Breaking News!

What qualitative research can learn from the media

Shobha Prasad

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Contact us

ESOMAR

ESOMAR Office:
Atlas Arena, Azië Gebouw
Hoogoorddreef 5
1101 BA Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Tel.: +31 20 589 7800

Email: customerservice@esomar.org
Website: www.esomar.org

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Introduction

The news media has been fundamentally changed by technology, from the speed of reporting to the styles, content and consumption. The clear lines between formats– online/offline, print/TV – have blurred, and with it interactivity between the creator and the consumer has become deeper and far more integral. With the changes in format and presentation, the way in which journalists communicate insights have become intimately impactful and deeply engaging.

Good journalism shares several traits with qualitative research; in essence, they share both methods and ends. As a result, there is much for the intrepid researcher to learn from the evolving face of journalism if they seek to create impact rather than simply inform.

The objective of this paper is twofold:

1. Examine changes in journalistic practice over the last five years specifically in response to technology, evolution of social media from the following angles:
    *   Content creation
    *   Content presentation
    *   Changes in philosophy/ approach

2. Assess how these insights can be translated into meaningful learnings for us as qualitative researchers

This paper has been built through conversations with journalists across India, US and Singapore, ranging in experience from 2 to 30 years. They have spent time at BBC, Bloomberg, The Express Group, FirstPost.com, Outlook and Others (request to keep the names of some publications anonymous) across print, online and TV. These have been supported with background reading and conversations with research industry stakeholders.

Emergence of the digital 'always-on' audience

"The future is already here, it's just not very evenly distributed yet."- William Gibson

The digital platform is fast becoming the primary platform through which audiences are accessing news. The Reuters Digital News Survey 2017 tells us that a third of 18–24 year-olds now claim social media as their main source of news. News access through mobile devices is increasing rapidly – particularly in the Far East, but also across the world.

The audience is:

*   *Impatient:* look for quick information shots, need instantaneous and realtime updates.
*   *Distracted and overwhelmed***:** Seek simplicity, brevity, are customizing their news feeds to de-clutter using apps such as Flipboard
*   *Opinionated and interactive:* Like to engage in dialogue, post immediate sharp and public feedback.
*   *Polarised into echo chambers:* Personalised curated news feeds are creating "bubbles" of the like-minded, and there is increased polarization. For every point of view there are extreme counter views in good numbers.
*   *Skeptical:* Amplified conversation around "fake news" is creating mistrust of mainstream media, which is going through a credibility crisis. There is a tendency to label as 'fake,' news that does not confirm their views.
*   *Expecting activism*: Interestingly audiences seek a stand or opinion from the news, and opinion news shows have very high viewership compared to the more balanced analytical shows.

The audience has turned co-creator and news amplifier - anyone with a smartphone or Internet access can generate and share/ amplify news.

The audience can completely bypass mainstream media to access news directly from newsmakers: Newsmaker Twitter accounts and social media pages give audiences direct access to newsmakers.

Power has moved subtly to the audience. Today the audience largely drives the agenda. *"The days of the editorial team playing God and dictating what audiences should read are over."* News companies are altering the way they perceive their audience, now increasingly defined by shared interests as "tribes", rather than by geography.

The audience that the news media creates for is the same as ours. We deal with them- as respondents and as clients.

Clients' expectations are changing:

- *Speed:* looking for dashboards and real time updates - have short attention spans for thick data.
- *Tell a brief crisp story*: increasing emphasis on sharp storytelling
- *Take a stand, tell us what to do*: seek strong direction from our findings, not just information - create impact.
- *Credibility*: Clients are fact-checking us against their other information and are quick to call out discrepancies. Clients are also directly able to engage with their consumers through social media and get feedback from them, bypassing the research agency.

Our relationships with respondents are also changing:

- *More interactive -* Each respondent is capable of uploading / sharing their views and slices of their lives for us to gain insight, participate in the process.
- *Access*: We can access a much wider range of people through the digital medium

Our clients' expectations are shaped by the way they consume media, and naturally, have come to expect researchers to create 'stories' instead of simply providing information, expecting, in a sense, a more journalistic attitude to research.

