

## Chapter 2

# A Question of Trust: Functions and Effects of Transmedia Journalism

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Narrative forms of journalistic reporting are traded as a sheet anchor in many newsrooms, as editors hope that they could brave the never-ending storm of the media crisis. But how does journalistic storytelling evolve from analog to digital? What are the potentials of narrative journalism across multiple media types and platforms? And what effects do such transmedia narratives have on media users? These questions are answered based on a multi-method research design, which includes both an explorative communicator study and an experiment with users. The investigation demonstrates that journalists expect narratives in digital media surroundings to invigorate the authenticity and comprehensibility of their coverage. This hope, however, only partly becomes a reality on the side of the recipients. Indeed, users judge multimedia online reportages to be more emotional than monomedia offline pieces, but as far as remembering and comprehending their contents is concerned, print texts are more effective.*

### **INTRODUCTION: ACCELERATE, DECELERATE**

In the digital age, journalistic production is influenced by manifold processes of uninhibited *acceleration*: Not only the time span between an event and its coverage becomes shorter and shorter, particularly in the new media; moreover, there is much evidence to indicate an increased density of journalists' working days (through an increased amount of tasks, both journalistic and non-journalistic) and, thereby, also a reduction in time per task, which results in a reduced length of the prevalent attention cycles and, in many cases, an increased publication frequency (see Krüger, 2014). The consequences are clearly perceptible in everyday news work: While it is often a matter of seconds which newsroom can boast to break a story first, pressure on journalistic actors is notably on the rise. At the same time, the quality of journalistic output appears to be at stake, in many instances: When speed becomes the paramount aim of editorial routines, other quality criteria—such as accuracy, truthfulness, comprehensibility, etc.—necessarily fall behind (see e.g. Eberwein, 2015a).

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In reaction to this maladjustment, many media scholars—as well as practitioners—are calling for a fundamental redefinition of journalism’s identity and its professional purpose (see e.g. Lee, 2014). Rather than following the general obsession with speed, which has become characteristic for most online news platforms around the globe, they argue that *deceleration* is the key to help journalism (re)gain public trust and to fulfill its social function in the best possible way (see e.g. Greenberg, 2007). Particularly high hopes are nourished by the approach of a narrative journalism, which is often said to have multifaceted positive effects, e.g. for generating attention for certain topics and communicating them in a most comprehensible manner (see e.g. Boynton, 2005; Kramer & Call, 2007; Sims, 2007). Success proves them right: Apparently, narrative forms of journalistic reporting have recently been experiencing a proper upsurge in many newsrooms (see e.g. Eberwein, 2013). In fact, quite a few editors are trading storytelling techniques as a sheet anchor that could not only help them to sell their products, but also highlight the social significance of journalistic writing in general and, thus, brave the never-ending storm of the ongoing media crisis, which has irritated the profession to the core.

Indeed, various experimental studies have shown that narrative forms of journalistic reporting have many advantages when it comes to explaining an ever more complex social reality to readers and viewers, while the traditional news form often interferes with remembering and comprehending journalistic contents, among other things (for an overview see Frey, 2014). However, many questions are still unanswered in this context: What does this mean for the future of journalistic genres in the Internet age? How does journalistic storytelling evolve from analog to digital? What are the potentials of narrative journalism across multiple media types and platforms? And what effects do such transmedia narratives have on media users?

Up to now, questions like these have not been analyzed systematically—neither in communication and media studies, nor in adjacent academic disciplines. This paper is supposed to assemble some first answers based on an innovative multi-method design, which combines an explorative communicator study with a reception experiment.<sup>1</sup> Before the empirical studies are presented in detail, however, it is necessary to provide a brief sketch of the underlying theoretical concepts and the previous state of relevant research in this field.

## **JOURNALISTIC STORYTELLING: DEFINITIONS AND STATE OF RESEARCH**

Scientific debates about storytelling have regularly been receiving high levels of attention in recent years (see e.g. Kleine Wieskamp, 2016). The cause for this concern can be seen in an increased interest among media practitioners in the various developments associated with this term: Not only in journalism, but also in other professional contexts—particularly in PR and marketing—the cultivation of well-told stories is considered to be a quality indicator (see Fog et al., 2010; Prinzing, 2015). However, it is striking to see that it remains unclear what this actually means, both in media practice and research. The heterogeneity of scientific definitions of terms like narration, story or narrativity is exemplified by a recent content analysis (Frey & Früh, 2014), for which a broad spectrum of different journal articles from this field of research has been evaluated. They allude to manifold sources from the most different scientific contexts, thereby referring to a multitude of possible key characteristics. So far, a consensus about a universally applicable definition is not in sight.

