

Journalism online: the search for narrative form in a multilinear world

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers mainstream journalism's attempts to bring interactive story-telling to the world wide web. It examines the development of immersive news technologies as a case study, showing that journalism based on such technologies is modelled on a games metaphor. The paper argues that games are not an appropriate model for journalism. It uses this case as a springboard to discuss the failure of mainstream journalism to come to grips with the multilinear qualities of web culture.

KEYWORDS: journalism, interactivity, multilinearity, immersive news, blogs, games.

INTRODUCTION

Mainstream media organisations have generally done a poor job of theorising the way they apply journalism to the world wide web. This is not surprising, given that for all the intellectual work that journalism entails, its most compelling imperatives are practical and material ("produce a coherent story/bulletin/newspaper by the end of the hour/day/week"). No doubt it also reflects the conventional wisdom among journalists that ever since Gutenberg's invention of the press, new technology has been the most consistent driver of change in the news business. As Terry Flew says, in such technologically determinist accounts, there is the danger of assuming that something called "culture" is acted upon by technology, for better or worse.[1] In fact, journalists and publishers are implicated in the process of media technology change, as Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone's analysis of the introduction of photography to newspapers demonstrates. The technology of commercial news photography existed long before the 1930s, when the photograph suddenly became an essential ingredient of the modern newspaper. The introduction of news photography was a stop-start process of editorial resistance and visual innovation that reflected the values and desires of journalists and the broader society.[2]

Each major technological development in media during the twentieth century (the transition from press to radio; radio to television; television to the web) offered such a "space" for human intervention. On the whole, however, media workers developed new production practices and

protocols through on-the-job experience, rather than from theory. This was an evolutionary process, marked by makeshift technique and a tendency to reinvent the wheel. For example, television production masterfully conceals the acute degree of artifice involved in creating viewing that feels natural and realistic, but it was not always so. In 1956, Victorians were welcomed to television by an orchestra and a committee of chaps in dinner jackets, broadcasting from GTV9's Melbourne studio. The guest of honour, the state governor, arrived in a Rolls Royce driven onto the set, a salute to live television's ability to capture spectacle in motion. As a spectacle, the occasion remained trapped in the conventions of the proscenium theatre and the radio show, and like the first public television broadcasts in the United States 15 years earlier, it was staged in a cramped, formal setting which failed to realise the essential character of the medium. [3]

It was the same again when major media organisations began to publish news on the world wide web circa 1994. With a few notable exceptions, such as the Guardian of London, the established media "did not really seem to understand the principles of interactive media and Net culture".[4] Typically, they mercilessly repurposed their own copy; insisted that the 24/7 medium publish highly significant breaking stories after its parent; and allowed few links to external sites, even though hypertextuality was the defining characteristic of the context.

Their blinkered outlook left the field open to a host of independent operators. Some, like Matt Drudge, played the news media at its own game and occasionally beat it; others, like AlterNet.org and indymedia, adopted a determinedly alternative approach. Still others, like the operators of Metafilter and blogger.com, looked past media content to software solutions that allowed individuals to self-publish on the web or participate in online forums that discussed the news.[5]

After almost a decade of experiment and evolution, the websites of the major news media have become far savvier creations, a fact demonstrated by the sites produced by publications such as the BBC Online and the New York Times in relation to the war in Iraq launched in March this year. Yet one notices how much the sites are characterised by practices of remediation, that is, by the refashioning of prior media forms [6]. Even native web formats such as Flash galleries which can, for example, tell the story of a battle through the linear arrangement of a chronological sequence of photographs, are heavily remediated rather than genuine formal innovation.

The most interesting (and rare) departures from traditional journalism on these news sites involve the weblog, a native format developed by individuals outside the mainstream media, and in many cases ideologically

opposed to its culture and influence. As American blogger Meg Hourigan says, by creating a more direct relationship between reporters and readers, blogging changes the relationship between news producers and their audiences. [7] Margo Kingston's Web Diary on smh.com.au, the website of the Sydney Morning Herald, is an example. A mediated blog with an audience that ranges from international affairs analysts to dairy farmers, it sometimes attracts highly informed contributions from its users. Kingston's robust understanding of the democratic nature of blogging means that many viewpoints are represented on the site just as their writers serve them up, and that Kingston engages with readers' critiques of the media and of her own columns. As Jim Hall, a former journalist and a leading scholar of online journalism, would say, Kingston's blog moves journalism into the social sphere. To Hall, this is an important function of interactivity. While he defines interactivity as "the real-time production or adaptation of texts (form and content) by users in a mediated environment", in discussion he stresses that interactivity partly depends on the level of user engagement. [8]