We can gain from the journalistic approach in four areas:

- Creating narratives
- Content presentation
- Speeding to the break
- Activism and Impact

Creating narratives

"If you're a journalist, show me a damn story."- Scot Rensberger

The journalist: Part storyteller, part activist:
Journalists define themselves as storytellers and activists. They focus on finding, assembling and telling powerful and provocative stories. Countless journalists have gone on to become writers and novelists and have seen it as a natural extension of their craft. Their approach to assembling stories is subtly different from that of researchers:

- *Seeking the story - the nose for the newsworthy*: News journalists are constantly tuned in to their environment, picking up trends and anomalies that house new stories. It is now standard practice to use online tools such as those offered by Google News Lab to pick up trending topics and build stories around trending themes that audiences are interested in.

Figure 1.
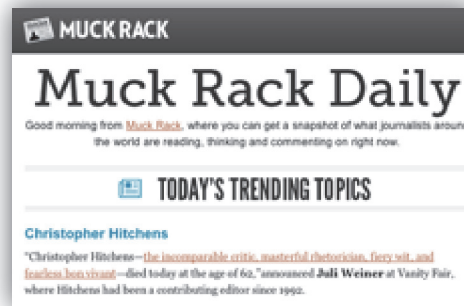
Researchers are not compelled to find topics to research. However, using online tools to pick up trending topics can help us add value to briefs we receive, or alert clients to trending issues for new briefs, forging a more pro-active relationship from our side.

- *Story focus from the start*: Journalists begin with a story idea, which they seek to validate aggressively, fine-tuning and modifying along the way. Insight discovery and validation is integrated into the journey. Every story uses multiple data sources - "*physical sources, such as records, files and references; the direct observations of the reporter; interviews with human sources; online sources. Most stories are combinations of two or three of these sources.*" Each source validates and checks out the other to build a credible piece. These stories are pulled together very fast.

Applying the "story lens" from the beginning of a study helps assemble sharper stories in a shorter time. Committing to a storyline and pushing to validate it may seem like bias, but is in fact a great driver to probe sharper - so long as one is balanced enough to admit if a storyline is not working out, and has the imagination to see alternate pathways.

- *Narrative genres*: News journalists today deal with an enormous variety of stories, each with its own narrative style and structure:

   *Profile***:** Find the people behind a story, the characters driving the issue.
   Explanatory piece - why something happen or how something functions.
   Issues and trend stories
   *Investigative***-** Look into wrongdoing, "follow the money," analyze power struggles
   Narrative **-** A story with a character, scenes, and tension.
   *Descriptive/day in the life***:** The alternative to a narrative, focusing on a particular moment, such as a ride-along with the police
   Voices or perspective story **-** Have people tell a story in a unique way: Q&A, roundtable discussion, a rail of quotes, or vignettes.
   Visual stories- presented through visuals/ photos/ video
   *The Listicle***:** Stories organized around lists
   *Running update***:** Tickers that are updated in realtime with breaking stories
   Games- Quizzes, crosswords

Storytelling is an underdeveloped art in research circles, as we do not see ourselves as storytellers. We tend to be more data focused. It would be interesting for us to consider using these genres to present findings in interesting ways, even using games such as quizzes, or humour.

- *Personalising and dramatizing narratives***:** The news media does not shy from amplifying the drama in their stories, and personalizing narratives. As far as possible reporters try to get real people to tell their stories in their own words. News reporters also try to "live the news" and personalize their narratives. As Christiane Amanpour says in a CNN promo: *"These experiences don't just make it possible to know where the story might go. They demand that we go with it."*

Our training to stay detached often prevents us from leveraging the storytelling opportunities in our studies. We underplay the drama and human angle to provide impersonal narratives, often told through business presentation tools such as PowerPoint.

