How has Storytelling in Contemporary Journalism been Impacted by Digital Technology?

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Abstract: As one of the most significant parts of journalism, storytelling has inevitably been affected by technological advances in digital technology. This paper discusses the impact of digital technology on journalism in terms of content, channels, specialist media outlets and audiences. The analysis shows that digital technology has indeed expanded the scope of storytelling content, that new and updated technologies threaten traditional narratives, and that it has empowered ordinary users to create. But it has also resulted in the prevalence of fake news and challenges to journalistic professionalism, with the entire framework of storytelling in journalism remaining in the hands of authoritative bodies.

Keywords: Journalism, Storytelling digital technology.

1. Introduction

Storytelling in journalism largely determines the direction and quality of a story, and in today’s highly advanced world of digital technology, storytelling has changed dramatically in terms of content, channels and other aspects. This paper analyses the impact of digital media technology on storytelling in journalism through a dialectical analysis of the impact of digital technology on content, channels, profession and audiences. The following questions are addressed: Firstly, how are new technologies affecting media content and is there a threat to journalism in this form? Secondly, how are new technologies changing the channels of journalistic storytelling? Are journalists able to embrace this shift? Thirdly, have digital media technologies really advanced or diminished the storytelling capabilities of professional media organisations? Fourthly, has technology really empowered users to create stories, or does the power remain with professional institutions?

2. Background

Storytelling is a vital part of journalism. If we break down this concept, or rather, what makes a “good” story? Effectively, it would look like this: a story starts with a less obvious or unexpected reason, but it is this reason that directly influences the outcome for which we already have an explanation. In this case, therefore, a story is compelling and surprisingly effective because it satisfies a sufficient condition: a good story always connects cause and effect (Schank, 1996). In addition, another important factor influencing storytelling is the audience, and the way in which the audience can better experience the content and produce better results has been the object of research. A well-told story has the ability to sustain itself, the reader becomes interested in the story and becomes convinced of its content, then a new sub-story is created and the reader is involved, and the reader follows the story to its conclusion.

The impact of the digital age on storytelling in journalism is clear. By adapting to the quality of the traditional media’s earlier technological environment, digital technologies have expanded the scope and output of journalistic practice. The focus of journalism began to shift to the compression and extraction of information content, providing new dimensions of size, brevity, searchability and retrievability. This gave new meaning to storytelling. Journalism’s orientation towards speed changed as a result, and with it came acceleration, immediacy and simultaneity. Increasingly interactive experiences also bring real time and even full time. A marked difference in the collection, sourcing, style, analysis, dissemination and financing of information for storytelling has emerged under the influence of digital technology, which has succeeded in creating new forms of expression: hooks, lists, images, video, artificial intelligence, virtual reality technology, data journalism, and much more. The emergence of these new technologies was quickly adopted by journalism for its distinctive features and created entirely new ways of expression, producing a sea change in the scope of news content, in the way it is presented, as well as in its speed and interactive effects. (Zelizer, 2019).

When we look at modern journalism, the 5Ws and 1Hs of storytelling have changed under the influence of digital media technology, and the results received by audiences have taken on a variety of dynamics.

3. Content: The Disappearance of Narrative Boundaries

Digital technology has also had a positive impact on news content. Writing and language are both technologies used for expression, and journalists cannot report or tell the news without these two elements. History is full of examples of how new technologies have reshaped the content of journalism. Freedom Forum’s Vice President of Technology, Adam Clayton Powell III, also a veteran of television and radio newsrooms, conducted a study at the Freedom Information Media Research Centre on how the advent of video in the 1970s changed the inherent paradigm of storytelling in the era of radio and television news (Powell, 1993).

His research shows that before the advent of video as a form of expression, television news coverage was characterised by longer shots, little editing and an overall slower pace of storytelling. And after video was introduced, the situation changed. The footage was no longer lengthy, the narrative
pace was accelerated and the whole content became faster. Users are able to access a much wider coverage and richer information in a short period of time. In today’s digital world, content has once again undergone a sea change that has been driven, if not caused, by technological change (Pavlik, 2000). It is true that the advent of video has given users more clues and information to understand the content of the news, and when considered from the perspective of McLuhan’s hot and cold media, the advent of video is a ‘hot medium’ in comparison to simple pictures and text. It also deprives the audience of a certain amount of independent thinking, whereas pictures and texts can mobilise the audience to recreate the possibilities. They can fill in the missing pieces themselves, as the ambiguity of the message provides opportunities for imagination.

