

Creating Change Through Storytelling

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: Stories are all around us. They inspire us. They connect us. They ignite our emotions. And they can lead to tangible impact.

Yusuf Omar has made it his life's mission to promote storytelling as a vehicle for change, and to mobilize communities across the globe to shape their own narrative.

After an accomplished career in journalism, Yusuf was disillusioned with traditional media. He felt the urge to innovate, and so he decided to co-found his own media initiative with his wife, Soumaya. They co-founded Hashtag Our Stories — a media company that aims to cut the middle man and go straight to citizen journalists, providing them with inventive tools to create quality content.

During Global Goals Week at Expo 2020 Dubai, Yusuf discussed the vital role that storytelling plays to engage and inspire audiences to achieve impact. After the talk, we sat down with Yusuf to learn about how he thinks storytelling can increase the impact of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs.

I'm Tariq Al Olaimy, and this is "People and Planet", a podcast from Expo 2020 Dubai's Programme for People and Planet, where changemakers from all over the world breakdown what it will take to create a sustainable future for our planet.

[INTRO STING]

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: Human beings have been telling stories as long as there's been language and art to express them, and you are someone who has pioneered this ancient craft. You think in stories, you remember in stories, you experience and interpret the world in stories. And it's a pleasure to have you with us.

YUSUF OMAR: Thank you. That was such a romantic introduction. Really poetic. I love it.

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: I'd love to start from the beginning. Can you tell us a little bit more about your upbringing, the environment you grew up in, and how it inspired you to tell stories?

YUSUF OMAR: I'm basically the result of migrants, of migrants, of migrants. So about 150-160 years ago, Indians arrived in South Africa. Some of them came as indentured laborers that were basically building railway tracks and sugarcane plantations. And then there's the generations of merchants that arrived. And that was my great grandparents that arrived from Gujarat to South Africa.

As I'm sure you know, the apartheid system was an awful thing that existed then, and today, in other parts of the world. That wasn't ideal. It forced various races to live in their own segregated communities. It deprived them of different types of education, different bathrooms, different buses. And my dad's father didn't want his kids to grow up in that world, where they were very limited about the opportunities that they could have. So when my dad was just three years old, they got on a ship and headed to the UK in the 1950s.

Long story short, that's where I was born.

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: And do you remember the first story that was told to you?

YUSUF OMAR: Do I remember the first story that was told to me? That's a really good question. I think the first stories that were told to me would have almost certainly been religious stories. Because as somebody who has grown up Muslim, I would have been taught Souras and Kalimas. And, actually we see my name, Yusuf, as a prophetic name. So I think religion, Islam, was probably the first story that was told to me.

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: And I'd love for you to tell us a little bit more about the variety of all of these previous experiences of where you worked, what you did and how they shaped that passion for storytelling as you grew up and now in the current day.

YUSUF OMAR: Well, let me start by saying, I finished a degree in marketing and management, and I actually did the final year in the U.S. And I finished it and headed to New York City. And I was sitting in Times Square, looking up at these giant billboards.

MUSIC

YUSUF OMAR: I was like, "this is the Mecca of marketing, right?" And in that moment, I looked up at a guy with a big tighty whitey jockey. And in that second, I realized I don't want to do marketing anymore. Like: "Be this man, wear these underpants." That was not what I was put on this Earth for: to sell underpants. So I had a real middle-class lack of direction, started applying for everything, from

biomedical science... And I didn't even remember, honestly, that I applied for journalism. Didn't cross my worldly mind.

And then one day I got an email — I'm sitting in Australia at the time — to say that I got a scholarship to study journalism in South Africa. I was like, what is this? I phoned my parents. And my mum was like, "Accept it quickly, in case they realized they made a mistake."

That's how little confidence we had in this entire opportunity. So I accepted it, went off to South Africa with really no thoughts of ever being a journalist. And to be honest, no teacher ever recommended me to be a journalist. It never crossed my worldly mind. I was not particularly strong in school. I'm not very... still not very good at reading. And fell in love with the idea of being a storyteller for a living. Being able to share narratives, being able to travel, meet people, talk to people for a living — what a thing.

And South Africa was an amazing place to be a journalist. It's still young, it's a 26-27-year old country. It's deeply divided. There is huge crime and inequality. And that makes it a very easy place to be a journalist. There's stories everywhere.