However, clients today are looking to hear / feel the human stories through us, which can provide the real human insights that make a difference. Some suspension of the detachment we are trained into may be called for.

Content presentation

This is an area where the news media has much to teach us.

Today, the very meaning of news is changing - news has gone far beyond politics, and covers an array of topics, ranging from the trivial to the tectonic. *"Today, everything is news - a story on Beyonce's twins can sit alongside a serious story ... everything is newsworthy today".* The audience accesses different types of news stories across different media.

News sources have splintered: media, bloggers, tweets and self-published articles are competing with conventional media. *"Expert bloggers can carry more credibility on some technical topics than news publications."* There is tremendous clutter and competition.

While our environment is not exactly the same, the basic challenge is similar: how to deliver powerful and insightful content with nuance and depth in an era of shrinking attention spans and information clutter.

There are three trends amongst the news media:

1.   "Media rich": Multimedia multiplatform formats
Visual enrichment has always been part of news journalism, and continues to be so. Journalists are trained to be their own photographers, and photojournalism is a full-blown art.

But articles are today also "media rich" - combining text, photos and videos in responsive formats made suitable for viewing on different devices and screen sizes, with software available to create such multimedia articles.

BBC iWonder's experimental content on themes such as the one given below on Footballers United, or the piece on World War 2, are examples of multiplatform content that plays to the strength of each platform to bring an integrated story. This piece pulls together static visuals, videos, access to documents, text and engages through quizzes to provide a holistic feel for the material.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.
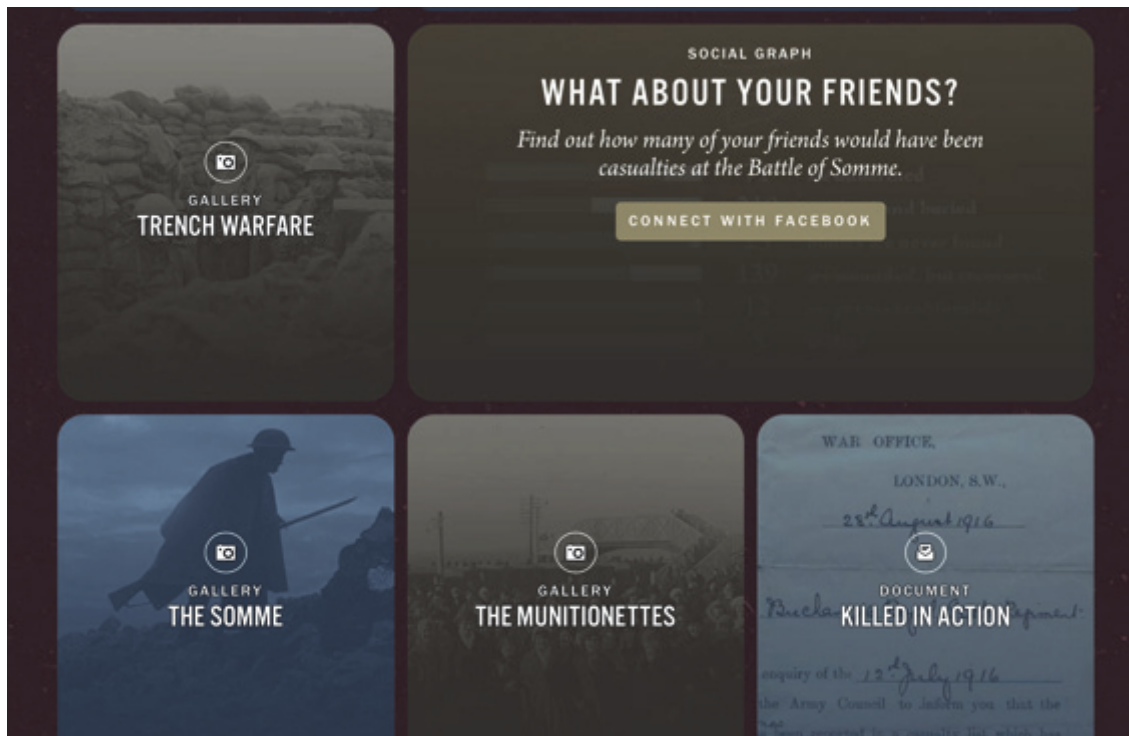
It is interesting that these stories are not necessarily linear - many different facets of the story are reflected and links provided, so those interested in specific parts can go there directly.

