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Paper:

A critical evaluation of the impact of the digital platform on the role of news storytelling – case study of the BBC and the SABC

Abstract

The field of news storytelling has evolved considerably due principally to the fact that it is influenced by changing technological platforms. Consequently, news storytelling is seen to be playing altered roles from the views of both the news providers and the audience. In this paper, I focus on the historical aspects of the online news platform and how it's interaction with society is changing. It basically posits that the news stories themselves have assumed new roles and meaning within society, specifically from the point view of the providers. The paper outlines the research context; the research framework; the structure of the study which includes the main questions, methodology and the initial findings arising from the content analysis; and concludes with some discussions points on the main challenges with regards to conceptualization.

Key words: digital platform, information technology, news storytelling, audience, and society

Research context

Storytelling as an art form has transcended the time. According to Czarnecki 'the concept of storytelling is older than human history itself' (2009:5). Information and knowledge was transmitted orally before written communication was developed. Hubert and Voas (2011:4) traced the history of storytelling forms from early Egyptian hieroglyphics to present-day more visual story styles and noted that, 'as civilizations grew, so did the iconic nature of their storytelling'. Any discussion on storytelling must take into consideration the evolving nature of this art form. Its later-day progression was followed by Czarnecki who notes that in the pre-Internet twentieth century, storytellers used the latest technology to share their stories with the world where they employed the use of vinyl, film, cassette tapes, then videotapes, and eventually compact disks and DVDs (2009:5).

As the world becomes more digitized however, the forms of storytelling too have gone digital. Tan and Mei (2011:608) point out that 'human communication has undergone four processes of spoken and written language communication, print communication, electronic communication and digital communication'. We are now in the era of digital communication where we are experiencing an ever-accelerating rate of change in the platforms that are used to tell stories. Czarnecki (2009:5) again contends that with the emergence of widespread personal computing and the Internet, the relationship between storytelling and technology has transformed such that where technology was previously a tool that could be utilized to reach a wider audience, it has now become a deeply integrated part of the storytelling process and the story itself. Thus, it has

SIGCIS 2012 Workshop- Dissertation proposal presentation

become a tool which is useful not only in telling stories in various different ways, but which could also be used to reach particular audience types in specific ways.

What do we mean by digital media and what is this interaction with storytelling? Digital media, simply put is digitized content that can be transmitted over computer and Internet networks. Tan and Mei (2011:608), reveal that it offers benefits to journalism which transcend those of the era of radio and television. With regards to the issue of what role digital technology is playing in the telling of news stories however, little appears to be written on the subject. Most researchers seem to agree that even with technology, the ability to tell a good story is still paramount. Czarnecki says that 'while going digital may require the storyteller to innovate technologically, the basic principles of how to tell a story remains unchanged' (2009:7). Tom Hallman, a Pulitzer award-winning journalist recognizes that irrespective of the medium being used, news writers must be excellent storytellers (2007:1). Not all researchers argue from this viewpoint, not surprisingly. Marshall McLuhan in his famous works arising from the book *The Medium is the Message* contends that the mediums are the messages in themselves not the contents of the medium; and that the medium and the content are inseparable entities. His Media Ecology theory framework underpins this research even as I investigate relevant areas in his claims in the light of digital media, since his studies were mostly excluded to the print and electronic media eras.

Nonetheless, as noted earlier, new technologies (specifically digital technologies) in themselves can help in the telling of better stories. But this assertion in itself is subject to debate, since society's expectations of what constitutes a good story is changing, as you would find. I therefore seek to critically examine what influence the digital platform is having on the role that news stories are being delivered to play. I also examine news providers' response to the impact from the digital platform.

The case studies

In the study, I employ the use of case studies, i.e. two public news media institutions from two different contexts - the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) and the SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation). The case studies are an integral part of this study as it allows for a deeper investigation of the changing digital platform and the ways in which technological innovation is managed within them. However, where appropriate, relevant news blogs outside these two would also be investigated in order to effectively cover the full scale of formats used in digital news storytelling.

The use of case studies gives me the advantage to narrow down and concentrate attention on the specific elements which I am investigating within these two institutions and platforms. The BBC news website is one of the most accessed news sites in the developed world and likewise the SABC's (from a developing context). The history of the evolution of the BBC is in itself an interesting one, where after going online in the early 1990's, the first attempts at developing content were laughable and shaky at best¹;

¹ Sourced from

http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcinternet/2007/12/brandons_history_of_bbc_on_the_2.html

SIGCIS 2012 Workshop- Dissertation proposal presentation

to the current era of the sophisticated use of 'user-generated content' and multimedia storytelling, (Thorsen, 2010).

That of the SABC is at a different level and takes place within a different time frame, with a venture into digital satellite broadcasting beginning as early as in 1995. However, as at present with regards to it's online platform, it's use of multimedia stories and user-generated content is less than half of all its total content output². Therefore, to analyze these two platforms comparatively will be inadequate. This said, investigating two platforms which cover the spectrum of online media usage across the both the developed and the developing world will give us the imperative to generalize results across varying contexts; which is what we sought to do with this study.

