Commentary: Remaking Events, Storytelling, and the News

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Technologies of storytelling express and connect. Well before Lippmann (1922) wrote about *the world outside and the picture in our heads*, technologies of storytelling enabled us to presence voices, events, and issues that would otherwise go unregistered in our collective vision and elude our collective memory. Storytelling facilitates knowing, and technologies of storytelling give form to different modalities of knowing. Journalism presents a particular approach to storytelling, defined by its own set of practices, protocols, and platforms. Like all approaches to storytelling, journalism evolves, and it is context-specific in response to varying historical, sociocultural, political, and economic realities. Modalities of storytelling evolve and the platforms and approaches to storytelling evolve with them, so as to move forward, and so as to remain relevant to contemporary context. Lippmann was writing about public opinion and a different crisis in journalism when he contrasted *the world outside* to *the pictures in our heads* so as to describe the importance of storytelling in preserving continuity between the two. By contrast, the crisis journalism has been facing for the past several years is a crisis of evolved platforms of storytelling and outdated practices of storytelling. It is a crisis of relevance, in that the resulting modalities of storytelling prevailing in journalism are no longer relevant. It is a crisis of context, in that the ensuing modalities of storytelling are not specific to contemporary sociocultural context. *Remaking the news* would require reimagining the form of journalism. The preceding chapters are ultimately about whether news can be remade, and if so, how. Their authors have specific recommendations about how the journalistic tradition of storytelling might be reinvented. I synthesize their approaches and offer my own thoughts on reimagining journalism and remaking what is news.

It is not accidental that I begin this critique by describing journalism as an approach to storytelling and not as a profession. Contemporary platforms invite us to think about journalism as a modality of storytelling that

eliminates the distance between professional and amateur actors and actants of journalism. And it is not by accident that all authors of the preceding chapters make direct references to symbolic interactionism, as the inspiration for contemporary journalism and as its possible salvation. The emphasis on symbolic interactionism pays its respects to the early stages of our field, and also marks a full circle return to our roots. Symbolic interactionism was a progressive effort that placed communication at the center, as academics, scholars, and journalists pondered the world outside: industrialization, urbanization, the big questions of democracy and freedom, the role of press and media, the place of social progressivism and social welfare, the possibility for economic progressivism, regulation and antitrust mentalities, civil rights, feminism/women's rights, technology, the role of science, and a set of ethics to guide them all as they made sense of the changing world around them. We are faced with similar questions today, perhaps because we never came up with adequate answers to these questions in the first place, or perhaps because these are the questions of humanity, and we are destined to always ask them, answer them, and then revisit them again.

Much like the symbolic interactionists, Nielsen, Lewis and Zamith, and Ananny place communication at the center, albeit in different ways. Nielsen's chapter is ultimately about how modes of communication render news-as-impressions into news-as-knowledge, thus marking the difference between being "acquainted with an issue" and having "knowledge about that issue." It is a difference between short-form vs. long-form news, instantaneity in reporting vs. slow news, and chaos vs. curation. It is borne out of the desire to be the one telling the most comprehensive version of the story, even if that means being the last, not the first to tell it. Somewhere in that mess sits the contemporary citizen, monitorial in orientation (Schudson 1999), in an oversaturated information environment (Gergen 1991), immersed in active spectatorship (Kreiss 2015), overwhelmed. There are so many ways of knowing of things happening and so few ways to really know about them. For Lewis and Zamith, journalists can help untangle these worlds, and their worlds framework envisions a journalism that orients through intuitive, interpretive, and sense-making processes. Status, processes, and conventions are not static but are constantly in flux, in order for journalism to produce modes of storytelling that are not what Nielsen refers to as "churnalism," but are, instead, context-specific accounts about the world outside and how it connects to the pictures in our heads. Communication, again, is at the center, and for it to occupy that place, it must involve both speaking and listening. Storytelling must evolve out of the

absence of storytelling; a true *whitespace*, in Ananny's words, that does not presume nor direct a particular form to a story.