MUSIC

YUSUF OMAR: I wanted to be a foreign correspondent though. I wanted to tell stories of wars and natural disasters, and to really see the world. And every newsroom that I asked said no. They said, "You're too young," "You don't have enough experience." And to be honest, the golden age of foreign correspondents was behind us. The time where you had somebody stationed in Russia.

So in 2010, I packed a backpack full of old T-shirts and this head full of crazy young dreams and started hitchhiking, from South Africa to Syria, from Durban, which is on the east coast of South Africa to Damascus.

And I had always seen this narrative of Africa as this big, bad, scary place, right? I've seen Danny Archer and Blood Diamond, and these kinds of narratives of child soldiers and famine. And what I saw was the complete opposite. ***1 SEC PAUSE*** I saw some of the fastest growing economies in the world. I saw a young population. I saw stories of hope and aspiration, and that trip really taught me two things.

One, it taught me how to really focus on solutions, and see that there is a different story that traditional media is often not capturing. And two, it taught me how to become a one-man-band storyteller, or what became known as a “mojo,” mobile journalist. The ability to write stories and shoot and edit and write tweets, you know, have many different storytelling weapons at my disposal.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And as you're speaking I'm getting this image that what you are incredibly good at is also making visible all these invisible stories that are around us... And I'd love for you to tell me a little bit more about what solutions journalism is. I know it's a type of journalism that was recently created, and if you could speak more to what inspired you to it and explain to the audience what is at its core and its essence.

YUSUF OMAR: Yeah, definitely. So there's lots of different words that are used, right? People will use solutions-based journalism, solutions-based storytelling, constructive journalism. And I'm not one that really cares for definitions too much; I'm more about the essence of what we're trying to do here.

So we might not necessarily have a tangible solution for racism, inequality, but we can talk about things in a very constructive way. Right? We can take the conversation forward. We can bring people to the table. So I think these are the two camps that we are at the intersection of: solutions-based storytelling and this kind of constructive journalism. And I honestly believe that: two things: one, it's a lot harder than normal journalism.

Anyone can report what's happening, but do they really understand why it's happening and how we can make it better? That takes a different layer of insights. And the second thing, I would say is, in an age where a lot of journalism is going to be automated, and a lot of storytelling is going to be automated. I'll give you an example. if you are covering the Olympics, it's easy for an algorithm to say it was Usain Bolt ran this date, on this time, at this distance, and... You can automate that storytelling.

MUSIC

YUSUF OMAR: At a time where storytelling is going to be automated for the simple stuff, for the, what happened, where it happened, we, as storytellers, really need to focus on the why and the how and the insights and the analysis. And that's why I think this solutions-based storytelling space, this constructive journalism space, is so interesting.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Incredible. And I also want to contrast that... You were speaking at Global Goals week at Expo 2020. Obviously everything that you talked about, you can also frame in one version through the SDGs; you're talking about

health and wellbeing. You're talking about poverty. You're talking about gender equality.

And, I wonder if you can tell us a little bit more about the turning point of when you decided that you were done with more traditional journalism and instead decided to co-found Hashtag Our Stories with your partner in goodness, I believe your wife Soumaya.

YUSUF OMAR: Yeah, Soumaya is amazing. And I wish she was here in this podcast, but hopefully she can join a future episode.-

So I go from working in newspapers in South Africa to working in a TV station in 24 hour reporting and that kind of stuff, to moving to India and becoming the Mobile Editor of the Hindustan Times where I had to train 750 people to tell stories on their phones — that was just our journalists alone — to eventually going to CNN International. And that was my dream job. I'd always wished to be: "This is CNN," you know? And, be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it.

MUSIC

YUSUF OMAR: A few things became very clear to me. We were at the time, if you remember...

Two of the biggest stories of our time. Traditional media completely missed both of them.

Nobody thought Brexit was going to happen. And nobody thought Trump was going to win the elections, no matter what they tell you today. And the reason for

it, we believe, is because they weren't listening to real people and real stories anymore. It was all experts and pundits and commentators, and those people were far more educated, more wealthy, more elitist than the average people on the ground.

And that's a huge issue. So, not listening to people was basically, in my opinion, meaning that we weren't having an accurate portrayal of what's happening in the world.

I saw a critical lack of diversity. In an office where there might be 200 international reporters, I was the only one that I know that identified as Muslim. And you know, people are coming to me to ask me, "Well what should we do with this?" I'm like, I don't know, I'm not even a very good Muslim, I'm the wrong person to ask.

