

Telling Meetings

Sophie Thunus & Caroline Godart

Sophie Thunus is an Associate Professor of Health Care Services Management at the Catholic University of Louvain, Brussels. In 2009, as a junior researcher, she joined a European research project that involved a long string of international scientific meetings. She thought they were amazing: these encounters brought together a wide array of different world views, and though they required endless adjustments, they also allowed for wider horizons to open up and for unexpected solutions to emerge. Meetings became the focus of her research, centering on political and inter-organizational meetings dedicated to building networks of mental health services. What she observed is sadly common: too often, defensive reactions flood meetings, and ideologies and political or personal interests take over. Hence, she became particularly interested in the mechanisms that make it possible to harness the enthusiasm generated in meetings to turn hope into change and reorganization.

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Sophie and Caroline have developed a narrative-based approach to meetings that recourse to storytelling to improves our understanding of meetings, in particular with regard to the meaning it holds to its participants.

Meeting is essential to political action. Social movements unfold through meetings (Haug 2014) and meeting is a central practice in policy making (Freeman 2019). As researchers, meetings are ubiquitous to our lives too: we love or hate them, often complain that they are inefficient (Allen et al. 2014) ... and yet we keep organizing meetings.

Why? What do we do in meetings? What do meetings do to us? To others and to the processes we are involved in? In our experience, addressing these questions through academic writing has proved to be challenging: on the one hand, academic thinking has a preference for the analytical, which forces us to break down our thinking into bits and pieces. Hence scientific publications spatialize our vision of meetings: they provide us with parts of the score but they also prevent us from getting the rhythm, that is, from experiencing a meeting in its essence, which is not spatial, but temporal, durational (Bergson 2012). On the other hand, academic production requires contextualization: the

observed meetings are located in one specific field. But how can a meeting be situated in its context without losing our sense for what is happening through the meeting? How can we prevent the meeting process from vanishing into the meeting context?

In this article we suggest that a meeting does not exist outside the narrative it inscribes within each of its participants. Therefore, we offer (quite literally) the story of a meeting, told from the viewpoint of one participant, who turns out to be one of this article's authors. The story (see below: « Zooming In: The Story of a Meeting ») is based on research and encapsulates empirical observations: first, direct observation of virtual and face to face meetings in the field of health policies from 2009 onwards; second, semi-structured interviews with these meeting participants; and third, the results of a survey on virtual meetings in academia that we carried out in April 2020. Through this survey, 814 meeting participants provided us with quantitative and qualitative data about their experience of virtual meetings.

This personal account of a fictional meeting is then used as a basis to reflect on how it improves our understanding of meetings, in particular with regard to the meaning it holds to its participants. The latter doesn't only rest in the words that are spoken, but emerges from personal experiences of what is said and of how it is said.

By telling such a personal experience, the story reveals a phenomenon that is very specific to meetings: that of a socially produced encounter between separated, individual pasts. This encounter unfolds in a shared present, a collective discussion that follows unpredictable directions (Bergson 2014) although it is framed by social artifacts (Arendt 1998). But once the meeting has happened, the meaning is there, the story is written: it is embodied by the participants who carry this story everywhere and behave accordingly. This story is as powerful as it is hard to grasp. And maybe that's the reason why we keep attending boring and inefficient meetings.

THE STORY

Zooming In: The Story of a Meeting

This is Week 3 of the secret meeting series of the Experts' Council for the National Public Health Authority. I have no idea what I'm doing here. Apparently, they're under the impression that I am qualified to offer an expert opinion on public health priorities in the case of another pandemic. Which I may be, but how would I know, the meetings take place mostly in Dutch, a language I don't speak. Voilà.

But when life gives you lemons, make lemonade, so I'm trying to see this as an opportunity to learn Dutch. With moderate success, in spite of the high frequency of the above-mentioned meetings: 12 2-hour sessions taking place once a week in the dark between 8 and 10pm. All of this is obviously unpaid, though the thrill of working with old, powerful men is supposed to compensate for the lack of a salary. It doesn't. Though to be fair, there's 10 of us: 5 old men, 5 young women, the power balance is in perfect equilibrium. A typical result of using gender quota's.

It's 8:01pm, participants are connecting one by one. All the men are already present and the young wolf who runs the National Public Health Authority makes a comment about women not being there yet. They chat indiscriminately about vaccination and football, a pale alternative to drinking macho beers in a hotel lobby. As much as I hate this buddy culture, I must say that I too wish we had a chance to bond or get to know each other one way or another. I seize this opportunity to judge their Zoom backdrops: some run a camouflage operation to disguise their homes (one famous epidemiologist appears against a wallpaper of wild horses running across the steppe. I wonder if this is meant to make him look like a modern Genghis Khan, a way to impress his power on others when it's impossible to sit at the top of the table, use his gaze to get attention or raise his voice). Some, the fancy ones, don't need this cheap trick: for instance, there's the emeritus with the Caesar statue on the walnut bookshelf; the young wolf has a daring, if bare scenography: a large banderole displaying the logo of his beloved institution. On the other of the spectrum, there's the female professor who, for some mysterious reason, has set up camp in her children's playroom, and the French-speaking health promotion professor who is always drinking a glass of red wine in his living room. Everyone seems dedicated to fulfill expectations; I almost wish we were in a physical meeting room and didn't have to deal with this social and economic inequity; the gender aspect is particularly infuriating. Though I am grateful for the possibility to mute Genghis Khan, Julius Caesar or the young wolf when they start yelling.

