the integrity of the data, it's important that the data we communicate has meaning. We, as researchers, as data analysts, we also consider ourselves as research visualization experts. We turn complex data and we analyze that complex data and we maintain its integrity and then we communicate it with visuals that are simple, that get cut through, that can be shared online. This is the way that information is moving forward. And it's so important, even more so in this technologically integrated era that we are living in today.

It's interesting when you think about the concept of a story, because a story is visual even without the use of pictures. Let me explain what I mean by that. Have you ever read a book and then a movie adaptation of that book has been released? Well, my favorite book at the moment, you'll be pleased to hear it's no longer "The Very Hungry Caterpillar", is actually "Pride and Prejudice". I'm a walking cliché for that, but when I read that book I loved it. And then I saw the film adaptation and I was like, "That's not what Mr. Darcy looks like. He just looks an awful lot like Colin Firth." And, you know, that is how good stories are inherently visual because, even without the use of pictures, our brain reconstructs that, when they have a narrative and we move through that story.

Stories are extremely powerful and engaging stories have what we call "The 4 I's". Engaging stories, firstly, create our interests. They maintain our attention, we want to see what it's about, we want to keep reading. Great stories instruct us, they have meaning. Great stories involve us. And, most importantly, great stories inspire us, don't they? And we know that the brain, even though it's able to understand and commute complex data -- it's relatable data, and are hopefully infographics, like, quite serious data is displayed in fun, visual ways that people can engage with. It's important that visuals and data today inspires us and connects not just with the eyes of our brain but with the eyes of our heart as well, and that's what a good story does.

This is what we do, this is a bit of the breadth of what we do. We take that complex data, we analyze it, and we distill it, and we communicate it with visuals. And we hope, and we believe that research is at its best when it tells a story, and that is how it can have an impact and how it can be spread out there.

A good story also has these three components: it has color, it has picture, and it has movement. You know, in "The Very Hungry Caterpillar", the colorful pictures that are involved and the moving pages in the storyline. Great stories have these three components.

This is a photo of my husband. He loves camping. Me? Not as much as he does. But we've been camping, we recently got married, we've been camping over the Anzac weekend, long weekend we went up to the Blue Mountains. And if you've ever been camping, you'll know that when you go camping, building a fire is crucial, isn't it? You need it for heat, you need it for cooking food if you're doing roast, things like that. It's crucial. But if you've never been camping, this crazy thing happens when you all get together and you all just sit around the camp fire for hours and you just stare at it. It's bizarre. Maybe because there's no Wi-Fi and that's all we can do, but we all sit around the campfire and we stare at it. A great campfire has color, it has picture and has movement. The crackling, burning red-orange flames – it engages our attention like a good story does. And I kind of liken it to what we're all doing here today. Like, this conference is like a 21st century fireplace. We're all gathered here, we're all engaged, we're all listening, we're attentive and we're sharing our stories, we're sharing our learnings, our expertise. And this is what we are doing here today. And it's just like a good story.

And so this is my parting wisdom to you. I hope that this presentation today has encouraged you that when you have an important story to tell, especially when it involves data, that you can tell it using visuals, that you can create interest and intrigue, that you can maintain the meaning of that story and that hopefully, then, you can get cut through in these technologically integrated times that we are all living in today.

Thank you.

(Applause)