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The study presented here follows an approach that originates from the narratological theories in literary studies and can, therefore, rely on a comparatively long tradition of academic inquiry (for an introduction see e.g. Fludernik, 2009; Schmid, 2010). In this sense, narrations can be defined as representations of real or fictitious events that are communicated by a *narrator* to one (or more) *narratee(s)* (see Prince, 1987, p. 58). They adhere to particular *structural* (e.g. orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, coda; see Labov & Waletzky, 1967), *stylistic* (e.g. poetic language, detailedness/clarity, images/metaphors; see Lausberg, 1998) and *formal* (dissociation from description, argumentation or statistical representations; see for instance Brooks & Warren, 1979) attributes and are usually designed to create certain *effects* (such as suspense, empathy or entertainment; see Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982).

By now, the notion seems to be generally accepted that the production of narrative texts is by no means restricted to the literary field, but can also result in non-literary publications (see Berning, 2010). Especially in journalism, narrative forms are usually associated with typical genres such as reportage, feature or profile (see Abrahamson, 1995; Hartsock, 2000), which are differentiated from other genres such as “inverted pyramid” news, commentary, interview, etc. (see e.g. Pöttker & Kornilov, 2010). In many journalistic cultures, narrative patterns of reporting have in fact turned into an explicit alternative to the mainstream of traditional news journalism—with the aim of counterbalancing its limitations and creating a more effective “third way” of describing social reality, in the territory between journalism and literature (see Connery, 1990; Eberwein, 2015c). By now, the historical development of this literary journalism has been described quite thoroughly by a large scope of individual studies (for a first overview see the *Selected bibliography of scholarship and criticism examining literary journalism* by the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, 2011), even from a comparative perspective (see e.g. Bak & Reynolds, 2011; Keeble & Tulloch, 2012), although a contextualizing social history of the genre and its specific functions still remains a desideratum (see also Eberwein, 2013, p. 102).

Besides, the links between narratology and journalism studies have also been put to the test only insufficiently so far, although the reference to narratological theories would be exceedingly advantageous for journalism scholars, for several reasons: First of all, it is conducive to systematizing the basic definitions in this area of research, thus illustrating what journalistic storytelling actually is—or can be. At the same time, it provides a comprehensive analytical framework that allows for a structured approach to the investigation of journalistic (and other) narratives (see Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2013).

Moreover, the historical development of relevant models in the field of narratology already points to an illuminating shift of the analytical perspective, which is also relevant for this study: While classical discriminations such as Stanzel’s typology of “narrative situations” (see Stanzel, 1984) were primarily focusing on the relationship between the narrator of a text and the figures that he reports about, many younger theoretical approaches display an increasing interest in the role of the reader in the process of receiving narrative communication (for a general view see e.g. Suleiman & Crosman, 1980). Such a shift of focus seems to be even more obvious when—as in our case—a research project is supposed to reconstruct how journalistic storytelling advances from traditional print reportage to the innovative multimedia productions that are currently sprouting on various online news sites across all journalism cultures. In order to live up to the reality of narrative journalism in digital media surroundings and across multiple media types and platforms, conventional narrative theories need to be adapted—among other things to specify the changing relationship between author and reader. The necessity of such a theory modification becomes evident in the case of new multimedia and interactive forms of storytelling that

go beyond traditional narrative techniques in journalism and literature (see Bull, 2010; Penn, 2013). Well-known international landmark productions such as *The New York Times*' "Snow fall" (Branch, 2012), *The Guardian*'s "Firestorm" (Henley, 2013) or "Killing Kennedy" by *National Geographic* (National Geographic Channel, 2013) may serve as interesting case studies in this context, as they exemplify different degrees of multimedia integration and user interaction and, thus, demonstrate how the reader can take over a more or a less active role in the process of absorbing and co-creating journalistic narratives online. They also offer meaningful examples of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2003): By complementing the conventional offline coverage by the respective newsroom and moving the featured protagonists across different media platforms, they are expected to enhance the reception experience of their users and catapult narrative journalism to a new level (see e.g. Moloney, 2011; Schlichting 2015; Gambarato & Tárca, 2017).

