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Conveying stories in a digital age

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Retelling Journalism

GRONINGEN STUDIES IN CULTURAL CHANGE

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Volume XLIX

Retelling Journalism

Conveying Stories in a Digital Age

EDITED BY

Marcel Broersma and Chris Peters



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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 1999, the local Groningen Research School for the Study of the Humanities, and the Groningen members of the national Netherlands Research School for Medieval Studies succeeded in obtaining a grant for an innovative, large-scale, collective research programme entitled *Cultural Change: Dynamics and Diagnosis*. Supported by the faculties of Arts, Philosophy and Theology and financed by the Board of the University of Groningen, the *Cultural Change* programme constitutes an excellent opportunity to promote multidisciplinary approaches to phenomena characteristic of transformation processes in the fields of politics, literature and history, philosophy and theology. In order to enhance programmatic cohesion, three crucial ‘moments’ in European history were selected: 1) Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages (c.200–c.600), 2) Late Medieval to the Early Modern period (c.1450–c.1650), and 3) the ‘Long Nineteenth Century’ (1789–c.1918). In 2000 and 2002 further grants were obtained for *Cultural Change: Impact and Integration* and *Cultural Change: Perception and Representation* respectively. Several international conferences and workshops have already been organised and more are planned.

This volume focuses on storytelling, which lies at the centre of journalism practice. Journalism is an industry of narrative, however, in the digital era the way in which journalists tell stories is undergoing a dramatic shift. New media offer new possibilities to convey information and simultaneously stimulate traditional media to search for original ways to convey attractive and authoritative stories. How journalism adapts is this volume’s focus.

It is the second volume generated from an expert workshop, *Trust, Truth and Performance: Diverse Journalisms in the 21st Century*, held in December 2009 at the University of Groningen. This event brought together approximately 25 international scholars to discuss key transformations impacting the industry, resulting in this collection and *Rethinking Journalism: Trust and Participation in a Transformed News Landscape* (Routledge 2012). The editors would like to thank the University of Groningen and ICOG for the financial support given to support these endeavours.

The editors are also particularly grateful to Marijke Wubbolts for her stalwart assistance in organizing the workshop, and to Gorus van Oordt who gave tips on preparing this volume. Finally, they would like to thank their production editors, Liselotte Schuren and Judith Katz, for their herculean efforts to ensure a consistently-formatted and well-polished text.

G. Th. Jensma, General Editor

INTRODUCTION: RETELLING JOURNALISM CONVEYING STORIES IN A DIGITAL AGE

Chris Peters and Marcel Broersma

Storytelling is at the core of journalism practice. It is the key for communicating with the audience and it exerts a heavy influence over how news is perceived in the public sphere. The idea of ‘just the facts’ journalism is a caricature – and an inaccurate one at that – as the type of news that circulates, that breeds discussion and reaction, that is both remarkable and memorable, is based around conveying a narrative that generates meaning. In this respect, one could call journalism an industry of narrative.

It has been argued that journalists actually come to see the world through narratives, a sort of ontological narrativity.¹ Frequently, they will refer to their articles and pieces as ‘stories’ and one of the first exercises most aspiring journalists encounter at university is being told to go out, ‘find news’, and return in a short period of time; the idea being that the first essential ability for a journalist to develop is to learn how to spot a story. This rationale is captured within professional discourse as well. Many of the common industry terms, from lead, to background, angle, developing and breaking news, refer to the idea of sorting events and characters into some sort of narrative arc with a beginning, middle, and end. As Tuchman notably called it, the ‘what-a-story’ is at the heart of journalistic lore even if it is not an everyday part of the journalistic endeavor.² Certain scoops or stories capture the journalistic imagination and, if we are to take our cues from popular portrayals of journalism, cause the editor to ‘stop the presses!’

Simply put, whether we are dealing with this type of ‘what-a-story’ or the more banal and mundane daily ‘NIB’s (news-in-brief), storytelling is ubiquitous at all levels of journalism. At first glance, typical event-based stories, the types which populate newspapers and news reports on a daily basis, may not be heavily infused with meaning, thematic development and complex narrative structuring. However, such reports bring a certain order-

¹ Jacobs, R. ‘Producing the News, Producing the Crisis: Narrativity, Television and News Work’, *Media, Culture and Society* 18 (1996), no. 3, pp. 373-397.

