

Chapter 2

A Question of Trust: Functions and Effects of Transmedia Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Narrative forms of journalistic reporting are traded as a sheet anchor in many newsrooms, as editors hope that they could brave the never-ending storm of the media crisis. But how does journalistic storytelling evolve from analog to digital? What are the potentials of narrative journalism across multiple media types and platforms? And what effects do such transmedia narratives have on media users? These questions are answered based on a multi-method research design, which includes both an explorative communicator study and an experiment with users. The investigation demonstrates that journalists expect narratives in digital media surroundings to invigorate the authenticity and comprehensibility of their coverage. This hope, however, only partly becomes a reality on the side of the recipients. Indeed, users judge multimedia online reportages to be more emotional than monomedia offline pieces, but as far as remembering and comprehending their contents is concerned, print texts are more effective.

INTRODUCTION: ACCELERATE, DECELERATE

In the digital age, journalistic production is influenced by manifold processes of uninhibited *acceleration*: Not only the time span between an event and its coverage becomes shorter and shorter, particularly in the new media; moreover, there is much evidence to indicate an increased density of journalists' working days (through an increased amount of tasks, both journalistic and non-journalistic) and, thereby, also a reduction in time per task, which results in a reduced length of the prevalent attention cycles and, in many cases, an increased publication frequency (see Krüger, 2014). The consequences are clearly perceptible in everyday news work: While it is often a matter of seconds which newsroom can boast to break a story first, pressure on journalistic actors is notably on the rise. At the same time, the quality of journalistic output appears to be at stake, in many instances: When speed becomes the paramount aim of editorial routines, other quality criteria—such as accuracy, truthfulness, comprehensibility, etc.—necessarily fall behind (see e.g. Eberwein, 2015a).

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In reaction to this maladjustment, many media scholars—as well as practitioners—are calling for a fundamental redefinition of journalism’s identity and its professional purpose (see e.g. Lee, 2014). Rather than following the general obsession with speed, which has become characteristic for most online news platforms around the globe, they argue that *deceleration* is the key to help journalism (re)gain public trust and to fulfill its social function in the best possible way (see e.g. Greenberg, 2007). Particularly high hopes are nourished by the approach of a narrative journalism, which is often said to have multifaceted positive effects, e.g. for generating attention for certain topics and communicating them in a most comprehensible manner (see e.g. Boynton, 2005; Kramer & Call, 2007; Sims, 2007). Success proves them right: Apparently, narrative forms of journalistic reporting have recently been experiencing a proper upsurge in many newsrooms (see e.g. Eberwein, 2013). In fact, quite a few editors are trading storytelling techniques as a sheet anchor that could not only help them to sell their products, but also highlight the social significance of journalistic writing in general and, thus, brave the never-ending storm of the ongoing media crisis, which has irritated the profession to the core.

Indeed, various experimental studies have shown that narrative forms of journalistic reporting have many advantages when it comes to explaining an ever more complex social reality to readers and viewers, while the traditional news form often interferes with remembering and comprehending journalistic contents, among other things (for an overview see Frey, 2014). However, many questions are still unanswered in this context: What does this mean for the future of journalistic genres in the Internet age? How does journalistic storytelling evolve from analog to digital? What are the potentials of narrative journalism across multiple media types and platforms? And what effects do such transmedia narratives have on media users?

Up to now, questions like these have not been analyzed systematically—neither in communication and media studies, nor in adjacent academic disciplines. This paper is supposed to assemble some first answers based on an innovative multi-method design, which combines an explorative communicator study with a reception experiment.¹ Before the empirical studies are presented in detail, however, it is necessary to provide a brief sketch of the underlying theoretical concepts and the previous state of relevant research in this field.

JOURNALISTIC STORYTELLING: DEFINITIONS AND STATE OF RESEARCH

Scientific debates about storytelling have regularly been receiving high levels of attention in recent years (see e.g. Kleine Wieskamp, 2016). The cause for this concern can be seen in an increased interest among media practitioners in the various developments associated with this term: Not only in journalism, but also in other professional contexts—particularly in PR and marketing—the cultivation of well-told stories is considered to be a quality indicator (see Fog et al., 2010; Prinzing, 2015). However, it is striking to see that it remains unclear what this actually means, both in media practice and research. The heterogeneity of scientific definitions of terms like narration, story or narrativity is exemplified by a recent content analysis (Frey & Früh, 2014), for which a broad spectrum of different journal articles from this field of research has been evaluated. They allude to manifold sources from the most different scientific contexts, thereby referring to a multitude of possible key characteristics. So far, a consensus about a universally applicable definition is not in sight.

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