Evolution of ICTs, digital news and the Media Ecology Framework

The evolution of the internet, the 'antecedent' to the highly-evolving digital platform can be traced from 1969 when the first network connections were made; to 1975 when network language was developed and tested; right down to 1981 when users connected (via Arpanet); then to the momentous connection to the early internet itself in 1986. In 1991 the World Wide Web was released which saw the number of users climb up to the historic 1 billion mark which it attained in 2005³. Today, we are still counting, as the number of users worldwide steadily increases, brought on by expansion in access to ICTs in third world countries. For the evolution of digital news however, it started off gingerly with some unsuccessful attempts made as far back as 1983 to distribute news electronically to consumers via specialized techy platforms. The notable headway however was the early foray into online versions of newspapers; where newspapers were simply uploaded unto the online platform (Thurman& Myllylahti, 2009). When the www was invented in the early 1900s however, it completely revolutionized the ways news stories were developed and distributed. This of course led to the decline in the actual newspaper industry. Since then, news providers have struggled to keep up with the rapidly evolving nature of the online news platform, and the smaller entities were the worst hit since they adapted at a slower rate, if at all. Not surprisingly, the area of digital news is still very much seeing innovation with the recent (early 2011) launch of daily news publication exclusively for the tablet⁴. This study follows through these innovations and reconciles attempts by the news providers to keep up to the changing demands of the quirky platform with the physical changes on the platform itself.

The Media Ecology Framework as introduced by Neil Postman in 1968 and popularized by Marshall McLuhan in 1964 has evolved over several eras as well. Centering on the general idea that technology influences society, it transcends 4 'epochs' of tribal, literature, print and electronic era. Applicably, Media Ecology and its relevance to the Internet age is relatively a young phenomenon, emerging long after McLuhan's pre-

² Sourced from <http://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/23/66515.html>

³ Sourced from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6959933.stm>

⁴ Sourced from <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,2045682,00.html>

SIGCIS 2012 Workshop- Dissertation proposal presentation

digital interpretations. Curiously, each researcher's interpretations of this framework differs somewhat; with the North Americans interpreting it as the study of media environment, (environment defined as structures, contents and impacts on society) (Postman 1968, Anton 2006); whereas the Europeans defined it as the study of complex, dynamic systems. Within the changing eras, the interpretations of this framework also changed, even by the same authors. In 1977, McLuhan defines it as being where, 'the various media buttress each other and do not cancel out'. Notably, there occurs in this study a somewhat uneven juncture, where all these different elucidations appear to find a place.

Structure: Research Questions, Methodology, and Initial findings

Employing a mix of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, I hope to answer the overall research question: what is the impact of the digital platform on the role of news storytelling? Specifically, I wish to find out:

1. How does the digital platform facilitate new forms of creative news writing?
2. How successfully are news storytellers adapting their techniques to technological innovations and how might this innovation be better managed?
3. How are news storytellers matching their techniques with the wants and needs of the various segments of the audience (society)?
4. What are some of the potentials that the new storytelling techniques offer in terms of engaging attention to the main details in the news rather than just the headlines?

Using the news website of the BBC and the SABC as the main resource, I started off investigations with a first phase quantitative content analysis over a period of six months, findings of which will feed into the next stage of investigations, i.e. a discourse analysis of content from the websites and a qualitative content analysis of same. I finish off my studies with in-depth interviews of the news providers from these two platforms, with enquiries centered on the information and knowledge emerging from the findings from these combination of methods initially carried out.

In the phase one content analysis, which is the stage where I am now, I quantitatively examine these elements of the news stories on the digital platforms i.e. text stories, graphics, videos etc. Kautsky and Widholm (2008:84) find that, "news websites are not simply digital versions of newspapers but a fusion of radio, television and traditional print media' hence the need to analyze multiple content forms.

Initial trends emerging confirm that, the BBC and the SABC are indeed at different levels with regards to how the digital platform is impacting their news storytelling forms and techniques. This is seen from a number of elements which includes but is not limited to: their use of interactive features; style of storytelling; formats and techniques employed; the rates at which these elements are changed within different stories; and the adaptation of styles, techniques etc. to the different audience types. Hence it is not too far-fetched to postulate that the audience (society) from these two contexts have different expectations of the role that news stories should play, and thus the news

SIGCIS 2012 Workshop- Dissertation proposal presentation

providers are delivering accordingly. The discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis and the interviews will of course lend a deeper understanding to this brief expose.

Discussion points

Not surprisingly, a study of this nature will initially face some challenges with regards to how it is conceptualized, and for me, this is in the areas of the interpretation of terms, critical approach, and the depth of investigations. Here below, I have outlined what are some of these challenges so far, and which I will have to resolve as I proceed:

1. The first issue is with regards to the yardsticks with which to measure the 'digitallity' of the online news platforms of the two case studies, i.e. the BBC and the SABC since they both are at different levels, taking note of course that this is not a comparative study.
2. In terms of what platforms (within the context of the digital) to include or exclude, I have to consider that their might be others which might be relevant and fall under digital news but not covered here, e.g. mobile news.
3. In terms of terminologies, some words are proving problematic e.g. the words 'platform' and 'format' and how they are used. To resolve this, I use platform when referring to the online space, and format when referring to specific online tools such as graphics, videos etc. Also I have defined the word 'technique' in news storytelling as using elements such as add-ons, interactive features, and new media. Also when using the word 'new' to refer to innovations, what exactly constitutes new? E.g. The BBC and the SABC are at different levels in terms of how they utilize the online platform. The use of the terms *digital* and *online* media is also an issue to consider; to what extent can they be used alternately here?
4. In terms of scope of the case study, I am looking at the media institutional level and also at the online news platform level, to what extent I should let the review of the latter supersede that of the former, is a key consideration for me.
5. On the issue of positioning of the case studies, to what extent, can I generalize the results from these two case studies as holding for the whole industry of online news media representation from multiple contexts? And considering that I am also incorporating analysis of news bloggers whose products are based on these two case studies, how do I position the findings from this particular angle vis a vis the case study platforms in itself?
6. In terms of depth and scope of the critical review of the founding framework, how far back to go in reviewing and applying the elements of Media Ecology since it transcends several eras?

SIGCIS 2012 Workshop- Dissertation proposal presentation

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SIGCIS 2012 Workshop- Dissertation proposal presentation

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