At the same time, digital technology poses a threat to the content of news stories. The most obvious of these is the involvement of other interest groups. While journalism is supposed to be a symbol of the fourth estate, alongside the legislature, the executive and the judiciary, and a counterweight to all three, as barriers to entry into the media have been lowered, new corporate and government players have begun to enter many areas of journalism not for the public good but for their own purposes. What was once independent journalism began to be complicated by the emergence of public relations and advertising, and by the blurring of journalistic boundaries by various campaigns or propaganda. Here, it is also important to note the emergence of ‘native advertising’. As Carlson (2015) points out, it makes the distinction between editorial and advertising less and less distinct, and the division becomes complex. These factors can further exacerbate the crisis of trust in journalism. It is for these reasons that independent journalism and the social role of the fourth estate are under serious threat (Franklin, 2011).

On the other hand, new technologies have also provided a breeding ground for fake news, with many unverified and unconfirmed stories being spread rapidly, seriously weakening the image of authority of traditional media. For example, the BBC’s unverified report in October 2019 of the presence of 39 Chinese illegal immigrants on a refrigerated container truck in Essex was in fact all of them from Vietnam. Although the BBC subsequently corrected the information, this was undoubtedly a serious content error. In the age of digital media, traditional media should be more established in journalism for their authoritative and accurate news content. What such an incident ultimately leads to is public suspicion and criticism of reputable media organisations.

4. Channel: Immersive Storytelling Experiences

In contrast to the inverted pyramid narrative structure used by traditional media, the digital media era has created a different approach, in which the experience and interactivity is completely different from the past, giving rise to new media reporting models featuring immersive and interactive formats. In January 2012, a Dallas man, a drone enthusiast, flew his drone over a local industrial area and accidentally discovered the secret of a meat processing plant that he was passing through: a creek near the plant was a deep red colour. He immediately contacted the local authorities, who then investigated and discovered that the meat processing plant was processing pig blood through an underground pipe leading to the creek. Tests by the Dallas County Department of Health and Human Services eventually confirmed that pig blood and other toxic wastes were indeed present in the pipes (Tremayne and Clark, 2014).

While such a format brings up many questions about changes in journalism and the specific impact of digital technology on augmented narratives, it also raises thoughts and discussions about the future of journalism, such as the fact that news stories in the age of digital media require certain electronic devices. Technologies such as VR and AR are widely used and hold great promise, but both VR and AR require expensive equipment to experience realistic use. This is not something that the average person can afford. Another concern is the need to teach the public about technology and to train journalists in its use. Both the public and media professionals should understand that the cost of using most technology is negligible and that all it takes is downloading an app for the device they already have. But it has also been suggested that journalism and media students need to learn not only the new technologies of the digital media age, but also their use in storytelling, which will be key to being able to adapt to new trends and gain the ability to work in 21st century news organisations and become well-rounded journalists and editors (Sirkkunen et al., 2016). But some journalists are known for their unwillingness to change and adapt to new technology, in particular when it comes to changes in the way they write and tell stories. And as some news organisations begin to converge and abandon traditional paper and TV channels, some of their older readers and audiences will lose relevance to the medium, no doubt adding to the digital knowledge divide (Vasileiadis, 2019). The emergence and development of mobile phones is a good example of this. Younger people are becoming the main users of mobile phones, while older people are losing the opportunity to experience new forms of news stories due to their insensitivity to mobile devices, and eventually the social news grasped by both will gradually become biased (Pavlik and Bridges, 2013).

5. Profession: New Requirements for the Editorial Team

Public relations professional Dan Middleberg and journalism research professor Steve Ross have done a report study that focuses on revealing the way journalists are using the Internet to tell stories in the digital age (Pavlik, 2000). The authors’ four survey of trends reported. Online Media, on the basis of more than 2,500 replies, demonstrates that subjects are relying more heavily on the use of the Internet and alternative online sources as a front-line messaging resource in their work in the digital media age. At the same time most respondents also said they were using the internet to collect information and additional sources that, in the not-so-distant past of traditional media, had to be sent to newsrooms for processing. When covering breaking news after hours, out of hours, or when no real-time sources were available, news material gathering became very difficult. Today, digital technology has made it increasingly possible to work to deadlines, especially significant in video journalism for the possibility of restoring the scene. This inevitably also raises the bar for journalists’ business skills. This is because it will mean that any journalist in a digital pressroom will have to be able to edit or produce
video operations. As a result, any journalist will be able to make video and audio and edit content on the spot and on deadline. Of course, this can have a significant negative impact on television news, with ever-increasing demands on operational competence and journalists under increasing pressure to be professionally competent (Pavlik, 2000).