All chapters then draw on the role of technology, with emphasis on how platforms transform the texture of knowledge (Nielsen), on the actors, actants, processes, boundaries, and modalities of storytelling (Lewis and Zamith), and on the privilege of autonomy in storytelling (Ananny). It is important to note here that technology is not perceived by any of us as an external force, capable of determining outcomes. Information and knowledge gathering mechanisms are human-made. Journalistic platforms are designed by humans and bear human assumptions, proclivities, and bias. Finally, organizing algorithms are constructed by humans, translating their own logic for curating information into code. Technology is still very much a force, but one rendered by humans, and as such capable of defining, restricting, and enabling our actions, in the same way many human-made things do, including our cars, our houses, our furniture, our books, our diplomas, our clothing, and other artifacts of our everyday lives.

Still, the unavoidable part to be played by technology in the storytelling project of journalism should not distract us from the objective of facilitating knowledge, of letting journalism attain a reflexive and historically sensitive form. And this would involve coming as close to whitespace as possible, out of which a pure and organic form of storytelling may emerge. Toward this point, all authors emphasize the role of actors in discerning acquaintance from knowledge (Nielsen), in engaging in disruption, hacking limiting architectures, and reorganizing boundaries (Lewis and Zamith), and in creating the circumstances for "stillness" out of which whitespace may emerge (Annany). My own position has always been that new(er) technologies lend themselves to all of these things, but that we, as human actors, reluctant to abandon the comfort of convention, seek to mold them into storytelling practices that they are simply not meant to serve. I find the nature of many of the new(er) technologies to be generative and corrective. For example, news was never meant to be a high-priced commodity. One cannot put a price on knowledge, of course, but the news of the day should be accessible to all at a low—if any—cost, and social media platforms correct the tendency to overcharge. Similarly, somewhere down the road to the professionalization of journalism, it became easier to trade in autonomy for status, power, and income. Finally, the storytelling conventions of broadcasting ushered in artificial divisions between those who broadcast and those who do not, concocted the advertising friendly abstraction of the audience, and made it easy for journalists to speak but difficult for them to listen. The technologies that seemingly have created the current so-called

crisis in journalism are meant to correct all these tendencies. It is up to actors to interpret the place of technology, and put technology in that place. The point of these technologies was to deconstruct organizations that were never meant to be media conglomerates; to reintroduce heterarchy in existing hierarchies of framing and power; and to restore storytelling autonomy. News organizations are often perplexed by the money question in the new media paradigm of journalism. Forget the money question. The business of making the news lies somewhere between the nonprofit and the for-profit models, and ideally adopts a hybrid of the two. Emerging technologies are not built to sustain large profit margins for conglomerates, nor was journalism meant to pave the road to making millions. The technologies are equipped to pluralize and to sustain smaller, autonomous, and independent organizations that can still turn a profit, but of a different margin. The problem of journalism is not technological. Remaking the news is not a question of fixing the technology.

The question of remaking the news is both a sociocultural one and an economic one. Tackling it requires reinventing the journalistic habitus of norms and practices and reorganizing the economics of news production. It involves the sociology and the economy of news. The symbolic interactionists, whose work all three chapters go back to, and who laid the groundwork for the contemporary paradigm of journalism, never envisioned journalism as a multibillion dollar business nor a celebrity vehicle for those involved. Thus, remaking the news requires that news institutions adjust to the reality of the present economy and abandon the economies of scale mentality— or, at the very least, adjust the scale. It is difficult, but not impossible. Network stations accomplished this when they had to survive in a market saturated with cable channels. The music industry is in the middle of addressing similar issues. And it is only a matter of time before the movie industry confronts a similar set of problems. So that is that, and it presents the essence of remaking the news.

And so, the problem of remaking news is not just about technology. But, it is also about technology. Specifically, it is about finding a place for technology, instead of technology finding its own place. In order to do so, we need to understand what technologies of storytelling do for journalism, and in turn, what function journalism plays for storytelling societies.

