

“Demystifying Through Myth”:

En Exploration of the Role of Myth in Shaping Identity Narratives in the Context of Technological Change

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ABSTRACT

Technology has a strong influence on the day-to-day operations of organisations, but the relationship between technology and organisational identity is little understood. We approach identity from a narrative perspective, and explore how identity narratives are adapted to accommodate new, disruptive technologies. To capture how these processes unfold in practice, we study the case of the Estonian public sector, and their plans for restructuring the current e-government infrastructure in favour of new solutions powered by artificial intelligence. Combining the analysis of strategy and vision documents with insights from an expert interview and existing literature, we reveal how local myths featuring characters such as the morally ambivalent goblin *kratt* are used by organisational elites to manage transformational change. Our analysis reveals that when integrated into identity narratives, myths can help organisations navigate change by creating a sense of continuity between past, present, and future, and establishing a balance between familiarity and novelty.

Word count: 6833

Introduction

Technology constitutes “a central element for understanding organizations” because it shapes “the way they are organized” as well as their evolution and resulting processes and structures (Ravasi and Canato 2010: 50). Despite its importance for the daily operations of organizations, little is known about the links between technology and organisational identity. Particularly in organisations where technologies are ubiquitous in the execution of daily tasks, we would expect core technologies to figure prominently in collective processes of meaning-making, but there is as yet little evidence of how this type of meaning-making around technology unfolds in practice.

We explore meaning-making processes around technology from a process as narrative perspective (Fachin & Langley, 2017), wherein organisational identity is treated as “continually constituted in narrative texts” that are composed and recomposed by organisational authors (Chreim, 2005: 569). We focus particularly on organisational elites (Alvesson et al., 2008) in public sector organisations, and how they “craft” and “maintain” (Iftikhar & Sergeeva, 2024: 1) identity narratives in the context of radical technological change.

To shed light on how these processes unfold in practice, we study the case of the Estonian public sector, and their plans for restructuring the current e-government infrastructure in favour of new solutions powered by artificial intelligence (AI). Combining the analysis of strategy and vision documents with insights from an expert interview and existing literature, we reveal the unique role that local myths can play in resolving the “tension between novelty and familiarity” (Dalpiaz & Stefano, 2018: 666) when narrating transformational change.

In our study, this capacity of myths to facilitate organisational change is most powerfully exemplified by the figure of ‘kratt’ – an ethically ambivalent man-made creature popular in local folklore, and frequently evoked as a synonym for AI in organisational narratives. Drawing on the example of kratt, as well as other mythical figures, we show how local myths can help organisational elites “weave” disruptive technologies into existing “biographical accounts” (Chreim, 2005: 567), make the novel and strange more familiar (Pondy, 1983), and foster a “sense of continuity” between past and future (Rasmussen, 1996; cited in Iftikhar & Sergeeva, 2024: 3). These findings not only help advance our understanding of the relationship between technology and identity, but also provide new insights to how managers can draw on stories from the organisation’s macro-environment (Chreim, 2005) to shape organisational narratives.

We hope these insights may provide valuable learnings for both public- and private sector organisations grappling with new technologies, and open up new avenues for the use of myths in organisational identity narratives. Gabriel (2000) once observed that myths deriving from folklore are unlikely to appear in organisational contexts. Our findings indicate, on the contrary, that in the current era of disruptive change, they may be more relevant than ever.

Theoretical background

Narratives and stories in the daily lives of individuals and organisations

Narratives are ubiquitous in our daily lives. We both consume them constantly in the form of conversations, news stories, advertisement, books and films (Abbott, 2008), and continually – though often unconsciously (Polkinghorne, 1988) - produce them to make sense of ourselves and the world around us. This tendency of humans to use narrative and stories to “link” individual “actions” and “events” into “understandable composites” (Polkinghorne, 1988: 13) is such an ingrained feature of human reasoning that it is considered “as basic to human beings as eating” (Kearney, 2002: 3); while eating and sleeping keep us alive, narrative is “the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful” (Polkinghorne, 1988: 1).

Though narratives are commonly seen as central to how we perceive, interpret, and make sense of the world (Abbott, 2008; Beigi et al. 2019; Boje, 1991; Czarniawska 2004; Polkinghorne, 1988), opinions on what counts as a narrative vary greatly. On the broadest definition, narrative may be used to refer to “any spoken or written presentation” (Polkinghorne, 1988: 13); on the narrowest, it captures a series of events linked by a causal chain (Abbott, 2008). There are also “no hard and fast rules for distinguishing between stories and narratives or storytelling and narrativization” (Brown et al. 2009: 324), with some authors (e.g. Polkinghorne, 1988) treating the terms as synonymous, while others (e.g. Gabriel, 2000) argue that only some narratives merit the title of story.

