

**Towards Professional Participatory
Storytelling: Mapping the Potential**

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Title:

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Abstract:

The internet - specifically its graphic interface, the World Wide Web - has had a major impact on all levels of (information) societies throughout the world. For media professionals whose work has primarily been defined as creative storytelling - whether in advertising, journalism, public relations or related fields - this poses fascinating opportunities as well as vexing dilemmas. The central question seems to be to what extent storytelling can be content- or connectivity-based, and what level of participation can or should be included in the narrative experience. Although these two issues have been part of creative decision-making processes in media work before the Web, new technologies of production, distribution and communication are 'supercharging' them as the central dilemmas in the contemporary media ecosystem. This paper discusses the history and contemporary examples of media work combining various elements of storytelling as a hybrid form between content and connectivity, as well as between one-way and multiple-way communication, and considers the normative and economical implications for the professional identity of media workers.

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Introduction

People in Muncie, Indiana - an average city somewhere in the United States - spend more than double the time with media than they think they do (Papper et al, 2004). These Middletown Media Studies' documented a gap between perceived and observed use of media; because of the pervasiveness of media in everyday life and the multitasking way we engage with those media, more than half of our media use 'disappears' when we are asked about it. An earlier survey of over 7.800 American adults found that more than half of them use multiple media at the same time (BIGresearch, 2002). In The Netherlands, an average country in Europe, people claim to spend about 20 hours per week with media – which is about the same time as people reported in 1975 (Huysmans & De Haan, 2003). This does not mean Dutch people spend all of their time in parks or concert halls, nor does it suggest that when indoors, Dutch families and friends primarily play board games together. It means Dutch people unwittingly lie about their media use. Beyond multitasking and the taken-for-granted nature of omnipresent media in everyday life, we also have to consider that using media increasingly means: media making, as in instant messaging, blogging, vlogging, moblogging, podcasting, and so much more instances of what Rosen (2004/2005) calls 'egocasting', which all things considered boils down to the phenomenon of just doing our own highly individualized thing when immersing ourselves in the multiple media around us. This to some extent suggests research aimed at how people use or 'receive' media has been looking in the wrong direction. In this context Livingstone (2003: 85) remarks: "*it is thought-provoking that, increasingly, without people's physical and hence visible participation in the process of communication, there will be neither text nor reception in the first place.*" In other words: if we consider media use, we must consider it parallel with media production. Yet all of the studies mentioned above did not ask the question: how many hours a day do you produce media?

Today's media world must be typified as an ecology where consuming has become synonymous with producing. Industry buzzwords and geek terms define content in this context interchangeably as: consumer-generated (Intelliseek, 2005), customer-controlled (Shih, 2001), and user-directed (Pryor et al, 2003). The problem for media use research is, that such a recombinant relationship does not seem to register using conventional measurement techniques. It never did, because media users were not really considered to be

anything else but ‘members’ of an audience. Yet Toffler predicted as early as 1980 the rise of the ‘prosumer’, and argued how would mark a shift towards a largely invisible or ‘phantom’ economy (1980: 275ff). This invisibility of making and using media simultaneously can be set against the increasing invisibility of media in everyday life, as documented in the American middletown of Muncie. *“In the twenty-first century, we navigate through a vast mass media environment unprecedented in human history. Yet our intimate familiarity with the media often allows us to take them for granted”* (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003: 5). The bottom line: as media become inescapably pervasive in the everyday lives of people in modern nations big (the United States) or small (The Netherlands), their day-to-day use tends to disappear.

Journalism

We use more and more media, all the time, and we’re not even aware of it – surely this must be good news for those who earn their money producing and distributing media content? In journalism, a key stakeholder in the professional domain of storytelling and producing media, the opposite seems to be true. In the United States, three recent studies – by the Project for Excellence in Journalism in 2004, the Pew Research Center in 2005, and The Media Center (at the American Press Institute) in 2005 – signal a *“long-term decline in news consumption”* (Pew, 2005: 44). A survey among American 18-to-34-year-olds carried out in May 2004 shows that, with the exception of Web portals, the vast majority of them rarely, if ever, turn to the news in any medium (Brown, 2005). Mindich (2004) notes how the median viewer age of CNN and network-TV news has risen to about 60 years, while only 11 percent of 18-24-year-olds list news as a major reason for going online. In The Netherlands, the average age of Dutch newspaper readers has reached 50 years (GsCorp, 2005). Other figures are similar, as studies in both countries conclusively show that the audience for news in especially print media, yet increasingly also in electronic media, is declining, fragmenting, and generally set to disappear over the next 20 to 40 years or so.