Events and Stories

There are events, and there are stories that we tell about events. I have always understood journalism as the process of turning events into stories.

But whereas anybody can tell a story about an event, journalism is guided by news values, that is, the things that turn events into stories told by journalists (Hartley 2002). News values organize how stories about events are told, in ways that have been researched for decades by our field, and can be summarized as follows:

• News values prioritize stories about events that are recent, sudden, unambiguous, predictable, relevant, and close (to the relevant culture/class/location).

• Priority is given to stories about the economy, government politics, industry and business, foreign affairs and domestic affairs—either of conflict or human interest, disasters, and sport.

• Priority is given to elite nations (the US, the UK, Europe, etc.) and elite people.

• News values often involve appeals to dominant ideologies and discourses. What is cultural and/or historical will be presented as natural and consensual.

• News stories need to appeal to readers/viewers so they must be commonsensical, entertaining, and dramatic (like fiction), and visual (Hartley 2002, 166).

As I argued earlier, remaking the news is both a sociocultural and economic question. Remaking the news requires remaking news values. Without reorganizing news values, the problem of remaking the news remains. But there are ways in which technology remediates, amplifies, or introduces newer news values. Some of these are mentioned or alluded to by Ananny, Lewis and Zamith, and Nielsen, and are worth examining further.

First, social media platforms enable journalists, but also people committing acts of journalism, to observe, record, and report events in ways that instantly turn events into stories. While I am not suggesting that this is a feature unique to social media,[1] it is worth pointing out that these platforms amplify this ability in a way that further contributes to and cultivates a culture of instantaneity in news reporting (Grusin 2010; Papacharissi 2014a; Nielsen, chapter 5, this volume). This implies that a distinction between instantaneous and more thoughtful, curated news accounts must be drawn, highlighting the differences between fast and slow news (Gillmor 2009; Zuckerman2009); acknowledging the presence of many journalisms, or at the very least, many layers to journalism; and cultivating the literacies necessary for all, journalists and citizens alike, to process those.

Second, these platforms operate on a logic that introduces hybridity to both news values and news production (Chadwick 2013; Russell 2011). It

affords journalists neither the time to process information, nor the privilege of being the first to report it. This change does not necessarily present insurmountable challenges, but it does require acknowledging that journalists are no longer the first ones or the only ones telling the story. The prevalent organizing logic of hybridity entails acknowledging the presence of many journalisms, or at the very least the many layers to journalism. These layers are frequently presented to publics in hybrid form, interweaved, not cleanly layered on top of one another, nor organized into fully formed stories that the public was previously accustomed to receiving (and journalists to delivering). So the job of the journalist is to untangle and curate these layers, and connect them back together, without sacrificing the integrity of the story or the perspectives of the *multiple* storytellers.

Third, as many—including Lewis and Zamith, Nielsen, and Ananny—point out, the new platforms of storytelling render journalism omnipresent, lending it an ambient, always-on presence (Hermida 2010). While not specific to social media, this property is augmented by such media, sustaining an environment of always-on listening and broadcasting. This implies the news is always on and always told, even when there is no new news to report. The latter frequently creates repetition and redundancy that only fuels the intensity with which news is reported without adding to the depth of the news coverage itself. This is especially harmful in crises, emergencies, or situations where access to media cannot be controlled or trusted. It is also particularly dangerous in circumstances involving the reporting of violent incidents, shootings, acts of terrorism, and events of a similar nature, where intensity can inadvertently contribute to the exposure and accidental glorification of behaviors that must be reported in a mindful manner. In the place of mindful reporting, we receive a mix of drama, opinion, news, and facts-in-the-making blended into one, to the point where it is impossible to discern one from the other. This brings me to my next point, concerning the form of storytelling each platform permits.