His discussion, however, largely sidesteps scholarly controversies over the meaning of interactivity. As several media theorists have noted, the term is inherently problematic. It not only possesses strong ideological undercurrents, but its meaning slides back and forth between the domains of computing and culture. Espen Aarseth scorns the word as part of commercial rhetoric, connoting "various vague ideas of computer screens, user freedom, and personalized media, while denoting nothing". [9] The analysis of Mark Deuze, a scholar of online journalism from the University of Amsterdam, tends to support this characterisation. He views mainstream media discussions of interactivity as simplistic, noting a lack of explicit rationale for the rich media on news sites: "When news sites in fact do offer all kinds of advanced multimedia or interactive options, it is rarely, if not never, made clear why this is done." He argues that online journalists and publishers often underestimate how the interactive strategies their sites adopt carry consequences such as the potential to undermine journalism's established culture. [10] Deuze's critique is well-founded in my view, and indicative of the near absence of news organisation voices in theoretical debates about cybertext. To thoughtful media scholars, a fundamental task in theorising the web has been to define key concepts such as interactivity in order to enable a more useful, but also imaginative discussion. In contrast, the mainstream media, and particularly commercial media, work from an instrumental and intuitive understanding of interactivity, which is different again from the ideological commitment to democratic participation evident in Hall's definition. To such organisations, interactivity involves engaging

website audiences in active rather than passive usage that boosts site traffic and meets commercial objectives such as marketing parent publications or attracting web advertising. This reduces interactivity's status to a received attribute of new technology, rather than an idea.

Do mainstream journalists, as distinct from their employers, accept Hall's democratic conception of interactivity, or prefer the commercial rhetoric of their employers? How many of them even recognize the distinction? Reviewing past DAC programs, I was struck by how underrepresented journalists and journalism were at these conferences, yet journalism is surely a significant aspect of digital culture. This conference paper outlines some of the practical and theoretical dilemmas confronting journalism as opportunities increase to build operational interactivity into news sites, but it is also a polemic urging journalists to take up the challenge of theorising digital culture and their role in it. The considerations for journalism are philosophical and ethical, as well as practical, and extend to refining and defending the central mission of journalism.

INTERACTIVITY AT ALL COSTS

One of the catalysts for this paper was a number of articles in Online Journalism Review that described continuing research in the US into the development of more interactive news narratives, specifically through the agency of "immersive news". Immersive news makes an excellent subject for study because it dramatically challenges traditional journalism practice. It employs technology which is somewhere between existing games technology and VR: it includes 3-D audio and video, haptic technology, and surrogate animations in the form of avatars. The hype around immersive news promises the user complete control:

Immersive technology puts control of news coverage in the hands of viewers. They can accept a default perspective picked up by a director or can opt for a different perspective or news experience, placing themselves in alternative parts of an event or even requesting a reporter to get added information. [11]

Inevitably and predictably, immersive news in its fully developed phase would require "the training of a new breed of reporters, ones capable of operating in the field with complicated equipment but also able to get the story in the old-fashioned, street-smart way". [12] Leaving aside the question of how effectively a journalist burdened with operating such equipment could still engage in old-fashioned, street-smart reporting in the field, let us consider the likely subject matter of such news. John Pavlik [13] instances the technology's ability to create 3D audio of a rainforest as a background to an online report

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from a remote location in the rainforests of Brazil. That sounds like a benign enhancement of online journalism. More seriously, another model of immersive news described by Larry Pryor uses technology to place the viewer directly in the action of a news story:

The most dramatic examples would be an urban riot, an unfolding natural disaster or a major spectacle, such as the opening of the Olympics or a Presidential Inauguration. The real event would be digitally re-created as a virtual event that surrounds the viewer with a visual, aural and even tactile experience... The full-blown immersive experience would attempt to insert the news consumer into the environment the reporter, film crew and field producer inhabit – wrapping the person in 3D sound and video, as well as offering background information and context, with different versions of the event customized for specific users.[12]

Pryor raises some obvious fears journalists might hold about what happens when users have the opportunity to manipulate a real news scenario. “Interactivity allows viewers to be part of the scene as news happens and get any slice of the story they choose. This ‘democratic’ concept of news coverage, with its possibilities of distortion and selective bias, raises tough ethical issues (for news producers).”[15]

He also expresses concern that a news scenario will be accidentally transformed in the post-production process:

The selective nature of new technology means that images easily get “out of synch” with reality. In the digital world, data is sorted, metered, chopped and channeled. To save valuable bandwidth, for example, computers can be programmed to only record changes in a scene, not the entire perspective, as in analogue video. This opens Internet news (and digital TV) to charges of distortion and even visual fraud. Is the viewer looking at a news event or only pieces of it? When is the depiction of a news event no longer “valid”? What can a viewer trust in this malleable world? Which artificial depictions make a difference?[16]

The current war in Iraq, which is already being used as a media lab for experiments with videophone and real-time coverage, is an obvious example of the type of significant news spectacle which could be presented as immersive news. As we think about problems that have already arisen in the media coverage – the simplistic and triumphal commentary provided by some cable network journalists embedded with the tank regiments which

entered Iraq from Kuwait, or various controversies over whether American or Iraqi missiles were responsible for the accidental killings of ordinary citizens – the ethical problems of treating war as an interactive news spectacle become apparent.