The literature analyzing the causes and consequences of these trends points towards two related issues: new media technologies (and specifically internet), and increased skepticism among the general public regarding the products of journalism. In The Netherlands, such a perspective is both represented in industry-level reports and analyses of independent organizations such as the *Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling* (2003), as well as in scholarly work on the changing character of journalism (Bardoel, 2000; Pleijter et al, 2002; Deuze, 2004). In the United States a similar pattern emerges where the aforementioned Pew (2005) report signals an industry-wide news media credibility crisis, and authors like Rosen (1999), Pavlik (2001), Bowman & Willis (2003) and Gillmor (2004)

herald new roles for journalists as bottom-up facilitators and moderators of community-level conversations among citizens rather than functioning as top-down storytellers for an increasingly disinterested public. Researchers at the American Press Institute for example predict: “*The closed and proprietary media business models of the past will give way to open models that facilitate transactions in which consumers create, compile, edit, share and distribute content*” (2005: 3). If anything, the conclusion seems to be that journalism must re-engage with their audience as fellow citizens rather than potential customers. Lasica (2003: 71) describes this as the emergence of a participatory journalism, stressing the symbiotic nature of the evolving relationships between mainstream and ‘grassroots’ news media.

Advertising

In another powerhouse of media production and storytelling, the advertising industry, a similar trend is becoming apparent – leading some industry observers to signal the ‘death’ of advertising (Rust & Oliver, 1994; Hughes, 2005), or even the death of the concept of the ‘consumer’ (Shirky, 2000). Studies signal a move away from many-to-one communication to one-to-one marketing, which can be characterized as a move towards what Jenkins (2004: 42) calls “*the empowered consumer*” who enacts her or his agency in the face of media saturation and clutter (Twitchell, 1996). The fragmentation of media audiences across hundreds of television channels, thousands of niche magazines and hundreds of thousands websites does not seem to bode well for the “*one-way show-and-tell ad*”-based advertising industry (Auletta, 2005). As people increasingly bypasses the products of mass media altogether, scholars and professionals alike see in the interactive and highly individualized character of new media like internet and the lack of credibility of advertising among consumers the main culprits of a changing storytelling environment for advertising (Ries & Ries, 2004), even on a global scale (Roberts & Ko, 2001). In this context, Rust and Oliver (1994) signal “*a new era of producer-consumer interaction*”, a time described by people in the marketing communications industry as a ‘participation age’, typified by what media have called the rise of the ‘creative’ (*The Economist* 03/10/2005) and ‘do-it-yourself’ (*USA Today* 04/27/2004) consumer (earlier documented by authors like Komenar, 1996). In the meantime, Dutch marketing experts correspondingly signal a shift in the level of control over media content from publishers and advertisers to individual consumers, calling for a industry-wide move towards ‘consumer-to-business and upstream marketing’ (Wiersma, 2005). “*Companies that don’t realize their markets are now networked person-to-person, getting smarter as a result and deeply joined in conversation are missing their best opportunity*”, warned trendwatchers in the 1999 business book “*The cluetrain manifesto*” (Locke et al, 1999).

The point to all of this seems to be that we are using more media than ever before in history, yet this intensive engagement with media does not translate into more attention paid to the stories told by the two archetypical media professions: journalism and advertising. This is a problem – at least for media companies who based their income and profit margins on the selling of content to audiences (or: the selling of audiences to advertisers), and for those media workers whose rationale for doing what they do is entirely based on the premise of an audience existing somewhere ‘out there’. The professional identities of journalists and advertisers indeed require an audience – it is indeed one of the main reasons people want to become creatives in an ad agency or reporters in a news organization. It is purpose of this essay to suggest these consensually shared definitions of what it means to be a journalist or advertiser are exactly the ‘cause’ of the disappearing media audience, and thus explore how we may rethink a professional identity for media workers that can be considered to be inclusive regarding the roles played by former publics.