We understand narrative to be a sequence of events (Gabriel, 2000) or a transition from an original state of affairs via an action or event to a consequent state of affairs (Czarniawska, 2004) such that by recounting the series of events in a certain way, the narrative is put into the events by the narrator (Czarniawska, 1998). Insofar as any such narrative, whether a “factual or descriptive accounts of events” (Gabriel, 2000: 5) or a pure work of fiction, does not exist

independently in the world, but is always the result of a deliberate act of narration, where the choice of a plot resides ultimately with the author (Czarniawska 1998, 2004), stories and narratives can equally be described as subjective accounts serving specific aims. We therefore treat the terms interchangeably as representations of events (Abbott, 2008) which acquire meaning thanks to a plot imposed by the author (Brown, 2015; Czarniawska, 1998, 2004). When skillfully crafted, such stories can carry deep emotional and symbolic weight such that they do not merely relay factual information, but rather “enrich, enhance, and infuse facts with meaning” (Gabriel, 2000: 135).

Since narratives have such a strong influence on the way we experience and interact with the world, it is no surprise that they have fascinated organisation and management scholars for several decades (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000; Czarniawska, 2004; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). This growing interest in narratives is symptomatic of the broader ‘linguistic turn’ in the social sciences (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Brown et al., 2009; Rhodes & Brown, 2005) and has seen narratives rise to the forefront both as object of study and mode of reasoning (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). As a result, stories are now commonly seen as “deeply implicated in all aspects of organizational life and scholarship” (Brown et al., 2009: 323-324).

For one thing, just as much of our social life takes the form of narratives (Czarniawska, 2004), storytelling in organisations is seen as “the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships” both among organization members and in relation to external stakeholders (Boje 1991: 106). Stories can also be wielded as a communication tool. As explained by Boje (1991: 124), organization members tell “stories not only to make sense of their setting but to negotiate alternative interpretations and to accommodate new precedents for decision and action”. When used well, stories can help manage and make sense of change, plan activities, and make projections (Beckert, 2021; Boje, 1991; Brown et al., 2009; Dalpiaz & Stefano, 2018; Vaara & Tienari, 2011) to the extent that through shared stories, “resourceful organizations can actually shape future development along the lines of the imagined futures they advocate” (Beckert, 2021: 13). “Crafting and maintaining” organizational narratives therefore becomes an important task for organisations (Iftikhar & Sergeeva, 2024: 1).

Storytelling is also vital for the management of organisational identities. Just as an individual’s sense of self is constructed by piecing together individual life events into a continuous narrative (Czarniawska, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1988), organisations may be seen not just as spaces where narration occurs, but as entities whose “identities are constituted by the

identity-relevant narratives that their participants' author about them" (Brown, 2006: 734) in a process where past events and projected futures are brought together to provide a "sense of continuity" (Rasmussen, 1996; cited in Iftikar & Sergeeva, 2024: 3).

Studying identity from a narrative perspective

From a narrative perspective on organisational identity, "language is assumed to *make* reality" (Fachin & Langley, 2017: 314; emphasis in original) and identity is seen as "continually constituted in narrative texts" that are composed and recomposed by organisational authors (Chreim, 2005: 569). On this definition, identity is treated not as something central, enduring and distinctive (Albert & Whetten, 1985), but as a fluid and changeable (Gioia et al. 2000; Fachin & Langley 2017), undergoing "shifts in its interpretation and meaning" (Gioia et al., 2000: 65) when faced with changing environments. Accordingly, instead of an "essence", "entity", or "thing" that responds to the question of 'who are we as an organisation', identity is seen as "continually under construction" in ongoing processes of enacting "how we are becoming" (Schultz & Hernes, 2013: 3-4). Within the collective process of building identity around shared narratives and stories (Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Czarniawska, 1998), organisation members author stories "in their efforts to understand, or make sense of, the collective entities with which they identify" (Brown, 2006: 734). These "subjectively construed understandings of who they were, are and desire to become" are, in turn, "implicated in, and thus key to understanding and explaining, almost everything that happens in and around organizations" (Brown, 2015: 20).

To capture and make sense of identity-construction processes, research that adopts a narrative perspective zooms in to "how people make sense of, and reconstruct their experiences from, a particular standpoint in time" (Fachin & Langley, 2017: 314). This approach is particularly well-suited to the study of organisational identity, since focusing "on how time (past, present and future) ... is reconstructed through language by participants" (Fachin & Langley, 2017: 314) allows researchers to capture how members "make temporal sense of organizations" (Vaara & Tienari, 2011: 370) and establish a sense of coherence and continuity (Chreim, 2005). Adopting a narrative perspective also "highlights the importance of linguistic resources and authorial elements to the study and understanding of identity" (Chreim, 2005: 570), and so allows researchers to explore identity on a more granular level, distinguishing

between narratives put forward by different groups, and deconstructing these narratives into individual constitutive elements.