² Tuchman, G., *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York, 1978).

ing and clarity to the seeming ambiguity and randomness of events. They meet the criteria of verisimilitude, credibility, and fidelity to some extent, and they help us to make sense of the world through narrative.³ In other words, the simple facts and observations that populate news reports are not in-and-of-themselves all that remarkable. What makes an issue stand out is its encapsulation in a progressive account that unfolds to demonstrate some transgression of societal norms or cultural expectations. As one of the more cynical maxims of the profession notes: 'never let the facts get in the way of a good story.'⁴

In the contemporary digital age, the different ways in which journalists construct and tell stories is undergoing a number of dramatic shifts. New and social media offer novel possibilities to tell stories, while at the same time they stimulate traditional media to search for new venues and approaches to convey their stories in an attractive and authoritative way. Interaction with audiences is increasingly possible, which impacts the relation and notion of sourcing as well as the dominant mode of address. Notions of truth and trustworthiness are reinterpreted in the era of digital media and we are only beginning to understand how these transitions stimulate new journalistic practices and shift the institutional function and ethics of journalism. The broader commercial and global context in which journalism now operates impacts the types of stories that are desired, sought out and produced, and may even change how we conceive of the societal role of journalism in an increasingly connected and ubiquitous media ecology. This volume addresses how journalism tries to find and craft new forms and genres of storytelling within this environment, considering what it means to tell 'newsworthy' stories in a digital age. Its Parts look at different lines of research that reflect on the broader themes of truthful, personal, and sensational stories, as well as the journalistic practices that underlie them.

Of course, claiming the novelty of such developments should always be subject to caution and histories of journalism are littered with such examples. Charges of tabloidization have been heard with increasing regularity in the midst of the media proliferation and fragmentation of the past few decades, yet aspects of tabloid content and form stretch back centuries, even

³ Cf. Aucoin, J., 'Epistemic Responsibility and Narrative Theory: The Literary Journalism of Ryszard Kapuscinski', *Journalism 2* (2001), no. 1, pp. 5-21.

⁴ Fulford, R., *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture* (Toronto, 1999).

pre-dating the actual tabloid format itself.⁵ Emerging technologies are frequently accused of heralding the dawn of an impoverished form of journalism, though history teaches us that the news industry quickly overcomes such fears and embraces innovation to enliven and enrich its breadth of storytelling possibilities.⁶ Yet awareness of this historicizing caveat to academic inquiry must also be cautious not to teeter too far in the opposite direction. Just because there are traces and parallels of previous aspects of news within contemporary equivalents, one needs to be careful to balance the tendency of claiming that ‘there’s nothing new under the sun’ with the sense that what we are witnessing is ‘something we have never seen before.’⁷ Journalism has changed and is changing. While its rhetorical claim about its social role may appear stable, there are structural changes occurring which are certainly challenging its societal relevance.⁸ Playing with the conventions of storytelling and platforms upon which they are told is central to journalism’s strategies of adaptation in this changing context and impacts the way that information is communicated and flows. Here a parallel with another form of ‘professional’ storytelling might prove instructive. As Schudson notes, while we could plausibly imagine eminent authors of the 1850s, early 1900s and modern age sitting around to discuss ‘the novel’ and understanding themselves as being engaged in a similar project, envisioning journalists from these same time periods participating in a comparable conversation about journalism seems far less likely, if not impossible.⁹ He notes that a key development historically was the change from journalism simply chronicling or recording instances to an increasing awareness by journalists that they were involved in a field that claimed to offer some form of knowledge. It thus becomes essential to consider the particulars about the social-cultural space, technological affordances, and economic context that provide a fertile network for emergent forms of journalism to appear and

⁵ Conboy, M., *Tabloid Britain: Constructing a Community through Language* (New York, 2006); Sparks, C. and Tulloch, J., *Tabloid Tales: Global Debates over Media Standards* (Oxford, 2000).