Professional Identity of Media Work

The professional identity of media workers in journalism, advertising, and public relations has traditionally been defined in terms of telling people what they need to know – in the case of journalism this meant what people need to know in order to function as citizens in democracy, for advertising this referred to what consumers needed to know about products and brands in order to play their roles effectively in capitalist societies (see for example: Van Zoonen, 1998; Kilbourne, 1999; Costera Meijer, 2001). Indeed it can be argued that the roles of ‘consumer’ and ‘citizen’ are similar, as both are constituted through the needs of a narrowly defined economical or political social system; yet these roles are also converging in terms of the contemporary ‘consumer-citizen’, where shopping has become a civic duty (Uricchio, 2004: 83), and where journalism and advertising can be seen as providing the resources for society to educate and socialize people into an ‘ideology of consumerism’ (Spring 2003).

The professional identities of media workers like journalists and advertisers have been carefully shaped through education at vocational schools and departments of journalism and mass communication, popular media representations of journalism and advertising professionals in for example movies and situation comedies, and not in the least by people working in the media industry themselves – in particular through the imaginary construction of people as audiences (Ettema & Whitney, 1994). It could be argued that media users never existed as audiences – people were framed that way for a brief moment in time one may call the 20th century. However, almost all of the professional and scholarly literature on journalism

and advertising in the United States and The Netherlands consolidated and reified the notion that the stories these media professionals were expected to tell served to inform, persuade, entertain and enlighten an otherwise more or less anonymous ‘mass’ audience. To some extent this accounts for the top-down, (informally) hierarchical, routinized and bureaucratized organization of news companies and advertising agencies – a physical and social organization that by its sheer culture of doing things seems to exclude multiple-way communication or any kind of meaningful dialogue between media users and producers (Weischenberg & Scholl, 1998). In other words: in a contemporary ecology where American and Dutch people of every ilk seem to be immersing themselves almost constantly in media, the people still earning the bulk of their salaries producing media content do not or even cannot see them as their peers.

The professional identity of media workers is not necessarily hostile towards what Hartley (2004: 6) describes as an interactive industrial model “*based on partnership and conversation with customers.*” There is one area of media work where the mutual engagement of producers and users of content has since the early 1990s formed the basis of the professional identity of its employees: the computer game industry. In 1992 a software company called *id* released *Wolfenstein*, a so-called ‘first-person shooter’ that quickly became a hit – as did its successor, the notorious *Doom*. “*Id games were distributed via a unique method called ‘shareware.’ The idea was that consumers could download the first section of the game for free from the Internet or order it by mail. If they liked the game, they could purchase the rest of it by contacting the publisher*” (Kent, 2001: 458). The shareware method became the industry standard for marketing and releasing new games. The development and design of computer games has other participatory characteristics, though. The release of the hugely successful *Half-Life 2* game in 2004 was preceded by the free release of game development tools so that fans could start writing and designing their own versions (or: stories) of the game – something that some of the bigger game manufacturers do regularly. Since 1999 Westwood – a division of one of the biggest companies in the gaming industry, Electronic Arts – has “*a dedicated department to feed designers and producers working on new projects with customer innovations*” (*Economist*, 04/10/05) – a praxis, which in the industry is called DIY (for: ‘Do-It-Yourself’) innovation. Most games now include map editors and other design elements through which casual or hardcore players can modify, adapt or even completely rewrite the game. The question is, whether the gaming industry – with the help of the World Wide Web – unleashed this interactive potential of producer-consumer relationships on its own. The answer must be: no. Von Hippel (2005: 165-177) shows effectively how the inclusion of the user in product design and innovation has been part and parcel of a wide variety of industries, and argues that new media technologies like internet

have just rapidly increased it. Indeed, the concept of the user as collaborator, co-creator or in a similar sense the blurring of the lines between consumers and producers correlates with Alvin Toffler's concept of the 'prosumer', where he writes about "*the willing seduction of the consumer into production*" as exemplified by the widespread popularity of do-it-yourself pregnancy test kits in The Netherlands and elsewhere early in the 1970s (1980: 275ff). Jenkins (2003: 5) puts the prosumer in a context of a brief history of participatory media culture starting with the photocopier, moving on via the Video-Cassette-Recorder to portable technologies such as the walkman and the cell phone. Participatory communication has been conceptualized as a human need and right, particularly in the context of development projects, and as an alternative to modernist notions of participation (in democracy or its media) as restricted to membership, whereas the registered voter and the newspaper subscriber can be considered to be members of the club that is called citizenship (Servaes, Jacobson & White, 1996). Particularly in the field of journalism authors looking at various instances of radical (Downing, 2001), oppositional (Eliasoph, 1988), alternative (Atton, 2002) and citizens' (Rodriguez, 2001) media have documented how these genres, forms and practices of making and using media can be typified mainly by their participatory character. Indeed, it can be argued that people have always been to some extent engaged with media as active participants and co-creators of infrastructure and content (Gere, 2002: 190ff). Consider for example the unexpected success of the telephone for home-to-home use up to the equally unexpected popularity of SMS for mobile phones; it's just that through our focus on the blinding light of electronic mass media success in the 20th century we have not been able to see people other than as 'audiences' for those media.