Constructing identity narratives around technological change

In the present study, we are particularly interested in exploring how symbolic stories crafted by organisational elites are used as a tool to shape organisational identity in the context of rapid technological change. Technology has historically had a prominent role in theorising organisations and constitutes “a central element for understanding organizations” because it shapes “the way they are organized” as well as their evolution and resulting processes and structures (Woodward, 1965; Patel & Pavitt, 2000; cited in Ravasi & Canato, 2010: 50). It is, moreover, considered to shape “how organizational members make sense of and organise their social reality” (Ravasi & Canato, 2010: 50). Yet, the link between technology and identity has been very little explored in existing literature. The few studies that do explore the relationship between technology and identity have focused primarily on private sector companies where the technology in questions constitutes the output of the organisation, and explore how technological change affects organisational identity (e.g. Tripsas, 2009). In such instances, the change tends to originate in the external environment, and organisational identity has to evolve to keep up with these changes.

Studies on the role of technology, particularly digital technologies, in public sector organisations are equally scarce, and have so far focused mainly on identifying ‘enablers’ and ‘barriers’ rather than exploring the effects of technology change on the organisations themselves (Lember et al., 2018: 215). In a rare attempt at exploring the relationship between identity and technology in the public sector, Tyworth (2014) studies integrated criminal justice information systems to demonstrate how an organisation’s identity shapes its ICT-configurations. His study treats organisational identity as relatively static and explore how ICT configuration are moulded to reflect this identity. Our aim is the opposite: treating organisational identity as fluid, we explore how identity narratives are adapted to accommodate new, disruptive technologies.

Machines and technologies tend to feature heavily in organisational stories. Computers, in particular have historically been “rich sources of organizational folklore”, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, when their rapid diffusion forced organisation members to address the fears and anxieties associated with this change (Gabriel, 2000: 153). Now, with the onslaught of AI-

based tools, we are arguably at the cusp of a similar revolution where many work processes are redesigned to integrate these powerful, yet often little-understood tools. Particularly in organisations where new technologies are central to the execution of daily tasks, we would thus expect such disruptive developments to have a profound impact of organisational identity narratives, as organisation members seek to make sense of the implications of the change processes taking place around them.

One of the crucial challenges in the successful management of organisational change is finding the right balance between the novel and the familiar, such that proposed innovations do not appear so strange as to provoke resistance, and yet do not become so familiar that organization members lose interest (Chreim, 2005; Dalpiaz & Stefano, 2018). The more disruptive the changes, the more acute this dilemma becomes (Dalpiaz & Stefano, 2018). Identity narratives can help manage the “tension between novelty and familiarity” (Dalpiaz & Stefano, 2018: 666) by establishing consistency between past, present, and future (Chreim, 2005; Dalpiaz & Stefano, 2018), and reframing the experiences and interpretations of organisation members (Boje, 1991; Chreim, 2005; Dalpiaz & Stefano, 2018). These narratives, in turn, can be strengthened by “importing themes from the external environment” that cohere with the organisation’s present and future activities (Chreim, 2005: 588). We study one such instance of identity management where local mythology is used by organisational elites to narrate technological change, and to balance the novel and the familiar.

Analytical approach

The Case

To explore how organisational narratives are adapted to accommodate new technologies, we analyse the narratives crafted by organisational elites on the occasion of the development and introduction of new AI-empowered e-government services in the Estonian public sector. Estonia presents a particularly interesting case study for two reasons. Firstly, given that it constitutes a “highly supportive digital environment where one would expect to see rapid evolution of technological capacities across the public sector” (Lember et al., 2018: 216), we would expect organisational narratives to be adapted at the same pace to adjust to these changes. As such, it is a revealing research site for exploring the transforming effect of technologies on organisational identity narratives.

Secondly, in Estonia, e-government technologies are not only widely promoted by state agencies, but also underpin the provision of virtually all government services. Since the vast majority of interactions both among public employees and between government agencies and citizens hinge on a few core technologies, any significant change to the digital infrastructure would substantially transform the daily operations of public organisations. The issue of finding the right balance between novelty and familiarity when narrating any such proposed changes would thus be particularly salient when communicating proposed changes.

To explore the interlinkages between identity and technology in the Estonian public sector, we zoom in to how the planned overhaul of public sector infrastructure is narrated by organisational elites, focusing on the strategies adopted to present these new technological solutions in a way that both guarantees a sense of continuity with the past while paving the way for the future and galvanising support for proposed changes.