Empirical research has not yet tackled these developments in a satisfactory manner. Indeed, there is a large quantity of experimental studies that discuss cognitive, emotional, evaluative and motivational-conative effects of narrative forms of communication within and outside of journalism (besides Frey, 2014, see also Bilandzic & Kinnebrock, 2009; Echterhoff & Straub, 2003, 2004; Green, Strange & Brock, 2013; Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007; Ricketts, 2007). However, the specific case of journalistic transmedia storytelling is largely blanked out. After all, existing research indicates that narrative communication apparently has the ability to positively influence intended effects, such as remembering and comprehending specific contents (see Machill, Köhler & Waldhauser, 2006) or the emotional experience of a given text (see Adaval & Wyer Jr., 1998). The impact, however, can vary, depending on moderating influences such as gender, age, social status and previous knowledge (see Flath, 2013; Vanoost, 2017), but also due to different modes of representation, which may include or exclude the use of photos, sound effects, etc. (see Lee & Gretzel, 2012)—a first clue leading to the assumption that the effects of monomedia newspaper reportages and transmedia reportages can be expected to differ.

However, it remains unclear in previous studies how exactly these differences come to manifest themselves. Indeed, quite a few scholars have been ascribing clear advantages to online journalism in general, which they believe to be superior to traditional print coverage because of its hypertextuality, multimediality and interactivity (see e.g. Steensen, 2011). Nevertheless, several reception experiments were also able to detect counterproductive effects: Particularly among recipients without a discernible affinity to web applications, for instance, the use of hyperlinks, audio and video elements as well as the active inclusion of users often lead to a feeling of disorientation and cognitive overload (see e.g. Opgenhaffen & d'Haenens, 2011) with negative consequences for the overall impact of the particular coverage.

Investigations of the specific effects of web-based journalistic narratives in comparison to offline newspaper or magazine reportages do not exist so far. What is missing, therefore, is a combination of the two above-mentioned strands of research regarding the effects of narrative communication, on the one hand, and online communication, on the other hand. This desideratum is going to be amended by the multi-method study that is detailed in the following parts of this chapter. Accordingly, two central research questions need to be answered:

1. Which specific aims and effects do reporters in print and online newsrooms strive to reach with their narrative texts, and in how far do the two actor groups differ from each other?
2. Can these aims be adequately realized with the available narrative means offline and online, or in other words: Do the intended effects really impact on the side of the recipients?

## **JOURNALISTIC STORYTELLING IN TRANSITION: A MULTI-METHOD APPROACH**

In order to probe into these questions, the research project presented in this chapter made sure to implement a two-step analytical design, which initially—on the basis of semi-structured interviews—highlighted the perspective of journalistic actors on the object of analysis. Subsequently, the focus was redirected to the perspective of the recipients, which was evaluated with the help of an experimental user survey. Thus, the superordinate aim of the study was to bridge the usual gap between communicator and reception research—a scientific strategy that has been postulated more and more vehemently in recent years, without having become a common practice up till today (see Dohle & Loosen, 2014).

The *communicator study* intended to retrace and comprehend current changes in the field of journalistic storytelling, in order to lay the foundation for a more systematic analysis of this widely neglected area of media research. Following an explorative approach, a total of 30 problem-centered interviews (see Witzel, 2000) with reporters from selected print and online newsrooms of German-language news media were conducted during Winter term 2012/2013. The interviewees were handpicked, in order to represent different types of print media (e.g. daily newspapers such as *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, weekly newspapers such as *Die Zeit*, or news magazines such as *Der Spiegel*) and their online counterparts as well as different positions in the newsroom hierarchy (e.g. freelancer, reporter, editor-in-chief). The interviews followed a half-standardized field manual that was supposed to help the interviewers to structure the relevant issues of the analysis and reflect them with the interviewees in a comprehensive manner. This manual comprised different thematic blocks, which focused, among other things, on the interviewees' professional self-concept, typical workflows in their newsroom, and the practical aims and objectives that they want to reach with their publications. The interviews were conducted face to face or via telephone and lasted up to 80 minutes. They were recorded, and afterwards, key passages were transcribed in full, before being evaluated with the help of a qualitative content analysis (see Mayring, 2014). By this means, it became possible to develop a set of assumptions that stressed the differences between printed and web-based reportages in convergent media spaces, particularly with regard to their specific benefits and intended effects.