If we accept for a moment that the typical features of the currently emerging media ecosystem are what Uricchio (2004: 86) describes as networked technologies that are P2P ('peer-to-peer') in organization and collaborative in principle, it is possible to argue that this is to some extent new and revolutionary in that the dominant framing of media workers' professional identity historically has not allowed much breathing room for these elements, as these are structurally filtered by notions of (editorial or creative) autonomy, workplace ethics, and industrial conceptualizations of 'the' public - using measurement techniques that reduce people to market segments, target audiences and special interest groups (Schudson, 1999). The professional identity of media workers is an essential element in the self-organization of journalism and advertising, as it serves to maintain the operational closure of these professions (Rennen, 2000). Audiences, clients, sources, and publics are the Other, kept at bay by structural couplings - as professed in mantras like 'serving the public' or 'creating added value for the customer' - but cannot be considered to have any direct role in the everyday

praxis of media work. Surveys among journalists in The Netherlands (Deuze, 2002) and the United States (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996) for example show how they appreciate and value feedback from members of the audience, but that these reporters and editors at the same time would not change their ways of doing things on the basis of critical feedback received from the public. Indeed, the literature on journalism and advertising suggests that ultimately these media workers primarily seek recognition and acclaim only from their colleagues and not necessarily from citizens or consumers (see for example Darnton, 1990; Ries & Ries, 2004).

The operational closure of media workers' professional identity can be seen as a direct result from a functional differentiation of society – a process of ongoing specialization of different social systems that provide specific services to increasingly atomized communities. Throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries people came to rely on journalism to inform them about democracy, and on advertising to socialize them into consumer culture – both of which can be seen as essential traits of successful capitalist societies. But this differentiation has also led to an ever-growing gap between society and its citizens, as well as between corporations and their customers. To bridge this widening gap, both journalism and advertising have sought to extend their control and dominance over the storytelling experience by merging, synergizing, and converging, thus catering to an increasingly elusive 'mass' audience (McChesney, 1999; RMO, 2003). At the beginning of the 21st century, however, it is possible to argue the temporary (and imagined) existence of such mass audiences has vanished – save the televised pseudo-events of the *Superbowl* in the United States and more or less annual 'telethons' (parading celebrities on television under the guise of collecting viewer donations for humanitarian causes) in The Netherlands. This fragmentation of contemporary society can be seen as an ongoing and even inevitable process of 'liquidization' and hyperindividualization of social life, where *"the way individual people define individually their individual problems and try to tackle them deploying individual skills and resources is the sole remaining 'public issue' and the sole object of 'public interest'"* (Bauman, 2000: 72). Instead of relying on journalism, advertising and other professional storytellers to make sense of our world, we seem to become quite comfortable in telling and distributing our own versions of those stories. According to Rushkoff, *"we begin to become aware of just how much of our reality is open source and up for discussion"* (2003: 37). I am not sure whether this is a distinctly contemporary phenomenon, but it is safe to argue that new media technologies like cell phones, wireless internet and plug-and-play devices greatly facilitate and accelerate these practices. It then seems the astounding rise of the mass media throughout the 20th century owes much of its success to filling a temporary void between the demise of our trust in (as well as reliance on and allegiance to) social institutions – like the state, the

church or mosque, the school, our families or our parents – and the emergence of a perhaps over-zealous faith in ourselves. As Shirky (2000) argues, “[i]n retrospect, mass media’s position in the 20th century was an anomaly and not an inevitability.”

