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News Storytelling in A Digital Landscape

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“If the culprit [the internet] is obvious, so is the primary victim of this radically reduced attention span: the narrative, the long-form story, the tale. Like some endangered species, the story now needs defending from the threat of extinction in a radically changed and inhospitable digital environment.”

Ben MacIntyre, *The Times*

“This whole idea of an attention span is a misnomer. People have an infinite attention span - if you are entertaining them.”

Jerry Seinfeld, writer, actor and comedian

“Long-form narrative is not only alive, but dancing to new music.”

Jill Abramson, *New York Times*

Introduction: Is the Internet Killing Storytelling?

Shortly before Christmas in 2009, social media networks across the internet were set buzzing with indignation. A collective state of high dudgeon had formed in response to an article in that most old-fashioned of platforms: a newspaper. The paper in question was *The Times of London*. The headline? “The internet is killing storytelling”.

If the author, Ben MacIntyre, articulated the fears of many in journalism, he equally upset a wide range of people who

believe that, far from killing anything, the internet is liberating us from the formulaic structures and scaffolding the media uses to tell stories.

So what is happening? This chapter seeks to address these key questions: Is the internet killing storytelling or merely evolving it? How are journalists and news organizations adapting to a much wider variety of storytelling possibilities? What does it mean for craft skills? Will long-form stories ever work on a computer screen? In essence, can narrative storytelling survive the onslaught of byte-size data and diminishing attention spans when ‘move and skim is the mood you’re in?’ (Achenbach, 2009).

Macintyre (2009) provides one view, and forcefully so: ‘The internet, while it communicates so much information so very effectively, does not really “do” narrative,’ he says. ‘Very few stories of more than 1,000 words achieve viral status on the internet.’ Macintyre was responding to – or building on – a seminal article in *The Atlantic* by Nicholas Carr (2008). Carr was writing about what he saw as his own diminishing attention span. Carr said his friends, too, could feel it: ‘The more they use the web, the more they have to fight to stay focused on long pieces of writing.’ Deep reading, Carr argued, is indistinguishable from deep thinking. So according to this argument, narrative storytelling – particularly long-form – is being washed aside by a tsunami of byte-sized information.

Susan Orlean, a writer at *The New Yorker*, has another view: that storytelling is thriving. She argues that there’s never been a better time to be a teller of stories and this view echoes that of many: that new technology trends might be disruptive, but that this is just packaging. Basic content will not be threatened by changes to the delivery system. Many others would seem to agree. ‘It’s a very, very exciting and very heartening time,’ says Jim Giles [2012], co-founder of the long-form science and technology journalism site, *MATTER*, ‘because so many interesting, high-quality things are happening.’

Is there demand for long form journalism?

There is little doubt that stories in print had already begun to get shorter; the internet has taken up the baton and condensed them even further. ‘There has been cause for pes-

simism,' says Evan Ratliff (2011), co-founder and editor of another long-form narrative site, The Atavist. 'But it would be hard to look around at the moment, with things like Kindle Singles, Byliner, Longform, Longreads, The Awl, and others, and not find some cause for optimism.'

Ratliff is one of a number of media producers and pioneers who are challenging the apparent incompatibility of the internet and long-form journalism. Companies like Mediastorm, The Atavist, MATTER and Byliner are all turning conventional wisdom on its head.

That said, it is perhaps worth guarding against the notion that we have lost a Golden Age of long-form narrative. These new pioneers are quick to point out that what they are doing is often compared to what is probably a mythical period in the past, when no 15,000-word piece was turned down, every story was Pulitzer quality and everyone was paid handsomely. Yet while the work of some writers – Gay Talese and Tom Wolfe among them – is rightly celebrated, the reality is probably more prosaic.

It is probably the case that long-form journalism has always been a niche activity, even in an age when there were fewer choices. And why should being long mean its good? Good is good, irrespective of length. Success depends on what your metrics are, according to Brian Storm (2012), Executive Producer at Mediastorm, a multi-media production studio, but the appetite is there: 'Do lots more people want to read a 10,000-word New Yorker article rather than a quick hit in USA Today? No. Does that mean the long form audience doesn't exist? Of course not.'