Data collection

As our primary interest is in the top-down curation of ‘official’ narratives, we focus mainly on “naturally occurring textual data” (Ravasi & Canato, 2013) from sources that can be considered to convey official positions, such as reports and vision documents. Instead of restricting our exploration to any single government agency, we focus on the “discursive space” (Brown, 2006) where multiple agencies are jointly involved in constructing the narratives around AI in the public sector. We define the relevant discursive space as comprising documents created by any public sector actors directly involved in questions of AI development and implementation in the public sector, such as ministries, expert groups or government offices.

With this broad delineation in mind, we set out to collect publicly available documents that explicitly address the question of the use of AI in the public sector. As a starting point, we accessed documents published on the official website for state-backed public sector AI-initiatives (www.kratid.ee), and used a snowballing technique to identify other relevant publications and portals. The resulting sample of written text comprises over 650 pages of materials published between 2019 and 2024 by the Government, the Government Office, the Parliament, the national Chief Technology Officer, and several ministries (Table 1). Where the same documents were available in both Estonian and in English, and where an initial perusal

revealed important differences between the narratives used in the two versions, we included both in our sample.

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To gain additional insights into the construction of narratives around technologies, we also conducted an extensive expert interview with one of the central figures in the development of the Estonian government's communication strategy for AI in the public sector. The interview was conducted in Estonian and focused on the development of e-government services in Estonia, the visions and challenges for integrating AI, and strategies for shaping narratives around new technologies. The interview, lasting around three hours, was recorded and subsequently transcribed using the publicly available speech recognition and transcription editing service Tekstiks.ee run by TalTech's Laboratory of Language Technology (Olev & Alumäe, 2022; www.tekstiks.ee). The transcripts were checked and edited manually to remove any mistakes in speech recognition before downloading from the Tekstiks.ee server.

Finally, to put our analysis in context, we collected information about the development of e-government in Estonia from a combination of English- and Estonian-language sources including briefings, websites, and academic papers. These materials focused both on the technical properties of digital infrastructure and on how the adoption of digital technologies has been narrated since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Analysis

We started our analysis by gaining a general understanding of the history and structure of Estonia's e-government infrastructure. Combining information from archival sources with insights from our expert interview, we compiled narratives summarising the main milestones in the development of e-government technologies since the early 1990s and clarifying the basic structure of the digital infrastructure that currently underpins e-government services.

Once we had developed this general understanding, we moved on to the analysis of our corpus of documents related to the development of new AI-powered e-government solutions. All the documents, as well as the interview transcripts, were analysed using NVivo 14. We

started our analysis by reading through the documents in our sample to get a general sense of the topics discussed in relation to AI. We then proceeded to identify instances of narration and storytelling around the proposed new technologies, and to look for recurring themes in the ways in which these technologies are presented. All documents were analysed in the language in which they were published, frequently taking comparative notes to ensure correspondence between codes in the two languages. Excerpts from Estonian-language materials cited here (marked with an asterisk in the findings) were only translated after analysis.

While collecting examples of storytelling, we were struck by the way in which references to local mythology were used to convey the vision for what daily operations at public sector organisations would look like after the implementation of new AI-technologies. To make sense of this use of mythology, we adopted an abductive approach, moving between the texts in our sample and existing studies of mythology and identity in Estonia, as well as insights from the expert interview. Thus, by “comparing stories”, “searching for underlying commonalities”, and “illustrating the meanings that emerge from them” (Fachin and Langley, 2017: 315-316), we sought to capture how organisational elites use storytelling, and particularly myths, to shape identity discourses and direct the sense-making processes around new technologies.

In what follows, we first provide a general introduction to the role of digital technologies in national identity narratives in Estonia and offer a brief explanation of the proposed changes to the current technological framework. We will then proceed to explain the role that myths play in narrating the future of e-government in Estonia, and conclude by discussing the implications of these insights for the management of technological change, the construction of identity narratives, and the role of myths in organisations.

Findings

The rhetorical and technical construction of e-Estonia

Estonia is widely regarded as “the pioneering state in the field of e-government” (Mäe, 2017: 33), defined as “the use of information and communication technologies in public administration, combined with organisational change and new skills, to improve public services and democratic processes and to strengthen support for public policies” (European Commission, 2003; cited in Kalvet, 2012: 142). Alongside broader reforms aimed at

liberalising the market economy and aligning more closely with the European Union and the rest of the Western world, the period immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union saw Estonia undertake a series of digital infrastructure reforms, embracing new technologies as a symbol of a ‘pivot’ away from the Soviet past (Budnitsky, 2022; Velmet 2020). The promotion of digital technologies as a means to shake off the post-socialist image culminated in the adoption of the concept of ‘e-Estonia’ - first proposed by then Foreign Minister and later President Toomas Hendrik Ilves in 2000 as a paraphrase of the EU’s eEurope programme. By adopting a digital image “amid global euphoria about digital technologies, Estonia was conveying that culturally, if not yet materially, it belonged within Western technological modernity” (Budnitsky, 2022: 1926).