⁶ Zelizer, B., ‘Foreword’, in: Sparks, C. and Tulloch, J., eds, *Tabloid Tales: Global Debates over Media Standards* (Oxford, 2000), pp. ix – xi.

⁷ Bourdieu, P., *On Television* (New York, 1998), pp. 43.

⁸ Broersma, M. and Peters, C., ‘Introduction: Rethinking Journalism: The Structural Transformation of a Public Good’, in: Peters, C. and Broersma, M., eds, *Rethinking Journalism: Trust and Participation in a Transformed News Landscape* (London, 2012), pp. 1-12.

⁹ Schudson, M., ‘Would Journalism Please Hold Still!’, in: C. Peters and M. Broersma (eds.) *Rethinking Journalism* (London, 2012), pp. 191-199.

potentially thrive.¹⁰ In this volume, the notion of storytelling is utilized as a guiding analytic to bridge these different levels of inquiry.

Narratives have the effect of making the unique or unusual appear familiar, to give order, flow, and meaning to otherwise disparate events.¹¹ For instance, the use of photos of children in wartime is a powerful rhetorical component of common conflict narratives, such as liberation or suffering.¹² Including accounts from ‘ordinary’ individuals is not only used for such dramatic fare but is also commonly used to situate and contextualize stories that are otherwise quite remote or abstract, such as those about the economy or foreign events. These techniques are so commonplace in the telling of news that we likely often overlook their significance. However, description, narration and exposition are ascending narrative techniques used to infuse feeling and experience into news discourse.¹³ Fulford notes that ‘a story is always charged with meaning, otherwise it is not a story, merely a sequence of events.’¹⁴ Coherence in news reports is built up through narrative, which is then bundled with an enticing veneer of presentation to capture our interest. This interweaving helps to distinguish and brand journalistic products. If we accept this premise, what becomes interesting is to interrogate how the frames, forms, and genres of communicative action are currently being reconfigured to tackle and capture the news on a daily basis. By relying on new approaches, technologies and contexts to retell old stories, this is what allows new forms of journalistic storytelling to take hold; to appear, Janus-faced, both new and familiar; simultaneously forward-looking while staying true to tradition.¹⁵

An understanding of narratives, consequently, facilitates an exploration of how the news is ‘held together’.¹⁶ As such, it is important to recognize

¹⁰ This parallels the methodological approach and mode of inquiry seen in approaches such as critical discourse analysis and actor-network theory. For the former, see Fairclough, N., *Media Discourse* (London, 1995); for the latter see Latour, B., ‘A Dialogue on Actor-Network Theory with a (Somewhat) Socratic Professor’, in: Avgerou, C. et al., eds, *The Social Study of Information and Communication Study* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 62-76.

¹¹ Tolson, A. *Mediations: Text and Discourse in Media Studies* (London, 1996).

¹² Wells, K., ‘Narratives of Liberation and Narratives of Innocent Suffering: The Rhetorical Uses of Images of Iraqi Children in the British Press’, *Visual Communication* 6 (2007), no. 1, pp. 55-71.

¹³ Chouliaraki, L., ‘Aestheticization of Suffering on Television’, *Visual Communication* 5 (2006), no. 3, pp. 261-285.

¹⁴ Fulford, *The Triumph of Narrative*.

¹⁵ Peters, C., ‘No-Spin Zones: The Rise of the American Cable News Magazine and Bill O’Reilly’, *Journalism Studies* 11 (2010), no. 6, pp. 832-51.

¹⁶ Cf. Desrosières, A., ‘How to Make Things Which Hold Together: Social Science, Statistics and the State’, in: Wittrock, B., Wagner, P. and Whitley, R., eds, *Dis-*

what is both new and familiar within emerging styles of journalism and focus on how they alter the craft. Successfully delimiting these elements becomes quite relevant when we evaluate how the seemingly endless possibilities of information, events, and personalities come together into a coherent assemblage every day that we can identify as 'news'. However, in the contemporary digital age, technology has made it such that what is called news is no longer entirely self-evident. Not only are the possible sources and sites of news more accessible and instantaneous, the question of who can create the news and the different forms that stories take also seems to be rapidly fluctuating.