We realized, okay, media lacks diversity, critically, and they're never going to be diverse enough internally. So what do you have to do? You have to train external communities to tell their own stories, and then we can have a really diverse newsroom. And two, they're obsessed with negativity, right? Twenty people have to die before it's a story. These two things: an obsession with negativity and a lack of diversity.

MUSIC

YUSUF OMAR: And we started telling people about our idea. We start saying to newsrooms and thought leaders, and speaking on keynotes, "We got an idea. We're going to train communities how to tell their own story" — because they already have access to Facebook and Instagram and Snapchat, but a lot of people don't know how to tell a story — and we're going to curate that into shows.

And we think that there's an iceberg. And at the moment.. at the very top is all of the stuff... the user generated content that the media is curating. It's the funny stuff like Chewbacca Mom; it's the messed up stuff like a terror attack. But we say below that, there's billions of voices.

YUSUF OMAR: And people laugh at us. Literally, at conference after conference, they mock us, they laugh at us. And you can leave that situation feeling disheartened, but it did the complete opposite to Soumaya and I. We left that, and we were like, "Oh my word". They don't get it. ***1 SEC PAUSE*** They don't see it. They don't see this enormous opportunity. They don't see that we can literally create a media organization from people's perspectives. We don't need their infrastructure. We don't need their satellite trucks. Still with journalists, fact checking and verifying and making sense of it all.

And yeah, a couple of years later and we've done it.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And you've met and heard stories of people from all over the world. Are there any stories from the storytellers using Hashtag Our Stories that really stuck with you to this day?

YUSUF OMAR: We cover a variety of different topics. We have nine shows. We have Our Money, which looks at entrepreneurship; Our Minds, which is mental health; Our Health, which is physical health; we have Sex Ed, which looks at sex education. And in each of those shows are incredible stories that will stick with me forever that were told by storytellers themselves. We didn't have to hold their hands. We provide them with tool kits and they tell their own story.

MUSIC

YUSUF OMAR: Some of my personal favorites include... During peak COVID-19 in New York City, there was this Muslim gravedigger in New York City. And he's a proper New Yorker. He's got the big jacket and he's like a really cool, tough guy, and it's cold and he's wearing gloves. And he's bawling his eyes out. He is crying and crying as he's in the graveyard. And he's just like, "Make sure you guys isolate. Make sure you guys stay at home because I'm seeing COVID-19 on the frontline." '

That story hits home for me hard because, though he's a Muslim gravedigger doing Janazah funerals, and those funerals might be slightly different to another New York funeral, at his essence, he's sharing the same universal themes of sorrow and loss and hardship and being that unsung hero, that's having to put his life on the line and be a frontline worker in drastic circumstances.

And that's where we're at. For me, you talk about the North Star or guiding light: we're creating the world's biggest human experience library. He's sharing a human experience. People are sharing different mental health human experiences, and I think that's incredibly valuable.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Of course we are in Expo 2020, which is being held in the middle of a pandemic, which is an orchestra of different human experiences that are coming together from different countries and pavilions and peoples. And of course, one of Expo 2020's slogans is, "Connecting Minds and Creating the Future". And I wonder as you've experienced the Expo, what are your thoughts on it as it relates to storytelling?

YUSUF OMAR: So the Expo has completely dumbfounded me. It blew my worldly mind and I mean that with the biggest sincerity. I will say it on record: It is the singular greatest event I've ever attended. Ever. And I've attended events in about a hundred countries. It is of a scale and creativity like you can... It's unreal. It's just nuts.

I was expecting it to be a bunch of countries saying, "Hey, come and visit us." But what it is is a bunch of countries saying, "We have the tools to save the world. Let's do this."

MUSIC

YUSUF OMAR: I've seen Rwandans that are trying to deliver blood with drones because they've got bad roads in the mountains. I've seen communities in Peru that are using nets to collect water on the mountains. I've seen all these local innovations that could apply to so many other communities around the world.

And I suppose you could say: "okay, you can find that information online, right? Why do you have to have an Expo?" Where the Expo gets really interesting is that it gamifies learning. It's very immersive. When you're learning about solar, you're operating a solar panel with your hands and you're navigating it and trying to catch the sun, which is on a big plasma screen in front of you.

When you're looking at artificial intelligence, you're looking at an enormous brain, the size of a building that's in front of your eyes and learning about how the internet connects all of our minds. It visualizes things that are really difficult as a storyteller to visualize. And that is an incredible thing.