The image of Estonia as a digital frontrunner has largely persisted to this day. Thanks to the development over the last few decades of a series of digital government solutions such as e-voting, e-taxation, e-school and e-residency, Estonia is considered to have been remarkably successful in adopting e-government principles and transitioning to a “technology-based information society” (Kalvet, 2012: 143), consistently ranking as a global leader in information-technology rollout and the provision of e-government services (Kalvet, 2012; Ernsdorff & Berbeck, 2006). Meanwhile, “e-Estonia has become a shorthand label widely used by national leaders, IT gurus, diplomats, and digital technology enthusiasts alike to evoke Estonia’s success in the digitalization of its public institutions through the implementation of particular e-solutions” (Mäe, 2017: 32)

Currently, Estonia’s e-government infrastructure is underpinned by two technologies introduced in the early 2000s, and which continue to constitute the pillars on which all other digital government services are built. These are the X-road and the digital ID (Budnitsky, 2022; Kattel & Mergel 2019). X-Road is “an interoperability platform for existing decentralized databases and a data exchange layer that can be used by public and private sector actors” (Kattel & Mergel, 2019: 143). It is not tied to any specific platform or architecture and constitutes the “information highway” that enables information exchange between government agencies, providing “secure interoperability” and identification of trusted actors in digital service delivery” (Kattel & Mergel, 2019: 143-144). The digital ID is an electronic ID card furnished with a chip, which functions both as a national identification card and enables users to identify themselves online and access digital services in the X-road environment (Budnitsky, 2022), including digitally signing documents, voting in national and regional elections, accessing their personal medical history and retrieving prescriptions, filling out tax declaration, and notifying

government agencies of changes in personal details. The X-road technology is used by over 2300 public and private services, and recent figures put the number of digital signatures used by the nation of 1.3 million people at nearly 350 million (Kattel & Mergel, 2019). In terms of digital infrastructure rollout, then, Estonia continues to be a global leader. Today, more than 1500 central and local government services are fully accessible online (Lember et al., 2018), nearly 100 per cent of citizens have a digital ID, close to a third of votes in national and local elections are cast electronically, most citizens declare their taxes and manage their prescriptions online, and most medical records can be accessed online (Kattel & Mergel, 2019).

Up to now, the X-road and digital IDs have formed the backbone of public services, and underpinned the majority of daily operations. Now, in light of recent advances in digital technologies, the Estonian Government has started developing plans for a radical upgrade of the existing e-government infrastructure. As explained in a White Paper published in 2020, in the new system, “artificial intelligence enabled virtual assistants should become the main way the government provides services” (Vaher, 2020: 44). On this vision, the present X-road based information exchange system would be replaced by “technical message rooms” where an entire ecosystem of loosely coupled “virtual assistants, back-end information systems and chat bots ... exchange data between one another and cooperate” (Vaher, 2020: 51-52). Such a change in both the underlying technological infrastructure and the operational logic of public services would constitute a radical transformation in the daily operations of public organisations. Though the broader infrastructure has yet to be developed, and may not be completed for some years still, the development of publicly managed virtual assistants and chat bots is already well underway, and according to the latest National AI Strategy, 130 solutions involving an AI element have already been developed and implemented in the public sector (MKM, 2024).

“Demystifying through myth”: communicating AI-powered e-government solutions

In the documents introducing the vision for the implementation of AI in the Estonian public sector, AI-powered solutions are commonly referred to as *kratt*. Though sometimes translated as ‘goblin’ in English, the name of *kratt* is not easily translatable. It refers to a well-known character from Estonian mythology; a man-made creature brought to life with the help of the devil. In folk tales, possessing a *kratt* enables its owner to attain considerable material gain, but also brings certain risks as the *kratt* does not always do its master’s bidding, and can

turn against its master when left idle. The figure of kratt is well documented in Estonia's oral tradition (Mihkelev, 2019; Valk, 2014b) and features prominently in local culture, inter alia serving as the title character of the first Estonian ballet (Eduard Tubin, Kratt, 1943; most recently staged in 2015), and more recently appearing as a character in the cult novel Rehepapp (Kivirähk, 2000) – still the most popular work of fiction in Estonia two decades after its publication (Postimees, 2018).

According to the vision document for Next Generation Digital Government Architecture (Vaher, 2020, 45), kratt was introduced as a synonym for artificial intelligence “due to its inherent similarity” with the technology. This equivalence has been so thoroughly accepted in organisational narratives that kratt is used throughout the documents in our corpus of texts as a generic name for any solution based on automation, while the AI-powered virtual assistant envisioned to revolutionise public service provision is officially called bürokratt – a wordplay on bureaucracy and kratt – or #KrattAI in English. The name has also been attached to various compounds such as ‘kratikava’ (AI strategy), ‘kratitugi’ (AI support), and ‘kratijupid’ (open source AI building blocks).