These effects were subsequently analyzed in the context of a *reception experiment* (see e.g. Thorson, Wicks & Leshner, 2012) during Summer term 2013, for which exactly 100 probands were confronted with monomedia (print) and multimedia (online) versions of different journalistic narrations from the same news outlets as examples of transmedia journalism in practice. The members of two control groups each read a reportage that had been published in the German quality print media *Süddeutsche Zeitung*<sup>2</sup> and *Der Spiegel*<sup>3</sup> in a similar form. The test persons in the two treatment groups received the same articles on screen, with audio and video elements added to the original text, but otherwise congruent contents. Thus, the multimodality of the journalistic coverage, which was intentionally manipulated by the research team, served as the independent variable in the experimental research setting; the aim of the study was to measure its impact on the process of remembering and comprehending the presented topics as well as other qualities of the narrative approach offline and online (dependent variables). The probands were recruited with the help of a quota plan that was differentiated based on sociodemographic attributes (including gender, age and educational background); the allocation to the four test groups adhered to the principle of randomization. In order to avoid socially desirable behavior, the test persons were initially kept in the dark about the intention of the experiment: They were only instructed as vaguely as possible, by indicating that the research project was designed to evaluate “new trends in journalistic

storytelling.” In the test situation, under laboratory conditions, each proband first had time to read (and if necessary, re-read) one of the assigned reportages, which could take up to 20 minutes. Directly after the process of reception, the test persons completed a fully standardized (face-to-face) survey with 18 questions altogether, which, among other things, included an examination of how many basic facts they had remembered and if they had understood the article’s central meaning. Additionally, it was also tested how the participants themselves would rate the quality of the different reportages.

The following passages of this chapter are going to document key findings from both steps of the analysis, which are juxtaposed afterwards in order to assess in how far the aims and intentions of journalistic storytellers, both offline and online, are actually realized on the side of the recipients.

## **RESULTS**

### **From the Perspective of Professional Communicators...**

The qualitative communicator study demonstrates that the self-concepts and professional aims of reporters in print and online media hardly differ: Both actor groups have in common that their narrative strategy of communication is understood as a purposeful opposition to conventional news work, which is still the dominant pattern of coverage, both in analog and in digital media surroundings. According to the interviewed reporters, traditional news journalism brings along various limitations, first and foremost because it claims to be detached and objective. However, as one of the interviewees put it: “Things that insinuate they are objectively true—they are exceedingly silly. [...] They are full of attitude—attitude by the people that carry them.”<sup>4</sup> Objectivity, therefore, is considered to be an ideal which is impossible to reach. Consequently, journalists that intend to create a reliable understanding of social reality need to develop alternative strategies and vehicles to describe it.

Such a vehicle is spotted in the approach of narrative journalism, which diverges from the mainstream of news journalism in many respects. According to several interviewees, an important constraint of conventional journalism is the fact that it has to operate under severe time pressure: “It is a classic view that a journalist does not have time. That is a typical limit. [...] Quite a few rules in journalism are a result of a lack of time,” one reporter explained—adding that he tries to escape this dilemma by deliberately “trying to have time, acting unjournalistically, in a way.” Only with sufficient time resources, it becomes possible to realize a key condition of any reportage journalism that is to have a first-hand view on the issues and events that are supposed to be described. As another interviewee stated, it is of paramount importance “that we see with our own eyes what is really happening. Because I increasingly have the feeling that other forms of journalism—mostly news journalism—only create a kind of informational layer that is not accurate any more—that is simply not true.”

But narrative journalists not only demand different research methods, they also distance themselves from conventional journalistic routines by generating their own modes of presentation: Instead of summarizing the mere facts of an event or topic, which is the common practice in most informatory journalistic genres, they want to capture and tell the story behind it. With narrative means, they want to make their readers “feel the facts,” as one of the interviewees said, thus, enabling them to live through the covered events themselves. Reaching this aim is only thought possible with “a certain formation of language, [...] a certain style,” another colleague added, claiming a substantial degree of narrative freedom, often inspired

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by the conventions of literary writing, that would be precluded by the strict standards of the “inverted pyramid” form. Through creating narrative forms of journalism instead, he strives for a transmission of social contexts that is “as vivid and authentic as possible”—a wording that resounded in many of the interviews in a similar way (see also Eberwein, 2013, pp. 162–215). As assessments like these seem to be typical both for print and web reporters, the conclusion that the self-concepts and professional aims of the two sub-groups are basically identical is relatively obvious.