Pryor does not say it, but the model he describes remedies computer and video games, particularly “realistic” violent action games which produce a feeling of immersion in the player, through their use of linear perspective and first-person point of view. [17] Although some of the high-level technology he discusses is still years from implementation, some news sites have deployed interactive features based on rudimentary games metaphors as part of their coverage of the war. The Newsweek graphic “Targeting Baghdad” (available on the msnbc and ninemsn websites) epitomises the trend. When the user opens the feature it reveals an aerial photograph of Baghdad, as it might appear to the crew of a bomber. The controls allow the user to zoom in closer to specific targets and then veer quickly away towards others. The allusion to gaming was not lost on the journalists who work on ABC TV’s weekly Media Watch program. Its host, David Marr, commented sarcastically:

NineMSN gives us war as a video game. Click on their web site and ‘Target Baghdad’ and you can conduct your very own bombing raid. Let’s drop one on the Baath Party Headquarters. Now let’s flatten Al Salaam palace. Bombs away. [18]

Western journalists are trained to recognise the news value of conflict [19]: this is one reason why video and computer games, which often feature conflict-based scenarios, are a suggestive model for online news. But at least some of the motivation for their employers is commercial, according to Flew:

The phenomenal success of the games industry, particularly after the development of home-based consoles such as the Sony Playstation, the Nintendo Gamecube, and the Microsoft X-Box, has drawn attention to the importance [for the media industries] of developing **media forms based around engagement and distraction, that draw the user away from ‘reality’ into a thoroughly ‘mediatised’ space** (author’s emphasis).[20]

His analysis suggests there are significant purposive differences between journalism and games – journalism emphasises the timely provision of reliable information about reality, while gaming values distraction and unreality. Games theorists, such as Celia Pearce, also find major distinctions between games and other media content:

In studying games and trying to understand their value as a form of cultural production, it's crucial to recognise that games are fundamentally about play, so a play-centric framework is needed in order to look at the function of narrativity in games.[21]

According to Pearce, a game is a structured framework consisting of a goal, obstacles, resources, rewards, and penalties. [22] The idea of rewards and penalties is obviously problematic for journalism, which values information as an end, not a means. It is ethically and morally problematic to encourage a style of immersive news in which users "play" with military and civilian lives in a real conflict.

In terms of narrativity, Pearce says that the action of successful computer and video games is of necessity spontaneous, and not directed. "The key is in letting go of the notion of games as interactive story-telling and trying to engage players in a more pro-active relationship with the narrative," she argues. [23] This absolutely contradicts Pryor's conception of immersive news. "Immersive stories are like any other story; they need structure, a space within which both the reporter and viewer can operate without getting lost," he argues.[24] To use the language of Lev Manovich, games prefer open interactivity; while journalism prefers closed interactivity (a simple branching or menu-based structure, which offers the user a limited number of choices).[25]

Another theorist, Birk Weiberg, goes even further than Pearce, to argue that the best games lack any kind of plot. Games, he says, "depend on simultaneity of the dynamic content and its representation. The most successful examples, for example Doom or Quake, meanwhile lack any kind of plot. To have no story but plenty of high-end graphics with constantly new effects has become a mark of quality." [26] This is certainly not compatible with journalism's traditional role of making meaning. Thus online journalism may remediate the medium of the computer game in immersive news, but only up to a point.

At some stage in the process, other values come into play. Anders Fagerjord has demonstrated that when different media rhetorics converge, their practices have to be compared, and some modified or abandoned:

One cannot combine the first-person perspective of VR and many computer games with the continuity editing we know from TV and film. Further, the 'flow' programming of TV, designed first and foremost to prevent the viewer from zapping cannot be combined with the open-access structure of hypertext. Live television

broadcast is not live any more when it is accessed from an on-demand archive. Hopefully, these three examples bring out the point that when rhetorics converge, different practises (sic) will have to be weighed against each other.[27]

He argues the need for what he calls a "rhetoric of convergence", a theory that deals with the web's ability to present a range of multimedia as a single text.[28] The logic of this is compelling: as far as journalism is concerned the practices to be weighed are ethical as well as formal, since ethical considerations have always been part of professional journalism's cultural practice. In summary, games appear to offer the news media a popular and commercially successful model for delivering news online in a more immersive format. On closer inspection, there are major disparities between the purposes, structure and ethics of these games and online narratives. Such a model is not only problematic, but potentially harmful to journalism's ethical conduct and public credibility. The search for increasingly interactive news sites is not likely to be resolved simply by looking in the magic technology box.