It is interesting to note that when used to refer to AI, parallels are drawn not only between the benefits, but also the risks of kratt and the technologies it represents. On one hand, kratt is introduced as a helper, “an artificial man-like creature meant for manual labor” (Vaher, 2020: 45). At the same time, as clarified in the foreword of an expert report on the implementation of AI (Riigikantselei, 2019: 5):

*“67% of Estonians expect us to be rather careful in implementing this powerful technology. This is why we have started calling artificial intelligence solutions by the colloquial name of kratt and Estonia's AI action plan kratikava. This is a big opportunity and powerful tool for Estonia, but one which has to be implemented responsibly and safely, so that the kratts – just as in folklore – do not bring evil down upon us through neglect.”**

According to its promoters, it is precisely this dual nature of kratt that makes it eminently suitable as a metaphor for AI. As clarified by the expert largely responsible for popularising the name, the object of choosing this particular name was to make these new technologies more familiar through association with a well-known character, while addressing some potential fears:

*“.. the whole push for using kratt was to do with – though it might seem ironical – demystifying through myth. An oxymoron, perhaps. But the idea was that none of my kids know what artificial intelligence is. But everyone knows what a kratt is. And through that, maybe even through the humour that is associated with it, it could be made into something simpler and more understandable to people. That is to say, to tone down the fear of the unknown, but at the same time to preserve the contradiction [moral ambiguity of the character]” (Int1)**

In terms of leveraging familiarity and novelty, then, the myth of kratt was deliberately introduced into organisational narratives from the broader socio-cultural environment in order to “facilitate” change by bridging “the strange to the familiar” (Pondy, 1983; cited in Chreim, 2005: 571).

AI as a mythical helpmate

Kratt was not the only mythical creature we found in narratives crafted by organisational elites to introduce AI. For instance, to clarify how the new virtual assistant might work, the vision document that first set out the concept of bürokratt (Sikkut et al., 2020, p. 2) contains the following imagined dialogue between a citizen named Pille and a character named Siil (Estonian for ‘hedgehog’):

“Pille is comfortably sipping away at her morning coffee when her smartphone activates. The virtual helper Siil that came with the phone’s software says in clear Estonian:

“Good morning, Pille! You have ten new messages.”

“Are any of them important and urgent?” asks the woman.

“Only one – a notification from the Police and Border Authority. Your passport will expire in 6 months.”

“Then there’s lots of time. Siil, add a notification to my calendar to renew my passport a month before the expiration date,” orders Pille.

“Alright. But last week you bought plane tickets to fly to Thailand next month. According to information from the foreign ministry, you need a passport that is valid for at least 6 months to enter the country,” clarifies Siil. “Should I order the new passport?”

“Yes, Siil – order me a new passport,” orders Pille again.

*“Alright, I will get in touch with the kratt of the Police and Border Authority....”**

The story continues with the details of the procedure of ordering a new passport, including scanning fingerprints and taking a picture with her phone, and concludes with Pille musing over the comfort of living in a digital state as she finishes her morning coffee. This story is remarkable in several ways, not least because, unlike the ambivalent kratt, it depicts AI as strictly positive and narrates what an interaction between two AI solutions might look like, with Siil communicating with a kratt to apply for a new passport. It is equally interesting to note that Siil, like kratt, is a well-known creature from Estonian mythology. As explained in a footnote to the dialogue (Sikkut et al., 2020: 2), Siil “was a good councillor in the national epic Kalevipoeg”, helping the hero Kalevipoeg win a fight against a group of demons by giving him advice on how best to attack them.

The stated motivation for the choice of the name of Siil for the virtual assistant is that it “is a working name for the purposes of the vision paper to ensure that the example is technology neutral” (Sikkut et al., 2020: 2). Yet, since in popular culture, Siil has become the symbol of a “universal helpmate”, making the hedgehog almost a “national animal” (Laak, 2013), the name also serves the function of further underlining the nature of the new technologies as something helpful and familiar.