This relates to a whole host of questions with which journalists and journalism studies scholars are grappling with as they seek to make sense out of what is happening to communication, media, and information and the news industry's role in our contemporary digital age. As the ease with which not just journalists but also the public can create, distribute, and interact over stories increases, questions are raised about what resonates as important and truthful. Communication has been democratized, and while it would certainly overstate matters to say that everyone is now a journalist, there is no question that what counts, as an authoritative and authentic voice is no longer just the purview of communication professionals. Our encounters with personal stories are no longer confined to the realm of close contacts and immediate social network but are part of the everyday media landscape, be this in the form of Twitter updates or reality television programming. In this respect the formality of communication is also in flux. Whether it be journalism or politics, storytelling forms which more explicitly align with audiences and empathize with their wants and fears are finding a place in mainstream (mediated) public discourse.¹⁷ Of course, different genres of storytelling are still quite varied. However, the shifting boundaries between public and private spheres of life have had significant consequences for the types of stories that journalism feels warranted and perhaps even obliged to tell. Broadly speaking, this impacts journalism practice and the everyday way that news organizations go about 'making news'.

These issues roughly map onto the different themes and sections in this volume. More specifically, Part I looks at how the idea of journalistic truth

courses on Society: The Shaping of the Social Science Disciplines (Dordrecht, 1991), pp. 195-218; Somers, M., 'The Narrative Construction of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach', *Theory and Society* 23 (1994), pp. 605-649.

¹⁷ Peters, C., 'Emotion Aside or Emotional Side?: Crafting an 'Experience of Involvement in the News'', *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* 12 (2011), no. 3, pp. 297-316.

is shifting in the contemporary age, and how personal and involved narratives are changing the way that stories are told. While mainstream professional journalism, at least within an Anglo-American context, still generally strives for a sense of truth that is firmly grounded in the objectivity regime, alternative approaches to convey the appearance of truth are gaining impetus. In his analysis of 'featurized journalism', Frank Harbers looks at an alternative to the tabloidization hypothesis, specifically considering how news organizations are incorporating literary elements into their coverage of everyday events in an effort to re-engage public interest in social issues. Rather than simply being a crass commercial imperative, Harbers considers how placing the individual central in the story and introducing storytelling elements potentially results in less distanced and more 'authentic' forms of journalism. Using the case of the Dutch quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, Harbers' research considers how papers have looked to develop and integrate new discursive forms of journalism under the pressures of competition and commercialization. He investigates one of the more prominent examples of this, namely the reportage in *NRC* by Arnon Grunberg, a literary author who has produced various stories on 'hard' political topics. This analysis highlights the challenges between engaging the public and providing information, and looks to how storytelling forms which migrate away from the objectivity paradigm illustrate a growing (but at times reluctant) recognition on the part of news organizations to experiment with new definitions and understandings of 'quality' coverage.

The second chapter, by Gitte Meyer and Anker Brink Lund, delves further into the question of what makes a narrative appear truthful and authentic, in their analysis of the '*Publiciszt*' tradition of journalism, an approach to storytelling built upon the pluralist political systems of Northern Europe, which necessitate compromise. Grounded in notions of truthfulness rather than a single overarching truth, this approach as outlined by Meyer and Lund is raised to challenge the predominance of Anglo-American understandings of the current shifts in the journalism field. They claim that many of the goals that new forms of digital storytelling are said to foster, from democratizing communication to incorporate diverse viewpoints; to recognition of multiple points of view; and public discussion and pragmatic compromise over the slavish pursuit of Universal Truths, are actually well-established within this lesser known framework of journalism. Their chapter can be read as a call for journalism scholarship to engage more actively with traditions outside its dominant intellectual paradigm, as it searches to make sense of the growing diversity of storytelling forms in a digital age.