At the same time, however, the qualitative investigation delivers various cues, which suggest that both actor groups also differ from each other. For instance, quite a few of the interviewed newspaper journalists made it clear that they tend to cultivate a critical view on current trends in the realm of digital journalism. While they themselves are evidently happy with the available forms of offline storytelling, they feel that online journalists should rather focus on non-narrative modes of high-speed news coverage “because the Internet is always quicker anyway,” as one of the interviewees pointed out. In the eyes of many print reporters, the online media are the true driver of journalism’s current obsession with speed, paving the way for a new kind of “fast food coverage” that merely consists of short and incoherent bits of information, while impeding longer narrative or analytical publications. Elaborating on this argument, another interviewee expressed hope that the Internet might one day even “depollute” printed newspapers and magazines from the daily news coverage altogether, thus, making room for more reportages and other forms of contextual journalism. In his view, print media are the ideal container for narrative reporting and he is convinced that they will continue to fulfill this function in the future, despite the current transformations of the media landscape. This view was seconded by a further colleague, who believes that the ongoing media transition

*is paradoxically quite good for the literary reportage, because those forms that do not work out online are going to work out on paper in the long run. [...] I believe that reportage has a bright future in print media but rather not in the digital media.*

This argument, however, was challenged by many web reporters, who retorted that the communicative potentials of online storytelling actually entail manifold chances, which could even help to renew and reinforce the narrative approach in journalism, in general, and in transmedia journalism, in particular. These chances are essentially accounted for by the ingredients of multimediality and interactivity, which lead some of the reporters to believe that they might enhance the authenticity and effectivity of their coverage. “Adding sound and images creates an atmosphere that would not be thinkable in traditional print reportage,” one interviewee argued, adding that “it helps to activate the user and it draws him into the scene, until he becomes a part of the narration himself.” From her point of view, digital storytelling can even be seen as the future of narrative journalism, which might eventually get ahead of conventional print reporting by strengthening its traditional aims and objectives. In order to underline this argument in the interview sessions, many of the online journalists referred to impressive examples of award-winning online projects, such as the aforementioned “Snow fall” by the *New York Times*, which seem to be expanding the territory of journalistic narration and serve as role models for many newsrooms in their attempts to redefine what storytelling journalism is all about. At any rate, web reporters refuse to accept the view by their print colleagues that online platforms should only serve the exchange of quick news coverage and be off-limits for long-form narrative pieces. Transmedia journalism examples, such as “The Sochi Project” (Hornstra & van Bruggen, 2013), help to support their refusal.

### ...And From the Perspective of the Recipients

These conflicting assumptions by print and online reporters needed to be tested in a second step of the investigation, after finishing the communicator study. However, the experimental survey demonstrates that the hopes fostered by the web journalists can only partly be substantiated.

On the one hand, it was evaluated whether online reportages—in contrast to their print counterparts—are in a better position to facilitate the process of *remembering* single facts and *comprehending* the larger context of the published contents. In order to approach these questions, the procedure of cued recall seemed to be the most valuable strategy, since it had been applied in a similar way in earlier experimental studies on the effects of narrative journalism (see e.g. Machill, Köhler & Waldhauser, 2006; Flath, 2013). In practice, after having received one of the stimuli, the probands were confronted with a set of test questions, which were designed to quantify how many details of the contents they were able to reproduce. Among them were several very simple open questions (e.g. “Which airport does the family live on?” and “How old is the boy?”) as well as multiple factual statements that the survey participants could comment on with “true” or “false” (e.g. “The protagonist and the woman are married to each other” and “The family earns money by collecting empty bottles”). The succeeding questions for investigating the degree of comprehension were considerably more complex. Here, the test persons were deliberately taken to the task of reflecting on the causes and consequences of the problems being discussed in the articles (e.g. “South Africa is a very liberal country when it comes to rights for homosexuals. Which reasons for the hostile attitude of many persons does the text mention?”). Afterwards, the answers from both blocks of questions were evaluated with the help of a pre-defined marking grid, which made it possible to compare the effects of print and online reportages on the process of remembering and comprehending their contents.