AI as a source of mythical power

The association of AI with mythical creatures like kratt or Siil implicitly opens the possibility that thanks to AI, its users might be able to access previously unattainable mythical powers. We find that this possibility is also explored explicitly – and affirmatively – in the narratives put forwarded in the documents in our sample. Notably, the national digital agenda for 2030 (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications (MKM), 2021) contains a whole chapter describing a vision of the future of the country as a “nation full of digital power” (MKM, 2021). The Estonian term used to capture this vision – ‘vägi’ – is actually a close, but not exact equivalent of ‘power’, and has a strongly mythical connotation in the Estonian language. As explained in the English version of the digital agenda (MKM, 2021: 9):

“Vägi is an evocative word with a long history as it is among the 300 oldest words in the Estonian language. In Estonian mythology, many things can have “vägi”: trees, songs and

words, even rocks. It's an invisible and somewhat magical power that the item or person possesses. And so it is an appropriate word to describe a digital society: aided by invisible and intangible power that gives us tools to be more. It is somewhat even magical and a power that needs to be carefully mastered."

This highly symbolic term is evoked again and again in the Estonian text to underline the potential of new technologies for opening up new possibilities and improving the lives of their users. For instance, to emphasise the link between the adoption of new technologies and the attainment of new power, the document speaks of 'digivägi' (digital power). Similarly, the term 'krativägi' is coined for talking about "AI-powered government" (MKM, 2021: 16). As further explained in the digital strategy (MKM, 2021,: 9):

"With digital "vägi" or "power" we wish to keep the valuable things we have established but believe that the Estonian digital society can be further improved. Estonia is already known as a strong digital society in the world, but we are capable of so much more. We want Estonia to be full of digital power - competent and more powerful than anyone could otherwise expect for such a small country. Therefore, we can always make the best use of the possibilities of digital technology."

The message communicated above is clear: adopting these new technologies constitutes a unique possibility for gaining powers and capabilities that no one "could otherwise expect" to reach. Accordingly, swapping out existing practices in favour of new technologies is made out to be highly desirable. This promise of exciting new possibilities thus addresses the other half of the puzzle of balancing novelty and familiarity, making sure that the narrative remains captivating even once it has been made more familiar (Dalpiaz & Stefano, 2018).

Discussion

Myths as translation tools for reconciling technology and identity by balancing familiarity and novelty

It is commonly accepted "that individual consumers, employees, investors and other stakeholders in fact all invoke fictions" when speaking or thinking about organisations (Savage et al, 2017: 976) to the extent that fiction has been described as a "routine element of organizational life" (Savage et al, 2017: 977). Yet, while all "collective identity narratives are fictive histories" (Brown, 2006: 741), explorations of organisational identity usually focus

more on fictions generated within organisations, instead of those borrowed from the outside. Indeed, in his seminal book on storytelling in organisations, Gabriel (2000: 22) stated that “organizational stories develop their characters and plots not from the folkloric universe of enchanted forests and crystal mountains, but, as the modernists argued, from the personal experiences of individuals in organizations”.

Though that may be the general rule, the case explored here demonstrates that myths sourced not from within the organisation, but from the broader socio-cultural environment can be highly valuable as communication tools. For individuals, “how we understand ourselves is shaped by larger cultural and historical formations, which supply much of our identity vocabularies, norms, pressures and solutions, yet which do so in indirect and subtle ways” (Alvesson et al, 2007: 11). The same is intuitively true of organisations, though the way in which contextual factors such as national cultural settings influence identities within organisations is still little understood (Brown, 2015). Our examination of the uses of mythology in narrating technological change reveals one way in which myths can benefit organisations by demonstrating how using local myths can help organisations navigate the tensions between familiarity and novelty. It also provides valuable insights on how to craft organisational narratives and maintain a sense of continuity and coherence in times of radical organisational change.

Though storytelling is, in theory, “a democratic resource” that is “available to anyone with a story to tell” (Beigi et al., 2019: 458), it can also become a powerful tool for control, since “the plasticity and interpretative flexibility of narratives” makes them particularly useful for communicating information to audiences in such a way as to “secure acquiescence and enthusiasm” (Rhodes & Brown, 2005: 174). In the case examined in our study, equating AI with kratt channels the narrative towards a certain representation of this new technology. It is no longer and abstract, unfamiliar concept that is difficult to comprehend or visualise, but a character with certain well-known properties – both positive and negative – which can be exploited with relative ease.

Notably, the myth offers no clarification on *how* this new technology actually works. Instead, the narratives uncovered here focused on *what* the proposed technological innovations have to *offer*. What they communicate, then, is not technical knowledge, but “experience” and “emotion” (Paca and Rozuel, 2024: 3). By evoking these myths, organisational elites focus change narratives away from the considerable technical complexity of implementing the

proposed changes, and towards the potential gains, promising to deliver a powerful new helper for organisation members and citizens alike. At the same time, the authors of the narratives are careful not to dismiss or trivialise existing concerns. For a narrative to “ring true”, it has to present a certain level of “verisimilitude” with “experience and the events occurring in the external world” (Chreim, 2005:570). A narrative that only praises the potential benefits of AI and ignores the risks would, therefore, be unlikely to convince an audience that is apprehensive towards this new technology. The power of kratt as a symbol lies precisely in this capacity to accommodate both the light and the dark side of this technology – by casting risks in a more familiar form, they are made more manageable.

