Comment

SCIENCE JOURNALISM AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING

The post-journalist's toolbox – Trends in digital storytelling[*]

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ABSTRACT: *Based on the stories collected in the essay La Scimmia che Vinse il Pulitzer. Personaggi, avventure e (buone) notizie dal futuro dell'informazione[1] [The Monkey Who Won the Pulitzer. Characters, Adventures and (Good) News from the Future of Information, translator's note] here we provide an outline of the main trends in the current digital information scenario. Beyond the much feared crisis of information, we are actually witnessing the appearance of a great number of initiatives and projects which attempt to keep last century's journalism values alive (though with many economic contradictions). Any journalist, even in the science field, who is interested in communicating in an innovative way can rely on a set of instruments – from the timeline to live coverage, passing through fact-checking – which can change the reporter-reader relation.*

"The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated", said Mark Twain using some irony to comment on the rumours about his death. The same could be said about journalism today, often reported as dead facing the advance of the Internet.

But does the digital revolution really jeopardise the future of information? Ory Okolloh, a young Kenyan lawyer would not tell you so. She belongs to a generation of African people who see the web as a chance for the emancipation of their continent. Ushahidi, the platform collecting eyewitness reports sent in by common people she created to document the violence in the aftermath of Kenya's 2008 elections, is now used by thousands of people and institutions in the world, including the UN which has recently adopted it as an instrument to coordinate interventions in Haiti.

From Nairobi to Sydney, investigation journalism is stronger than ever thanks to Julian Assange, an Australian globe-trotter hacker who believes the Wikipedia spirit can contribute to unveil the deceptions of powerful people ruling the countries. Over the past few years, Wikileaks has published dozens of undisclosed and confidential files (including the manuals for the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo), unveiling environmental scandals and acts of political corruption that have been subsequently reported by dozens of international newspapers.

In his turn, the 20-year-old Dutchman Michael van Poppel is the clear demonstration that the ability to spread real-time information has not been put at risk by the crisis of giant companies. Although this boy has never read a newspaper, also thanks to a Twitter account, his BNO News systematically beats any large-scale international press agencies, as was the case when he first reported the news about the earthquake that hit L'Aquila in Italy.

Also in traditional newspapers there are people fighting the current impasse and looking at the future with hope: it is the case of "journalists with nerd tendencies" from the Interactive News Technologies department of the New York Times who design new digital formats for news, investing on a mix of graphics, interactivity and readers' involvement.

Those are some characters described in *La Scimmia che Vinse il Pulitzer. Personaggi, avventure e (buone) notizie dal futuro dell'informazione* [*The Monkey Who Won the Pulitzer. Characters, Adventures and (Good) News from the Future of Information, translator's note*] (Bruno Mondadori, 2011), an essay

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written with Raffaele Mastrolonardo, a colleague and co-founder of the Effecinque agency. The book stems from a journey made across the US, Africa and Europe in 2009 and 2010, when the reports of the "death of journalism" spread all around the world, with curtains falling for a few historical newspapers, while others filed for bankruptcy and reporters where sacked on the spot.

And yet, after so many years spent writing for the web and telling the on-going change in the digital media ecosystem, we also felt the reports of the death of journalism were "greatly exaggerated." If only you looked beyond the depressed giant information companies, you could see dozens of agencies around the world mixing design and technology; young reporters using their iPhones to tell about the war; videogame developers obsessed with news reports; programmers whose mission was to give a good shape to clusters of bits. In short, a group of information pioneers were trying to go beyond the general depression and reinvent news in the digital millennium. With the awareness that, though business models are not well outlined yet and the technologies are in their first development stage, rather than killing good information, the Internet can be its best ally.

This is the common thread of the eight stories collected in *La Scimmia che Vinse il Pulitzer*. In each chapter, the protagonist is a person or a project that tries to carry a strong value of last century's journalism into the new millennium. These are the "eight links between past and future" that range from *precision* (the fact-checking Politifact project) to *swiftness* (the Twitter-based agency BNO News beating the breaking-news giant companies); from *intelligence* (the Stats Monkey software which writes reports at the speed of light, without human intervention) to *participation* (the crowdsourcing Ushahidi project to tell wars and crisis events from the bottom); from *transparency* (Julian Assange's revolutionary utopia) to *freedom* (a courageous law promulgated in Iceland to safeguard the right to information) and *appearance* (Jacek Utko, Polish designer that saved many newspapers in crisis, thanks to his restyling). The essay ends with an emblematic chapter on the change it attempts to describe: the most important editorial offices of the world are witnessing the emergence of the journo-hacker figure, journalists with high IT skills who – from the New York Times to the Chicago Tribune, from The Guardian to El Pais – use their statistical and programming abilities to write a new page of the digital journalism.

Why not a ScienceFact?

In *La Scimmia che Vinse il Pulitzer* there are not so many references to science journalism. However, since the stories told represent a general change in the digital storytelling world, we can easily attempt to extend the range of the projects described to science communication.