Especially off the back of a pandemic, where we've all been isolated for two years, it's quite humbling to be like, "Wow." People have been working on some really creative stuff. They've been pushing the needle forward in a bunch of interesting ways. It literally feels like you're about 10 years into the future here, complete with security guard robots that tell you off for not wearing a mask.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And it's the world's greatest show, but it's also the world's greatest platform, also, of solutions. And you gave a masterclass at Expo 2020 on January 19th, called Creating Positive Impact, for Expo's SDGs Storytelling Lab event which was held at Global Goals Week.

I'd love for you to tell us a little bit about the masterclass and what you covered as it relates to global goals.

YUSUF OMAR: I gave a session where I basically made the case that good storytelling is not a sidebar. It is the singular most important vehicle to bring about change.

ARCHIVAL RECORDING

[Yosuf Omar's speech in Expo Talks]

YUSUF OMAR: I've been a journalist for a long time. I've been a foreign correspondent in Syria, I've traveled to about 100 countries. I've seen bad and good storytelling. Bad storytelling is fluff, right? It's just distracting, we don't know what to focus on. Good storytelling is everything. It's literally what we get behind. It's what people... it galvanizes people to make real fundamental differences to address these goals, to address the Sustainable Development Goals. It's so important, good storytelling.

So, like at the Expo, there's so many interactions where you can touch things and do things and play games and experience things. That's immersive storytelling and it's so good. Like it goes right to the heart. You can also do it through a mobile camera.

My company's created augmented reality lenses where we can use a koala to navigate us through national parks in Australia. We've created lenses so you can use your face to recycle and swap between waste. You can use a bee and navigate it to find pollen and avoid pesticides. Interactions, games, with your face, that engages young people. And we've seen four million people in the last year alone play these games. So people love it when they can interact with storytelling.

Back to the interview with Yusuf Omar:

YUSUF OMAR: The second idea that I spoke about was the idea of sustainability being focused on solutions-based stories. The sustainability narrative of, 'we got too much plastic in the ocean. Oh, there's too much garbage on this site...' It's tiring. We don't want to watch it. We don't want to share it. Our generation has been inundated with negativity through our mobile phones since the day we were born. We want answers. So sustainability has to focus on solutions. It has to focus on answers. We have to say problem and solution, and that's highly shareable content. Look at your Facebook timeline. People share solutions.

And the third opportunity that I spoke about was mobility, and the idea of mobilizing communities to tell their own stories. We don't need to send a correspondent out to tell a story for somebody else. We should empower those communities to tell their own stories and give them toolkits.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: I love those examples. And I just want to fish a little bit for now on that last point. It's really interesting. You mentioned the impact of storytelling and also its potential actually for achieving the SDGs in so many different ways. What does that mean to the everyday citizen? How can they equip themselves with these tools? How can they empower themselves in becoming storytellers, really bringing those narratives and shaping those narratives out in the world?

YUSUF OMAR: The first thing I would say is you do not need to spend any money. You don't need to buy a microphone or lights or a tripod or any equipment. Most people have a Ferrari in their pocket, but they're driving it in first gear. They've got this 4k or high definition phone, which they can capture footage, which to the average citizen is indistinguishable from a broadcast camera. You have the power already. You just got to start using it.

Secondly, start communicating through the camera. Try moving your communication with your friends and family from texting them on WhatsApp or text, to starting to send videos, because then you'll start thinking in terms of visual storytelling. And third, don't be precious.

I think sometimes we hold ourselves back from this opportunity to share our story because we worry that it's not of a certain standard. It's not good enough. The internet has never been more forgiving of shaky, handheld, bad-quality audio. It doesn't matter. I could shoot something on a \$100,000-\$200,000 camera and the stories that we get from a community in Kenya will perform 10 times better. So, really like you don't have to be precious. Start getting content out there and looking at how people respond. And that's the only way you're going to learn.

MUSIC

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And for many, the SDGs might feel like this distant and intangible concept. It's hard to open to that complexity. How does storytelling help to make that impact real? And can you give examples of fields that your storytellers have covered, like the one that you mentioned in Kenya, that maybe made these on paper ideas and concepts and visions, tangible for the everyday person?

YUSUF OMAR: I think most individuals and organizations today are trying to do the right thing, right? You see companies across the board that have CSI and CSR initiatives that are aligning themselves with the SDGs, even if they don't quite know it yet. So I think that's a great place to start in terms of finding stories, right? Even in your immediate community, you can find recycling programs that are taking place, gender equality movements that are taking place, and tapping into those stories.