Oh wait, we're starting! Or at least something is happening. The president once more regrets we can't meet for real but applauds our efficiency; he hopes we can stay focused on the topic of the

meeting and is glad that we can at least work together without distraction. Which is when I get a private message in the meeting chat from a female colleague who says hi and wonders what on earth we are doing. The chair, an old man who looks like a fish with longish white hair (hairdressers are shut because of Covid), speaks up. He's the authority behind the National Public Health Authority. He has run it for 50 years even though he officially retired 15 years ago; he also taught at the most prestigious university in the country. He's catholic, cunning, and ubiquitous. He declares that he is about to give us an extensive reading of the agenda, which is going to frame our conversation and prevent us from wandering into opinions and informal chit chat. I make a sincere effort to listen but my mind is hypnotized by the bureaucratic newspeak: something about criteria and indicators that we must define to establish priorities among proposals that will be submitted by task forces that are supported by working groups that represent the different stakeholders of the public health sector. Sexy. It all sounds great, but I hope he really does moderate the meeting and gives everyone a chance to speak, otherwise there's no way I'll have a say in this—the differences in hierarchy and knowledge of the subject matter are too big, and there's also some years-old trauma of being made fun of because what I was saying was deemed not rational enough. I can't imagine how hard it must be for my colleague whose children regularly pop up drooling and screaming (although she somehow also manages to have a very successful career).

A riveting conversation has begun on the difference between criteria and indicators. All the old men (and some of the women) have turned into semioticians. This is La Sorbonne, 1968. How should we evaluate proposals? Criteria exclude! exclaims Genghis Khan. But we cannot afford to exclude innovative proposals! replies the red wine drinker. We are a scientific committee! We need evidence-based criteria! expectorate others. Intellectual emulation reaches a peak. A tall health economist closes the debate by saying that we can use indicators as guides while also remain able to decide what we want to do. Meanwhile, everyone has consistently ignored the 5 little yellow hands that went up and down throughout the heated conversation, hoping to speak while sticking to the rules that had been layed out at the beginning of the meeting. In vain: the young wolf has lost mastery of the pack. Boomers are taking over.

The head of the French-speaking doctors' union puts an end to the mayhem: a great lover of rules (though he is, he insists creepily, "also stimulated by a lot of other things"), he reminds everyone that only raised little yellow hands should have the right to speak. The young wolf jumps on this opportunity to restore order (while ignoring the appalling innuendo) and gives the word to a woman who's been waiting to speak for a while. She works on health inequality for the European Union and, as an inequality expert, has perfected the art of professional backdrop neutrality (small lamp in a darkish room). She points out that the category "health inequality" is positioned in such a way on the Master chart that it can only be assessed where it concerns health care accessibility. She

suggests that it should have its own column so it would intersect with every horizontal entry; we could then assess each criterion in terms of health inequality. It makes perfect sense. I want to say so but there's a whole wave of raised little hands before me so I just add a note to this effect in the chat and assume that we are going to proceed to approve this suggestion, which is both necessary and obvious.

Not so fast. The young wolf who presides over our meeting is hesitant, arguing that we would need to get rid of another category to include "health inequality." Maybe he doesn't know about the "add column" function in Excel? I want to help. He starts rambling, and in the maze of his confused explanation as to why it is seemingly so complicated to add a frigging column to the chart, I gather that the real issue here is aesthetic: he prefers perfect squares. An equal number of horizontal and vertical entries. And so does his former dissertation advisor, the old fish, who seems equally uncomfortable with the proposal. But just as "health inequality" is about to vanish into the ether of irrelevant criteria for public policy, the young mother, who has seen through the predicament we are facing, suggests replacing the "e-health" column with "health inequality." I expect a horrified reaction from the tall economist, as this is her field, but nothing comes. Looking more closely, I notice that she has entirely stopped moving. Her connection froze at the worst possible moment; this is Spring break, she's at her family's fancy country home in the boonies with poor internet. I imagine her gesticulating in her living room, yelling "Can you hear me? Can you hear me?" but this is a failed séance. Too late. The motion passes: "e-health" is replaced by "health inequality."

Moving on. It is now (finally!) the turn of the head of the French-speaking doctors' union to speak, the one who insisted that we follow the order of the raised little hands. He has a lot to say but evidently no idea how to articulate any of it: he seems to be talking about the need to get rid of professional sectors in health care but then moves on to a weird anecdote about a lawsuit and then a discombobulated rant about the health minister. He's floundering: none of it makes sense, it's been going on for a full 4 minutes, and it's not getting any better. He keeps saying "I hope I'm clear!," but really he's not and none of the little hands can save him: they're all patiently awaiting their turn to speak. Bored, the president ends his tirade with a dull "Thank you, Michel." The meeting is winding down: no new little hands are allowed to be raised, those that still had something to say, say it. Conversations have turned into strange jigsaw puzzles in which questions, answers and comments appear to be disconnected. It's efficient in terms of checking bullet points off a list of topics to address, but it's also impossible to gauge who's actually following what's being said: there's no space for quick follow-up questions outside the meeting room, around a cup of tepid coffee or in the hallway. Not that I particularly enjoy those moments in real life, but they do create a kind of team spirit that is completely lacking here. Meanwhile, the top right corner of my screen has not stopped blinking for the past 2 hours: while I was under house arrest on Zoom, trying to focus on obscure

semantic distinctions in a foreign language, the teaching and research assistants from my department were on Teams, having their weekly “happy hour”—a much more fun gathering that involves every academic’s favorite past-time: inebriated complaining. It’s too late to join them: at 10pm, their meeting is ending too. People are turning off their phones and computers and the constant notifications are slowing down, a short respite until tomorrow morning, where it will all start again: the bizarre meetings, the endless interruptions, and the self-reflection at the bottom corner of the screen.

1 Kristin

- Are meetings and Zoom meetings different? And