As Table 1 shows, printed monomedia reportages are clearly more effective than multimedia online reportages with regard to remembering and comprehending essential journalistic contents. While the probands in the two control groups were able to reach 12.64 out of 16 maximally possible points on average for the test questions in the area of remembering (that equates a share of 79 percent), the two treatment groups only scored 10.21 out of 16 points (or 64 percent). In the context of the comprehension questions, the control groups—with 5.64 out of 12 points per proband (47 percent)—also scored higher than the treatment groups (4.98 out of 12 points or 42 percent). This result refutes the assumption that was expressed in the qualitative interviews, according to which narrative multimedia articles can communicate their contents in a more effective manner than monomedia print narratives—at least as far as remembering and comprehending is concerned.

However, small deviations from the average values are notable within the four test groups, when certain moderating influences are taken into account. For example, younger users (14 to 29 years) tend

Table 1. Remembering and comprehending print and online reportages

	Remembering		Comprehending	
	Points per Proband	Percentage	Points per Proband	Percentage
Print	12.64/16	79.0	5.64/12	47.0
Online	10.21/16	63.8	4.98/12	41.5

Source: own research project



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to remember and comprehend the contents of online reportages more successfully than older users (50 or more years). Moreover, female recipients achieve considerably lower scores for the online stimuli as compared to the print versions in both the categories of remembering and comprehending, while the discrepancies among the male test persons are much smaller. Both age and gender are correlated with the average amount of time that the test persons usually spend online and their previous experience with mobile media (smartphones, tablets, etc.), which generally lead to higher scores in both categories too. Finally, previous knowledge about the topics of the reportages also has a positive effect on the average test scores. These moderating influences help to explain the specific impact of web-based multimedia storytelling, thus offering insights that may be valuable for newsrooms in the process of planning their editorial agendas.

On the other hand, the reception study was also a helpful instrument to test which other qualities the probands ascribe to the different narrative texts, for instance, with regard their *information value*, their *entertainment value* and their *emotional qualities*. Therefore, they were shown twelve further statements (e.g. “The presentation of the article is entertaining”, “The article evokes my compassion”, and “I consider the article to be trustworthy”), which they were supposed to rate on a scale from 1 (“I totally disagree”) to 5 (“I fully agree”).

Table 2 exemplifies that the overall interest in the chosen articles is slightly higher among the print readers as compared to the online readers. While the former assessed the respective statement with an average value of 3.62, the latter only reached a value of 3.44. A similar discrepancy resulted from the statement “The presentation of the article is informative”—here the control groups leave the treatment groups behind too (3.84 vs. 3.64). It may come as a surprise that the readers of the monomedia narratives (2.92) also judged their articles as more entertaining than the recipients of the multimedia pieces (2.82), since this result again stands in contrast to the assumptions derived from the qualitative study in which the web reporters insisted that their forms of reporting are a warranty for more authenticity and vividness. On the other hand, the experiment also makes it obvious that multimedia online reportages create a distinctly higher degree of compassion (4.02 vs. 3.42) and, furthermore, that they are considered to be more trustworthy (4.52 vs. 4.33), although the value of trust for the print articles also reaches a high level.

In analogy to the results for the test of remembering and comprehending, moderating influences such as age, gender, affinity to online and mobile media as well as previous knowledge about the reported topics may lead to small variations within the test groups. These moderating influences, however, do not change the overall tendencies indicated by Table 2 and are, therefore, negligible in this context.

Table 2. Other qualities of print and online reportages

	Print (Mean Value)	Online (Mean Value)
Article is interesting	3.62	3.44
Presentation is informative	3.84	3.64
Presentation is entertaining	2.92	2.82
Article evokes compassion	3.42	4.02
Article is trustworthy	4.33	4.52

Source: own research project

## **DISCUSSION: TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING— BOOSTING TRUST IN JOURNALISM?**

What can be learned from this multi-method study? In how far does it advance our previous knowledge about narrative journalistic concepts in the age of media convergence? And what are possible implications for the practice of transmedia journalism?

The qualitative communicator study demonstrates that journalistic storytellers ascribe extraordinary potentials to narrative forms of presentation such as reportages or profiles, particularly if they are looking for a lively and authentic strategy of communicating social reality. Many reporters explicitly describe their narrative modes of journalistic coverage as a countermovement to the dominant pattern of a seemingly objective news journalism, which is regarded as an insufficient means to describe the contemporary world. Oddly, while several print reporters blame the digitization of the media landscape to propel a hitherto unknown demand for speed in many newsrooms, it is generally agreed among their online colleagues that the special features of web-based communication (for instance, interactivity and multimodality) may even invigorate the impact of narrative journalistic genres.