The thing is the internet is a very competitive landscape. There's a lot of noise. You really have to try and find stories that make you say, "wow."

So for example, we've got a storyteller in Cape Town who we did a story on, on how he turns human urine into bricks. He uses human urine and biomimicry as an agent combined with a bacteria to create bricks at room temperature, which is a huge innovation. You don't have to rely on these big ovens. It's very scalable. It's amazing. So, that's the kind of story I tell my friends about. I'd be like, "Oh, my word, there is a guy who was taking human urine and making bricks."

I also think when you're finding these stories, we often spend a lot of time capturing the story and not enough time thinking about how it's going to share. So,

aligned with these SDGs and the kinds of innovations that you're finding or the solutions that you're finding, think right from the beginning about your engagement strategy; what is your headline? What is your share text? How are people going to comment? Why would they share this video? Generally, people share things because it represents something about themselves. Right? I share a video about climate change, because like I care about climate change, but understand that before you even go into the project.

I suppose that's the main advice I would give you, if you're trying to align storytelling with the SDGs, go into it trying to understand why somebody would share this content first, because if you can't come up with a good reason for that, you're going to really struggle to gain organic reach, and that's going to get frustrating.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And I wonder, how have you managed to combine many worlds in this one world in which you're operating in of explaining difficult concepts, connecting SDGs with each other, connecting so many different emotions and really expanding our sense of how we're connecting to these issues in a way that's interesting, that's engaging for people, and really what makes Hashtag Our Stories different from traditional media outlets in this sense?

YUSUF OMAR: I think at its core it's people's perspectives. We're not speaking to politicians, we're not speaking to spokespeople and experts. We're speaking to people on the ground and their lived experience, which is tragically and surprisingly ignored. You said a very important word there, you said emotions.

Emotions are at the core of it. You want to make anyone care about climate change, you want to make anyone care about mental health, physical health,

gender equality, even life underwater, find a human emotional connection to that story. It is the only way you're going to win this.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And it's also interesting I think to see the larger platforms are also trying to start... to go into what you share in terms of emotions.

For example, the movie "Don't Look Up," which was this satirical film [mixed reviews] about climate change, and that's trying to work with the many complexities in this space. It's trying to tell these many different stories into one. It's trying to break down and engage audiences in a very different way. And as you said, mixed reviews from how... especially from climate activists like myself to maybe the everyday person that has maybe me never come across these topics before.

And in that context, as you see these larger platforms starting to go into that kind of space, where do you hope to see the future of storytelling?

YUSUF OMAR: The future of storytelling — and I'm obsessed with this idea and I will keep saying it and keep saying it over the next nine years — by 2030, the future of storytelling will be layered onto our world. I wear a pair of camera sunglasses every day of my life. And I've done it since 2016 and I already have screens on my face. I'm not talking about virtual reality. I'm not talking about "removed from the world". I'm talking about layering the internet onto our world.

MUSIC

YUSUF OMAR: We did a project in Boston, about a month ago, and we took a bunch of historical images of Boston and the women's suffragette movements

and other movements in Boston, and the first woman to run the Boston marathon. And we layered those stories onto the city.

So you could walk around with smart glasses around the city of Boston. You could see the stories of what had happened: the protest movements, the first woman to run the race, as she was getting pulled off by the race conductor. You could hear poets that are narrating and explaining that journey. That is where storytelling is heading. It's heading into an incredibly immersive space, where you see the world through somebody else's point of view, literally through their perspective.

And I fundamentally believe if we can walk a day in somebody else's shoes, we really can start to understand their lives. We can create more empathy and more understanding. That's one of the issues that's wrong in the world today, right?

You're somebody living in Europe and you don't like refugees, but you have no context of their life. You have no idea why they left, what they're fighting for. And if you could contextualize it, if you could walk a day in their shoes and see the world through their point of view, you'd actually understand that they're not so different to you, that they aspire to the same things. They also want their kids to go to college. Their kids also watch Game of Thrones.

Like, we have more in common than we have apart, and I really believe the future storytelling, through augmented reality, through immersing yourself in other people's lives, is one of the most effective ways for us to create more empathy.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: It's been such a pleasure to have you with us and thank you so much for weaving these beautiful stories. And thank you so much for walking us through the world, through your eyes, and also through your wearable camera. Thank you.

YUSUF OMAR: Thank you very much.

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: People and Planet is an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai. Creating a sustainable future for our planet, together.

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