Mediality

Instantaneity, hybridity, and ambience play their part in reorganizing how stories are told on the newer platforms of journalism. But each of those platforms bears unique characteristics and lends the stories told a unique form, through a variety of affordances that include the algorithmic architecture that gives a platform its shape. And so we may think about the mediality each platform affords each event, as that event is turned into a story. For example, Lang and Lang (1953) famously studied the MacArthur

Day parade in Chicago, discovering that audiences watching the event from their TV sets had experienced a much more organized, personable, and warm event than the one experienced by the crowds participating in the parade in the streets. Similarly, we may think of the different realities experienced by people participating in the events themselves, as opposed to people following the events on their TV sets, or on Twitter, or via news sites, or on the radio, or even through a polymedia[2] environment rendered by a combination of all these. The texture of each story may give shape to a different event, depending on the form of the story and literacy sensibility of publics "listening in" to the developing event.

The remaining question then is, what form does the platform afford an event, as that event is turned into a story? What is the shape, the texture, and the feel of that story when it is told over Twitter, as opposed to, for example, Reddit, crossing the boundaries of which frequently affords a misogynistic glean? The form, which is the shape, the look, the feel of news is specific to historical and sociocultural context. It is also borne out of the mediality of storytelling contexts, and these are all questions for journalists, scholars, and citizens not necessarily to produce finite answers to, but to always be asking and thinking about.

Affective News and the Polity

Finally, instantaneity, ambience, and the organizing principles of hybridity, combined with the mediality of the new platforms of journalism frequently lend form to breed of news I have termed *affective*.[3] I define *affective news* as news collaboratively constructed out of subjective experience, opinion, and emotion, to the point where discerning one from the other is difficult, and doing so misses the point (Papacharissi 2014b). Characterized by premediation, affective news streams are driven by reports of events that are in the making, and thus frequently communicate a predisposition to frame the developing story, and in doing so, lay claim to latent forms of agency that are also affective and networked (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2013). Affective news is intense, phatic, and emotive. It blends broadcasting practices with the conversational conventions of interpersonal storytelling. It is filled with intensity and frequently prompted by repetition of the same news or opinionating about the news, especially with there is no new news to report. This becomes problematic when affect, or this form of intensity, is reported as the event, in the place of more in-depth analysis, new news, or, in Ananny's vernacular, absence; silence. Affective news does invite modalities of being acquainted with an issue, rather than knowing

an issue, per Nielsen's analysis. But it is also a way for broadening journalism and lending it a "worlds" perspective, in the words of Lewis and Zamith, because it affords polyformity in news storytelling, and a way for citizens to feel their way into a story.

The fact that news is always on and always with us cannot but invite an affective connection, both in terms of how news is told and in terms of how news is absorbed (Beckett 2015). And while it is easy to exploit the emotional angle of news, the affectivity these newer platforms of news storytelling lend can actually help journalists finally reconcile divides between the subjective and the objective, the broadcaster and the audience, and emotion and reason that have longed defined and restricted the stories we can tell individually, collaboratively, and collectively. Emotion and reason, subjective and objective orientations, are symbiotic processes. Broadcasters and audiences are terms arbitrarily ascribed to actors that really are (and should be) coconversant and coevolving. The most masterful journalists, in their most memorable reporting, used technology to communicate a story that balanced emotion and reason and transcended broadcaster/audience boundaries.[4] Remaking the news is really about remaking the ways in which, societies turn events into stories. Technology is playing a part, but it has unfortunately been miscast. Technology is there to help us reimagine news values. That is the place of technology and that is the way to remaking news storytelling.

Notes

1. The 24-hour TV news cycle banked on this decades ago.

2. For the distinction between polymedia as opposed to multimedia, see Madianou and Miller (2012).

3. See Z. Papacharissi, "Toward New Journalism(s): Affective News, Hybridity, and Liminal Spaces," *Journalism Studies,* published online March 2014.

4. More thoughts on this, here: "The Return of Sentiment,"http://www.niemanlab .org/2012/12/the-return-of-sentiment.