The power of myths more generally lies in their ability to “set agendas, express emotions, and fashion ways of thinking” (Gabriel, 2004: 3), making the powerful managerial tools (Kostera, 2008) for delivering “collective meaning and a joint purpose” (Paca and Rozuel, 2024: 3). In times of transformational change, identity narratives have the crucial task of establishing a sense of continuity from the past through the present and towards the future in such a way as to make the vision of the future familiar enough to be comfortable and novel enough to be desirable. Myths help create such connections by “re-enacting” the past in the present and providing “participation for the current generation in something that happened” – or is imagined to have happened – “long ago” (Kostera, 2008: 3). In this context, fictional stories act as a “transportation vehicle to other places, times and technologies” (Beigi et al. 2019: 459); for instance to a time when there were no computers, and the only way for someone to lighten their workload was to build a magical helper from such materials as were readily available.

By evoking links between past, present and future, myths help organisation members in “making temporal sense of organizations” (Vaara & Tienari, 2011: 370). Indeed, in this context, the past can be seen as a guarantor for the future (Annus, 2000), ensuring that the one is not seen as wholly separate from the other, but as the logical continuation of a process started long ago. In this way, new technologies are rendered less “strange” and more familiar since they are a reiteration of a familiar concept in a new form. At the same time, their novelty is not compromised, since this new form still promises significant gains on the past and present. The attention of audiences is thus focused on “stability” and “coherence with the past” (Chreim, 2005: 570) while promising a new and even better future.

Conclusion

Though there is some evidence that new technologies are changing the way we tell stories (Beigi et al., 2019), the stories we tell *about* these technologies do not necessarily have to be new. The myths in our case are quite the reverse. Indeed, it is precisely the familiarity of these myths that makes them so useful. Though these particular myths stem from a very specific cultural tradition, we believe the practice of drawing on myths to consolidate identity narratives in the context of technological change can easily be translated to other contexts. For one thing, kratt-like helpers are not just found in Estonia – the golem made of mud and brought to life through incantation is a well-known figure in Jewish folklore, for instance. Moreover, other kinds of mythical narratives may well be more appropriate in other contexts. We hope these insights may inspire other researchers to explore the potential of myths for helping to craft organisational identity narratives, and encourage practitioners to explore myths from their own local context which could be brought into organisational narratives. After all, if we want to keep our bearings in this period of disruptive change, the (imaginary) past may prove more relevant than ever.

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Table 1. Data sources

List of documents included in the analysis, commissioned and published by the following public bodies: the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications (MKM; <https://mkm.ee/en>), the Information System Authority (RIA; <https://ria.ee/en>), the Government Office (Riigikantselei; <https://www.riigikantselei.ee/en>), the Government (<https://valitsus.ee/en>), the Parliament (Riigikogu, <https://www.riigikogu.ee/en/>), the Ministry of Education and Research (HTM; <https://www.hm.ee/en>), the Ministry of Justice and Digital Affairs (JM; <https://www.justdigi.ee/en>)

Document Title	Author / Owner	Year	Description	Pages
#Bürokratt: teekaart aastaks 2020	MKM, RIA	2019	Overview of planned steps in development of KrattAI in 2020	14
Eesti tehisintellekti kasutuselevõtu eksperdirühma aruanne	Riigikantselei, MKM	2019	Expert group report on the adoption of AI in Estonia	65
Estonia's national artificial intelligence strategy 2019-2021	Government of the Republic of Estonia	2019	Estonia's national artificial intelligence strategy 2019-2021	10
Next Generation Digital Government Architecture	Vaher, Kristo, RIA	2020	Vision document published by the Chief Technology Officer of the Republic of Estonia on the architecture of digital government and bürokratt	120
Bürokratt: digiriigi järgmine arengutase e-Eestis. Visioon ja konseptsioon	MKM	2020	Vision document for KrattAI.	6
#KrattAI: the next stage of digital public services in #eEstonia	MKM	2020	Vision document for KrattAI. English version	7
Eesti Digiühiskond 2030	MKM	2021	Estonian version of the digital development agenda published by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications	64
Estonia's Digital Agenda 2030	MKM	2021	English version of the digital development agenda published by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications	54
Eesti 2035	Riigikogu	2021	General overview document of the national development strategy until 2035. Adopted by Parliament in May 2021.	31
Estonia 2035	Parliament	2021	General overview document of the national development strategy until 2035. Adopted by Parliament in May 2021. English version.	32
#Bürokratt: teekaart aastaks 2021-2022	MKM, RIA	2021	Overview of planned steps in development of KrattAI in 2021-22	20
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