If their chapter is a call to look outside of traditional paradigms to understand contemporary storytelling, the following chapter by Susan Aasman urges us to look beyond traditional orientations and platforms to make sense

of how stories circulate and gain meaning in our current times. Journalists, documentary film-makers, and citizens (or news ‘prosumers’, as they are sometimes referred), increasingly take their own experiences as a point of departure for stories that give the public a feeling of authenticity. Aasman examines three examples of documentary first-person filmmaking over the past fifty years and notes that the successive phases illustrate two key transitions: that of the genre shifting from ‘objective’ to more inward-looking approaches and the shift from professional to amateur storytelling. Her chapter traces the changes in recorded self-expression and argues that it would be a fallacy to assume this is only a net-based development that began with YouTube. Rather, she looks at these changes as part of a series of slow developments beginning back in the 1960s, which became stronger over time and entered the mainstream in the 1990s.

Part II moves on from personal truths to considers personal revelation as a bastion of contemporary news. These chapters investigate instances when storytelling is seemingly employed in the name of entertainment, rather than the public interest. Though journalism is essentially a market-driven enterprise, the influence of commercial interests on actual practice has long been withstood through a process whereby journalists attempt to gain autonomy through professionalization. In the digital age journalism faces increasing competition on the information market and entertainment, as a selling point, becomes more prominent. Anniek Dubied and Magali Dubey take a broad look at this trend in the profession through interviews with showbiz reporters who produce celebrity news in Switzerland and France. Within the past decade, there has been a quantitative increase in showbiz and celebrity-focused content in French-speaking Europe and their study looks at what impact this has in terms of the identity and reputation of the news industry. They look to the ethical conundrums faced by reporters assigned to cover the showbiz beat and what storytelling techniques and approaches they use to craft their stories while also maintaining a sense of professional status and detachment. They look to how these journalists attempt to craft meaning and utilize professional storytelling skills to ‘write about nothing’. Indeed, for such journalists one of the key ways that they manage to maintain their personal and professional integrity when assigned to this beat is to utilize narrative techniques and writing skills to write thick, engaging stories that appeal to audiences. In essence, while they eschew the informational importance of journalism, these reporters fall back on storytelling as an alternatively crucial part of the news enterprise.

Staying within the realm of celebrity, Tim Hoebeke, Annelore Deprez and Karin Raeymaekers use the coverage of Belgian cyclist Tom Boonen and American golfer Tiger Woods as case studies that on the surface illustrates the increasing importance of ‘heroes’ to sell newspapers. However,

their point goes beyond the commercial. Viewing modern journalists as following in the tradition of bardic storytellers, they look to how traditional myths are used in the process of newsmaking to create stories that journalists know how to tell and with which audiences are familiar. These stories of heroism, tragedy, villainy and compassion help convey moral values and when it comes to the portrayal of heroes, their status helps to reinforce and confirm social mores and norms. In this sense, these tales told in the press are not simply for entertainment's sake. According to Hoebeke, Deprez and Raeymaekers, mass media are the primary contemporary storytellers in society. The mythological narratives they craft are significant in terms of their ability to help the public make sense of reality by relying on established narratives rather than a bland rational recitation of facts.

However, this is not to say that what appears as sensational coverage may not also have economic benefits. In the final chapter of this section, Nicolas Hubé ponders the makeover of front page design in French newspapers and how this is used to make papers attractive to a broader audience. Looking to the way that design and marketing strategies have become interwoven with professionalism, Hubé points out the crucial aspect of the front page and how it brands newspapers, considering the way that informational focus has translated to a concentration on appeal and connection with potential readers. His argument points to the necessity of considering storytelling and design changes in the context of broader economic and political imperatives, a perspective that illustrates the interrelated nature of three essential poles of the journalistic field, namely: production, content and audiences. Hubé encourages academic caution in terms of overemphasizing blanket evaluations of journalistic change, such as tabloidization, without considering its many manifestations and divergences in different contexts.