Unlike traditional journalism, where information is provided in a single way, the ways of proving authenticity in the digital age are beginning to diversify. One of these is the establishment of appropriate accountability. The concept of “transparency” in journalism offers a reliable way of building credibility and mutual trust, and is the most adapted to today’s digital-dominated journalism. The value of journalism is generally provided in two forms: one in which individuals provide valid information, and the other in which multiple pieces of evidence support it. Unlike print or broadcast journalism, which is extremely restrictive in terms of time and space, there are unlimited opportunities for association and continued depth in online media. Facilitation and connectivity are inherently fundamental constructs of the Internet, and as a result news stories are no longer just discrete entities; instead, seemingly isolated news stories are linked in this way and connected in a multi-source network of information on a variety of topics. In the old days, when the authoritative media dominated the communication relationship, readers and viewers were expected to trust journalists or editors unconditionally, and of course they had no other choice - to believe that the stories were true, and this is one of the reasons for the decline of the traditional media industry today: the stagnant, monopolistic transmission relationship. A good example of this is the CNN effect. The “CNN effect” emphasises the importance of global television networks in determining the actions taken by decision-makers and the outcome of events, especially in the Western media, mainly CNN and BBC. The US began to develop its media industry rapidly after World War II and soon monopolised the global media networks and built its own vast media industry on top of this. Until 2007, the world’s major transnational communications markets were mainly located in Western countries or Japan, and most other media outlets were heavily dependent on the US market (Boyd-Barrett and Xie, 2008). 1980 saw the publication of the report of UNESCO’s International Commission on Communication, Many Voices, One World, also known as the McBride Report. The report noted that there was a preference for Western countries and media in news coverage, and that the dissemination of information was uneven and one-sided (Mansell and Nordenstreng, 2006). But look to digital media, where journalists have achieved relative ‘transparency’ through open source technology, showing where their information comes from in a real and clear way, where all the background to the story is available, where the depth and plot of the story can be carried forward, and where viewers and readers are given equal rights to publish and give feedback on news stories (Hayes and Ceppos, 2007).

6. Audience: Empowered to Participate in Public Discussion

With the increased digitisation of news, digitisation has gradually created a favourable environment for readers to engage in debate and interact with news publications by opening up countless possibilities. Whether in columns or in the news, the comments section has become a new platform for public debate; it offers readers and citizens new ways of engaging with the public sphere in the context of the news. Digitalisation offers the public more possibilities to participate in the comments section, on social media and in relation to sharing columns. The media are also keen to encourage readers to visit their debate sites. The democratic value of a more diverse public debate has emerged (Morlandstø and Mathisen, 2017). Media companies - and advertisers - are also increasingly interested in stimulating audience engagement, as this is indeed a way to increase profits. This is indeed also evidenced on social media, where thousands of online celebrities interact with viewers through photo-video and live-streaming and make a career and profit out of it, a participatory approach to journalism that makes for a more engaging user experience than in the past. People also have the opportunity to speak to government agencies about a number of public issues and political content, breaking the once monopolised right to create stories.

It is also important to see the disadvantages of such a model. While ordinary people can participate in a variety of formats, platforms and channels, such a model of journalism ultimately operates in the framework established by professional news and media organisations. Again, this means that media organisations still have a relatively large amount of influence and impact. While the media industry as a whole is increasingly inclined towards strategies that foster consumer engagement, the differences among industry departments deserve recognition. In contrast to companies engaged in entertainment production, the majority of news organisations have been characterised by a slowness to adapt to consumer engagement and a reluctance to bring audiences into the production arena. There has been considerable evidence of resisting audience engagement and targeting for several decades. The arguments against giving people access to news platforms are widespread in the press: ranging from legal and ethical problems to economic and other resource-related issues, as well as questions about the role of professional journalists (Karlsson, 2015).

7. Conclusion

The above analysis of several factors critical to storytelling in journalism shows that digital technology has had a positive impact on the scope and detail of journalism in terms of content, but also negative impacts such as fake news. The emergence of more advanced technologies in channels has likewise threatened traditional narratives, and learning and using new technologies is a professional challenge for journalists. In terms of the impact on professional media and users, it can be seen that although digital technology has given users the right to publish content, it is still generally within the framework of the authorities. In summary, while digital technology has revolutionised traditional storytelling in journalism in these areas, there are still many problems and opportunities and threats to journalism.

References