One recent episode would seem to demonstrate the demand for a more wholesome online diet. In early 2012, two experienced reporters, Jim Giles and Bobbie Johnson used the funding platform Kickstarter to appeal for funds to start a site called MATTER. The problem they set out was that 'the web has become a byword for fast and cheap'. Their pitch was that they would focus on doing one thing, and doing it exceptionally well:

Every week, we will publish a single piece of top-tier long-form journalism about big issues in technology and science. That means no cheap reviews, no snarky opinion pieces, no top ten lists. Just one unmissable story... It's an experiment to see

if independent journalism, done right, can fill the gap left by mainstream media.”

(Giles and Johnson, 2012.)

They had set out to raise \$50,000. They hit their target in less than two days. By the time they closed the appeal 2,566 people had, collectively, pledged over \$140,000 to help them get started.

Is there a business model for long-form narrative journalism?

Demand aside, these new ventures also have the advantage of being born into this new and constantly changing environment. They have developed through an online business model from the outset, while traditional media may face a difficult transition. They have been heavily reliant on advertising revenue and, for instance, magazine sales. But while these relatively small newcomers may be lighter on their feet, they might look enviously across at the big players for one thing: deeper pockets.

Great storytelling takes time. Good writers need paying. The question is who will have the pockets to pay them? So as an increasing number of players move into the space of long-form narrative, it raises a fundamental question: can they sustain themselves? Is there a business model? It is early days yet, but the signs are good.

Smaller companies do not have the resources of the large news organisations. But neither do they have tiers of management or a legacy that tells them ‘this is the way we’ve always done things here’. In the past these ‘legacy news providers’ have had their formats dictated by technology and they have adapted successfully. But there has always been a pervading sense of feeding the beast. Few journalists are given the time, space, business model or even training to escape this way of operating. However, these new entrants to the market have stripped down their operations to exactly what they need for the job.

Two sites, the Atavist and Mediastorm, have a similar approach and their success is pointing the way for others to join them. Both are charging small amounts to access content. The strategy for selling Mediastorm’s films and Atavist’s long-form stories is to make sales of individual pieces, pitched at low prices, while ensuring that paying is a painless experience. In its first

year, the Atavist sold more 100,000 copies of ten pieces of narrative non-fiction (\$2.99 for the multimedia version, \$1.99 for text). Audiences raised on an app store model will be familiar with this way of buying content. Revenue is shared with authors: the more readers, the more revenue - for both author and publisher.

At the same time, both companies have developed successful content management systems. These were initially just to house their own work, but both realized the commercial value of the systems they had created and so began to license them out to a wide variety of clients.

The Atavist system allows the user to publish work out to a variety of platforms like iPhone, iPad, Kindle and Android.

While Mediastorm exists to make great stories, its business model has diversified even further. It runs popular training workshops at its headquarters in Brooklyn and sells training resources online. It also makes a significant amount of money by making films for clients, particularly in the NGO sector.

These new ventures are significantly different from a conventional independent production company, primarily because they have their own means of publication. For some clients, the very size and existence of a ready-made audience spanning 170 countries is an attraction. Some of Mediastorm's clients find that more of their customers see the films on the Mediastorm site than on their own. Mediastorm's own storytelling, however, is its priority and it is turning down significant amounts of client work.

All this is a clear departure from the dominant business model in online journalism, which has been driven by advertising revenue based on page views.

New ways of working: upending culture of fixed lengths and focus groups

The business model is not the only departure from convention. These new pioneers of long-form storytelling are rejoicing in trampling across the conventional boundaries of mainstream media in other ways.

Firstly, there is no fixed length to their pieces: there is no set time or number of column inches. Brian Storm (2012), at Mediastorm, says:

“In traditional TV everything has to be 27 minutes or some other fixed time to fit the schedule. But we’ll do a piece that’s whatever length we feel is the optimum length to make it the most powerful piece of storytelling we could produce.”

Conventional wisdom at the time of writing is that two to three minutes is the maximum anyone will watch on the web. Yet Mediastorm is regularly producing stories in the region of fifteen minutes and reaching global audiences that some TV programmes would envy. More significantly, over two thirds of the audience is watching the films all the way through: a very high retention rate for the internet.