The final Part III of this collection gets away from different trends in storytelling proper to look more specifically at changing practices in terms of how journalistic stories are told. Chris Peters looks to the top of the American broadcast hierarchy, the network newscast, to examine to what extent evening newscasts are changing their storytelling practices as they adapt to a tumultuous journalism landscape. He compares one of the bastions of broadcast journalism, the *CBS Evening News*, under what appears to be two vastly different stewardships – that of Walter Cronkite and that of Katie Couric – to critically interrogate the claim that journalism mainstays have begun to incorporate elements associated with 'soft' news storytelling into their production. His textual investigation reveals that, in many respects, the *CBS Evening News* remains faithful to many of the 'professional' traditions established, and often valorized, under Cronkite. However, his study also illustrates that Couric's version of the *Evening News* incorporates elements that would more aptly be described as personal and conversational

in its storytelling, something traditionally eschewed in the performance of the objectivity paradigm. By considering the complexity of how the newscast is being reconfigured, Peters argues that equating this creeping of informal storytelling techniques to a broader trivialization of journalism seems a knee-jerk and empirically-suspect charge.

Dan Jackson picks up on another broader critique often levied against journalism to interrogate the proposition that the news media increasingly report about the ‘process’ of politics over the ‘issues’. Looking at UK-based meta-coverage of politics, Jackson looks more closely at process news and investigates the political and democratic implications for using these sorts of narratives in campaign coverage. He considers whether reporting politics using different storytelling techniques helps to demystify the political process, and whether such narratives can be harnessed to enhance citizenship. He relates such coverage to questions of cynicism and obfuscation, asking whether these stories clarify and build confidence in the journalistic coverage of politics and in the electoral system itself. Jackson argues that the purpose of all political storytelling is to promote broader understandings of issues and he proposes a number of injunctions that might help journalistic coverage to facilitate the conditions under which active citizenship can flourish.

Moving over to the continent, Yael de Haan and Jo Bardoel study actual measures that Dutch media organizations have implemented to try to establish a trustful relationship between their organizations and readers. The authors assert that trust in journalism and media constitutes a crucial prerequisite for the democratic function of professional journalism and journalism’s ability to make sense of issues to the public can only be assured when this relationship is firm. In this sense, de Haan and Bardoel look to the necessary precondition for contemporary storytelling, which they identify as a press that satisfies demands for accountability and responsiveness. When the press is perceived by the public to transgress, its ability to create meaning through storytelling is curtailed. Looking at specific measures and instruments introduced at *de Volkskrant*, a quality paper in the Netherlands, the authors investigate how the journalistic performance is impacted by accountability instruments and discuss how trust, responsibility, responsiveness and accountability shape the terrain upon which the news can be told.

In this volume’s final chapter, Bernadette Kester examines the way that stories are constructed when the context within which they are produced deviates from the environment where the journalist typically operates. Specifically, she investigates the storytelling strategies that Dutch foreign correspondents have developed as they try to tell stories from China. She argues that the main way that we understand the ‘other’, that which is foreign, is through the stories told to us by foreign correspondents of our national

media. The way we perceive countries and other cultures is shaped by the meanings portrayed in these narratives and such stories do not only influence our personal perception, but they lay the grounds for foreign policy supported by the populace. Authenticity in these reports demands proximity, however typical storytelling routines often need to be adapted and reconfigured in these foreign contexts. Kester's contribution provokes a fascinating question with which to close this collection, namely: how is storytelling impacted in regimes where they are used to determine and control what stories are told?

This collection is the second book generated from an expert workshop that was held in December 2009 at the University of Groningen. The event, *Trust, Truth and Performance: Diverse Journalisms in the 21st Century*, brought together approximately 25 international scholars from around Europe to discuss some of the key transformations currently impacting the industry. The first collection on this theme, *Rethinking Journalism: Trust and Participation in a Transformed News Landscape*, looked at issues of public trust, participatory forms of journalism, and emerging news forms, which were challenging the established rhetoric and discourse surrounding the profession.¹⁸ This volume follows a related but slightly more content-based theme, to consider the key practice of professional enactment, namely the construction of different news stories. It looks at how the personal and sensational are impacting the content of news and considers these changes in conjunction with changing practices, systems and contexts of news production.

¹⁸ Peters and Broersma, *Rethinking Journalism*.

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