This hope, however, only partly becomes a reality on the side of the recipients: Based on the user experiment, it can be shown that recipients indeed perceive multimedia and interactive reportages as more emotional than traditional narrative articles in newspapers and magazines. However, with regard to remembering and comprehending the communicated contents of the stories, the printed text forms are considerably more effective. Interestingly, multimedia online contents are also regarded to be more trustworthy than monomedia offline reporting, although the level of trust is remarkably high for the latter as well.

Certainly, the empirical research design developed for this study is by no means beyond doubt. The communicator study, for example, with its sample of 30 journalists, can merely claim to have an explorative character; a representative survey on the self-conception and professional aims of the specific groups of narrative journalists, both offline and online, is still missing—not only in the German-speaking world. Also, the narrow focus of the reception experiment, specifically pinpointing the issue of remembering and comprehending journalistic contents, is far too limited to allow for a universal judgment about the impact of storytelling practices on different media platforms. Here, more complex analytical designs, also with a more precise discrimination of varying degrees of multimedia integration and user interaction, could undoubtedly help to produce much more differentiated findings. Such a differentiation would also make it necessary to produce more complex stimuli, a requirement that was impossible to be addressed in this chapter, in view of the limited resources of the research seminar that realized the project presented here.

Nonetheless, the results of the study—even though only documented in an abbreviated version—provide various entry points for further discussion: Currently, media practitioners in many newsrooms around the world lament the fact that audiences do not seem to trust journalistic products any longer (see also Donsbach, Rentsch, Schielicke & Degen, 2009; Peters & Broersma, 2013). The reputation of journalistic actors is at the usual low level (see e.g. Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2013) and recent discussions about media performance in a time of “post-truth” politics have done their share to discredit the profession even further (see Tanz, 2017; Eberwein, Fengler & Karmasin, in press). Surely, these are not the best of circumstances to justify why it is still important to invest in professional journalism in the middle of a media crisis. At the same time, the data which have been collected for this study illustrate quite impressively that a narrative presentation can clearly enhance the credibility of journalistic output. Apparently, this is even more so if a story is covered in different formats across different media types.

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If this insight is thoroughly reconsidered, the concept of transmedia storytelling applied to journalism, which includes both on- and offline media outlets, functions not only as an instrument for communicating journalistic contents to media users, but also as a valuable strategy for newsrooms in their struggle for public trust, which the profession needs more than ever these days. Transmedia journalism can reconcile print and digital storytelling, extracting the best of both universes, as the empirical research highlighted. Such an interpretation may once more substantiate why journalistic storytelling is being traded since recently as a multifaceted concept with manifold potentials, not only in communication and media studies, but also in practical journalism. If journalism is to have a future, more deliberation on this topic will be inevitable.

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## **KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Hypertextuality:** The extent to which online texts (or parts of them) are related to each other by internal or external hyperlinks.

**Interactivity:** The degree to which users are involved in the exchange of information with computers.

**“Inverted Pyramid” News:** A form of news story that communicates the basic facts in the initial sentences.

**Multimediality:** The extent to which different media channels (text, images, audio, and video elements) are combined and integrated in a common digital form.

**Narratology:** A branch of literary theory that focuses on the study of narrative structure.

**Problem-Centered Interview:** A theory-generating research method in qualitative social sciences that aims at combining the principles of induction and deduction.

**Reportage:** A journalistic form of storytelling that, first and foremost, intends to create an authentic account of the events it covers.

**Storytelling:** A method of communicating information in the form of stories that is applied in journalism and organizational communication as well as in fields such as knowledge management, education, psychotherapy, etc.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The point of origin for the thoughts presented in this paper was a project seminar in the MA program for Journalism at Technische Universität Dortmund, Germany, which the author supervised in Winter term 2012/2013 and Summer term 2013, together with Horst Pöttker (see Eberwein 2015b for further details). The participants of this seminar deserve recognition and gratitude for their contributions to the empirical parts of the study.
- <sup>2</sup> The text delineates the fate of a Bulgarian family of refugees that has been living at the airport in Munich, Germany, for several months. The original version is available online at: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/krisenfluechtlinge-am-flughafen-muenchen-alles-ist-besser-als-zurueckgehen-1.1534989>
- <sup>3</sup> The article broaches the issue of homosexual women and men in South Africa. Its original version is online as well: <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-8515-7573.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> All direct quotations that are not attributed to any particular source are taken from the problem-centered interviews which were conducted for this study. They were translated from German to English by the author.