Length of output is not the only way in which formula and format are being challenged. We live in a time when the large news organisations know more about the demographics of their audience than ever before. Yet the make up of their audience is not a factor in the way either Mediastorm or the Atavist construct their stories. They worry that to do so would risk homogenizing their audience and that the key to their success lies simply in great storytelling. ‘We don’t think too much in terms of traditional demographics,’ says Evan Ratliff (2011) at the Atavist. ‘We’re targeting anyone who loves to read great true stories. We don’t really get too much more specific than that.’ Mediastorm takes the same approach.

The real revolution: tablets and social recommendations

There is a revolution going on: a development that makes more difference than any other. But it is not in storytelling. It is in the tools available to tell and consume stories. The role of computers is changing. Tablet computers and applications, or apps, are changing everything. Kindles and iPads are merely early leaders in what will become the commonplace way of consuming long-form journalism. In fact, storytellers are probably not ready for the explosion of devices that will facilitate long-form storytelling.

Those who believe the internet is killing storytelling are thinking about play back on a desk-top computer. But the internet is a distribution vehicle for a whole variety of devices. The exponential growth in tablets – particularly for reading – marks a significant departure from the traditional desk-based computer used for

work. Tablets are driving a change in the demand and consumption of long content. ‘All our numbers support an audience need for long form play back,’ says Brian Storm (2012), ‘and here’s the killer fact: 65% of viewers who start viewing watch until the end.’ Magazines do not have the benefit of analytics to measure the way their readers consume long articles, but how many would dare to claim that kind of retention rate from their readers?

Mark Armstrong (2012), the founder of Longreads, says that as well as the embrace of tablets and mobile devices, three other factors are driving a resurgence in long-form journalism: the rise of social recommendation—when people read something they really love, they become its biggest cheerleader; communities and publishers (like Longreads) that have embraced a new way to organize this content; and the rise of time-shifting apps like ReadItLater. The ability to take a story offline with you and finish it in places where you might not be online is critical to the success of long-form content.

Revolution or not, the development of these new tools cannot avoid an inescapable fact: the content has got to be good. In fact, because of the many alternative distractions available, it has to be very good. New tools and new technology will never be a substitute for great storytelling. Great narrative storytelling can provide a compelling signal through the noise of the internet, but it can only emerge from great reporting.

Traditionalists should be reassured. By and large, those investing in long-form journalism on the internet are not inventing some new kind of storytelling. Producers at Mediastorm do not even think about the web as their platform. Their output can be viewed from a distance of one foot away on a phone, two feet on a computer or tablet, 10 feet on a TV or 50 feet or more at a cinema. ‘What we think about is how do we tell the best damn story we can tell,’ says Storm (2012). A beginning, a middle, an end, surprise, humour, emotion: these remain the fundamental concepts, whatever the platform. It is the platforms themselves that are evolving rapidly. The internet is just a pipe. But for these new pioneers it is also a way of removing gatekeepers and enabling people to tell stories.

What none of this resolves, of course, is whether our attention spans are indeed diminishing. We are told that children have no attention span, yet they seem happy to read Harry Potter books at one sitting. Meanwhile, nearly 100 million people

have watched the 29-minute KONY 2012 film on the internet. What this reinforces is that the quality of the narrative needs to be very high. That is why sites like Mediastorm and The Atavist turn down far more ideas more than they commission. There is an appetite for long-form journalism and an increasing number of providers are seeking to satisfy it. But only good storytellers need apply.

Challenging Questions

- Compare the production and consumption of long-form journalism in 2000 with 2012.
- Does the advent of the Internet spell the end of long-form journalism?
- Consider the effect of the Internet on television current affairs.
- Consider the effect of tablet computers on long-form narrative journalism.
- Examine the business models available to sustain long-form journalism.

Recommended reading

www.atavist.com

www.mediastorm.com

www.longreads.com

www.longform.org

www.byliner.com

www.kickstarter.com/projects/narratively/narratively

www.kickstarter.com/projects/readmatter/matter

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