Participatory Storytelling

As storytelling through the media is becoming an increasingly participatory experience, the professional storytellers in journalism and advertising cannot claim control nor dominance anymore over what Carey (1989) called the conversation society has with itself – which conversation he ideal-typically considered to be amplified by journalism. According to the American Press Institute, “*to stay afloat, media companies must reimagine storytelling forms to vie for consumer attention [...] and they must react to the consumer’s creation of content with awe and respect*” (2005: 3). Jenkins (2001: 93) calls this shift towards a more inclusive production process cultural convergence, fostering “*a new participatory folk culture by giving average people the tools to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate content. Shrewd companies tap this culture to foster consumer loyalty and generate low-cost content.*” As an example of this, one could consider the announcement by News Corp CEO Rupert Murdoch in April 2005 to start including bloggers to the websites of his news organizations: “*our internet site will have to do still more to be competitive. For some, it may have to become the place for conversation [...] We need to be the destination for those bloggers.*” Although these are examples of media companies retaining control over the storytelling experience by co-opting the bottom-up narratives into their praxis, I would like to believe the professional identity of media workers could include a P2P-relationship with the former audience beyond strictly commercial or economical aspirations. In order for this to happen, a rethinking of the factors shaping and giving meaning to this identity is in order.

Before the 1990s, it would be possible to have a calm discussion with journalists and advertisers on how to adapt their products to consumers who are willing to collaborate, communicate and explicate – as this would not have challenged the foundations of their professional identities. Whatever people would want or need to do with their media, they could still quite safely be framed as audiences and therefore not being taken too seriously. People, regardless of the remote control or the supermarket tabloid, would still subscribe to newspapers and magazines, would still sit through the advertising sections interrupting television programming at regular intervals. Their actions thus confirmed and extended their ‘membership’ to this more or less contained community of publics in the eyes of professional storytellers in the media. But, as Luhmann (2000[1996]: 92) has noted, “*mass media may generate reality, but a reality not subject to consensus.*” The rising distrust (Luhmann, 2000

[1996]: 1) and disbelief (Couldry, 2004: 21) about social systems like the media during the 20th century coupled with a fast-paced individualization of (Western) society as well as a corresponding celebration of self-determination among people in for example the United States and The Netherlands are the social theoretical key to unlock the door of rethinking media workers' professional identity. A continuation of existing models of professional identity is meaningless unless it coincides with a radical reworking of the basic premises underlying our concept of professional identity in the media industry. I would like to argue that a future professional identity of media work could only be maintained if it includes a participatory culture as for example indicated by a notion of storytelling as a collaborative experience embedded in its mode of operation. In other words: advertisers and journalists should be trained to think about the stories they tell as co-created with people who they used to name (and thus effectively excluded as) audiences, users, consumers or citizens, but who are now Rosen's aforementioned 'egocasters', living in a thoroughly individualized culture dominated by personal technologies (like the cell phone, the laptop computer, the digital video recorder and the ubiquitous remote control), annotating and assembling their own, highly customized reality through the media. One way for the industry to respond to this is through ever-more sophisticated editing and production techniques aimed at capturing the browsing, grazing, scanning and zapping behavior of media users. Another way would be, as sketched above, to find ways to co-opt the 'petit-narratives' emerging online. Eminent news organizations like *Le Monde* in France and the *Mail & Guardian* in South Africa were early examples of this approach, offering moderated blogspace online to their readers. Yet all of these techniques serve the same purpose: to maintain the operational closure of the professional media system. It is my contention that the only way to adapt to the 'new' media ecology in an economically successful and, in a normative sense, socially desirable way is to include the former 'audience' as a fellow narrator of lived experience.

Concluding Remarks

As suggested earlier, both in journalism and advertising a scholarly and professional literature is emerging that addresses changing notions of media work, coining approaches such as interactive advertising, open source journalism, the customer as co-creator of media content, or the blogger as citizen-journalist (Richards, 2000; Leonard, 1999; Rice, 2005; Williams, 2003). Most of this literature is still based on the often unspoken assumption that media work – whether in journalism or advertising, and to some extent game design (see for example Wolf, 2001) – is essentially premised upon (a monopoly on) storytelling by media professionals for (selected) audiences. Paraphrasing Deuze (2003: 217), we have to consider

the different futures of professional storytelling in journalism, advertising and marketing communications existing next to – in a more or less symbiotic relationship with – participatory, collaborative and connectivity-based notions of media work.

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