JOURNALISM AND MULTILINEARITY

Surrendering control of the narrative structure of news has not come easily to professional journalists. As Hall and others have argued, the inevitable consequence of connectivity is that the journalist becomes less of an authority and more of a news guide. [29] During the late nineties, as journalists came to grips with the web, they began to construct website content as a series of randomly interconnectable lexia. Getting to grips with the non-linear nature of hypertext was easy, since they were highly experienced in treating news as non-linear building blocks – story paragraphs, sound bites, actuality – that could be assembled and reassembled at will. Online journalists successfully adopted story "layering" and the concept of site architecture, institutionalising these formal concepts in their newsroom manuals and style guides. [30] Accepting that they must surrender some of their power to direct news narratives was far more difficult.

Not surprisingly then, the multilinear tendencies of web narrative and culture have been challenging for journalists to theorise, and this is one explanation of the borrowing from blogging and game culture described above.

Although hypertext is non-linear, the appeal of the web to its human users surely lies in its potential multilinearity: not just in the accessibility of hundreds of millions of fragmented, random texts, but in human interaction with these texts to create personally relevant narratives. In the short history of the web, multilinearity has played a featuring role, in literary software such as Storyspace, hypertexts such as afternoon, a story [31]; the development of interactive cinema; and in MUDs where

participants write ever more complex elements into their communal narratives.

The web potentially contains any number of different versions of any story. Some are literary like afternoon, a story, but many are true, or purport to be true. More than a mere multiplicity of voices, the web is the site of millions of alternative realities: a postmodern proliferation of “‘mininarratives’, which are provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances.” [32] This brings web culture and its protagonists into conflict with establishment journalism. There is tension between the news media and the discipline of cultural studies; in Australia, it tends to manifest itself in media attacks on the academy, particularly on journalism schools housed in the same departments as cultural studies. As The Australian newspaper argued aggressively in a recent editorial: “Cultural studies... has brought nothing but relativist disrepute to the humanities (journalism training has also suffered).” [33]

This type of attack places reflective journalists working in the online newsrooms of established media organisations in an uncomfortable position, sandwiched between the mass media’s disdain for the cultural theorists and the disdain of many digital evangelists, such as George Gilder, for the culture of the mass media institutions.[34] Online journalists, by and large, have handled this problem by overlooking it, understandable perhaps given their organisational status and daily production burdens. Yet I believe this is dysfunctional behaviour with harmful consequences. First, it prevents online journalism from truly embracing the connected nature of the net. How can online journalism be genuinely interested in democratic interactivity of the type Hall envisages if it is at ideological loggerheads with a large part of its potential audience? (A cynical soul might see this antipathy as perhaps another reason for the appeal of computer game models to online news sites, since news packaged like a game distracts the audience and keeps them away from more real communication with journalists. As Aarseth argues: “Once a machine is interactive, the need for human-to-human interaction, sometimes even human action, is viewed as radically diminished, or gone altogether...” [35])

Secondly, ignoring this impasse, rather than taking a stand on journalism’s values, allows the continuing erosion of journalism’s core mission: to tell the truth of significant news as best it can. There is still a powerfully good argument for journalism’s fundamental premise that it is possible, not always but often, to get at the truth of a situation. Moreover, to seek to do so is an honourable pursuit that contributes to the public good. The war in

Iraq is a case in point: reviewing our use of its coverage should convince many of us that whatever its flaws, we are still tuning in, hanging on for the occasional instance when a highly competent, cool-headed, independently minded journalist files from the scene of a major news event such as the Baghdad marketplace bombing. There is much virtue in such old-fashioned news coverage and its respect for facts.

The blogger Rebecca Blood says, explaining the difference between journalism and blogging: “Journalism begins with reporting; all of the other functions associated with the practice have been developed in support of this one essential objective.”[36] Journalists can do much more to explain and defend this role to web audiences. After all, there is an underlying sympathy between the cultures of journalism and the web. The development of western journalism occurred within the framework of the development of western liberalism. The spirit of western liberalism is empirical: it is committed to discovery through personal experience (which for journalists, translates as wearing out shoe leather). Good journalism conducted in this spirit is profoundly committed to “the particularity of things” (to employ Arblaster’s distinctive phrase) [37], rather than spin and stereotype. Looked at this way, traditional journalism has a surprising amount in common with the neo-liberal web culture of individualism and the mininarrative. This is fertile territory in which to explore the values and forms of online journalism while honouring the journalist’s role.

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