During the workshop *Science Journalism and Digital Storytelling* hosted by SISSA in Trieste, the discussion focused, for example, on whether it is possible to apply also in the science field the radical fact-checking project described in the first chapter: PolitiFact. It is an online initiative born on the eve of the 2008 presidential election campaign from an idea of Bill Adair, a political reporter with a long career, then tired to have to lie down under the mechanisms of the show of politics. To go beyond what the scholar Jay Rosen defined as the "he said, she said journalism"[2] (in which journalists limit themselves to reporting the opposite statements of political opponents, without ever explaining to the readers where the truth lies), Bill Adair decided to leave his position as correspondent at the White House for a prominent American newspaper and to start his career anew with a more risky yet exciting project. That is how PolitiFact was born. It is a website that has focused on a single activity right from the start: an accurate verification of all the statements that inflame the political debate on the papers and TV talk shows. The PolitiFact editorial office scrutinises the most controversial statements, consults independent experts and governmental agencies to subsequently express a clear opinion through verified facts and figures (true, mostly true, half true, mostly false, false and "Pants on Fire"). The verdict is displayed through a Truth-O-Meter, an effective visual meter which often becomes viral on social networks.

Since its debut, PolitiFact has given birth to a rich database that allows users to surf the verdicts issued by subject, but also by politician. So any citizen who does not have a clear opinion about the reputation of a senator can simply digit their name on the Politifact search engine and display all of their statements verified by the editorial office.

The attention to details and the ability to communicate effectively on line have brought PolitiFact to win the much coveted Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting in 2009: one of the first acknowledgements given to an exclusively on-line initiative, which is a confirmation of the fact that quality journalism survives in the digital era, also in its watchdog version (i.e. controlling those in power).

For the moment, PolitiFact only deals with politics, but Bill Adair does not hide he is tempted to extend his method to other domains.

For example, just like politics, even the world of science communication is often prone to controversy and debate that puzzle readers, leaving them with unclear opinions. At SISSA's workshop, the participants tried to study the possibility of launching a similar project in the scientific field. A hypothetical ScienceFact would not need many technological investments (a good database and appealing graphics would be enough) and may have a large impact on the public debate about controversial issues such as global warming, nuclear energy, the impact of technology on our health and so on. However, as one of the speakers highlighted during the workshop, beyond the commonplace of science relying on many data and certain figures, often it is not easy to express a strong opinion on such complicated issues. But just like PolitiFact shows, such a service may at least try to deny the most sensational lies told by politicians or lobbyists who often use scientific arguments to guide the political debate towards their own advantage. In short, a possible ScienceFact service may provide the readers with more effective tools to understand the main scientific issues that are ever more frequently interwoven with politics and economy. And it would undoubtedly be an effective digital storytelling instrument to involve also the public that usually shies away from those issues.

A toolbox for digital journalists

Whereas PolitiFact represents an innovative 2.0 journalism project not involving advanced technologies, the best about digital storytelling recently seen on line actually concerns teams and people with remarkable IT skills. In the last chapter of *La Scimmia Che Vinse il Pulitzer*, we tell about the emergence of a few hybrid figures able to match their passion for journalism with advanced programming and web graphics skills. It is a group of pioneers usually called "journo-hackers" in the US. At the beginning of the chapter we tell about our meeting with Adrian Holovaty, identified by many as the unquestionable genius of this category.[3] When he was not even 24, he made the first mashup on Google Maps, by integrating all the crimes committed in Chicago in a map later become famous (Chicago Crime Map). Thereafter, Holovaty launched Everyblock, a hyper-local site overturning the perspective of local news access: you just need to insert the name of a street to immediately visualise all the news relating to that area. Everything is done without employing any reporters, but only relying on sophisticated software collecting and aggregating information already published on line.

Also the editorial offices of the most prominent American newspapers have hired many journo-hackers over the past few years. For example, the Chicago Tribune and its News Application Desk, managed by Brian Boyer, uses data-journalism instruments to support the investigations of the newspaper. Even more famous are the so-called "New York Times renegades",[4] a team of journalists-programmers-graphic designers that are implementing some of the most spectacular digital storytelling projects available on line, also in the scientific field. For example, the interactive feature produced on the British Petroleum disaster in the Gulf of Mexico represent the state-of-the-art of 2.0 journalism: through a single interface it is possible to display in real time the oil spill spreading across the Gulf, the most affected areas, the efforts to stop the leak, the impacts on nature and a timeline explaining how the disaster has unfolded.

In any case, over the past few years step forwards have been made in the field of digital storytelling. Also those who are not journo-hackers or cannot count on the support of a big editorial office behind their back can now resort to a series of easily accessible instruments that make it possible to tell stories in a more involving and interactive way.

At Effecinque, the news agency I have founded together with Gabriele De Palma, Carola Frediani and Raffaele Mastrolonardo, we use many of these instruments to innovate the service we offer to the newspapers we collaborate with: from online maps provided by Google, to mashups by Crowdmap, the live coverage by Storify and Webdoc, to the interactive timelines provided by Dipity or Timeline Setter.

These are only a few of the instruments available in a digital journalist's toolbox. Although without the powerful support of the big publishing companies, anyone can take up their experimentation and thus contribute to build a piece of the new-millennium journalism. Most importantly, old and new reporters should do it quickly, before the news about the alleged death of journalism turns into something real.

Translated by Massimo Caregnato

Notes and references

[1] N. Bruno and R. Mastrolonardo (2011), *La Scimmia che Vinse il Pulitzer. Personaggi, avventure e (buone) notizie dal futuro dell'informazione"*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano.

[2] J. Rosen (2009), *He Said, She Said Journalism: Lame Formula in the Land of the Active User*, *PressThink* weblog; available at http://archive.pressthink.org/2009/04/12/hesaid_shesaid.html.

[3] R. Leone (2006), *The Mashup Man*, *American Journalism Review*, December 2006/January 2007; available at http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=4258.

[4] E. Nussbaum (2009), *The New Journalism: Goosing the Gray Lady*, *New York Magazine*, January 11 2009; available at http://nymag.com/news/features/all-new/53344/.

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