Integration with social media, interactivity is also the norm - news articles invite interactivity and amplification by displaying twitter handles, or suggesting visiting the article on social media websites. It is normal today to see a "click to tweet" option on blog or other articles in the media.

Enriching through Infographics and Illustration: The growing area of data journalism that tells stories from hard data has been using infographics extensively. Infographics are able to convey ideas and huge amounts of data at a glance. Other digital storytelling tools like maps and interactive graphics provide a "richer and more engaging journalism."

Use of cartoons is another enduring journalistic tradition, and media companies still engage extensively with illustrators and cartoonists.

On mobile screens, the importance of visual is even higher. Where earlier MoJo was more about the mobile technology, now journalists are trying to figure out the medium better - the language, the iconography that is native to this format.

The Outline, a mobile first media house uses bold visuals and – and since it is directed primarily at a younger audience – it also has a quirky look and feel.

Figure 4.
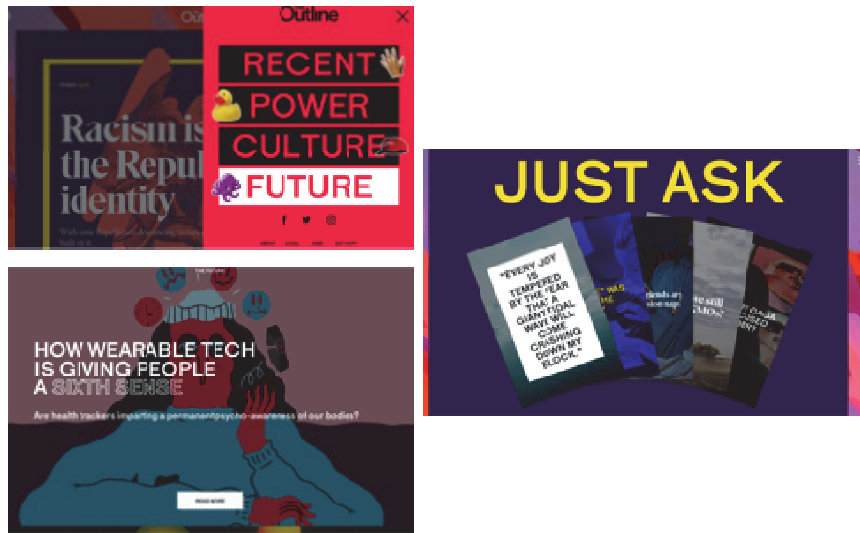
2. Video storytelling- a strong emerging trend:

Digital media is planning a significant increase in video content, believed to be preferred by young audiences and more 'shareable' on social media. Many types of news videos have been developed and are in use:

- Short clips or eye-witness accounts
- Live stream or events
- List videos/ listicles – to summarize news stories into essential takeaways
- Narrated video with a human VO, direct to camera
- Short caption videos with subtitles as narrative (do not need sound, text driven, but could be set to music or have ambient sound). This format, made for 30-90 second viewing, is gaining popularity and seen to be most sharable.

Of these, the last – the short video – is in use by many legacy media on their websites, to enrich or substitute their articles, and can be of great use to researchers. It does not require high technical skill, can be pulled together quickly, and is very effective and sharable.

Media houses are also making an effort to tailor video to different formats. Apart from the 16:9 videos, in November 2016 the BBC introduced vertical videos on its mobile application, shown in figure 5.

Figure 5.

Given that video is expected to grow into a primary storytelling medium, journalists are figuring out how to convey complex narratives through videos. The space is still evolving.

3. Continuing primacy of written journalism

Despite the pivot towards more visual storytelling, written journalism is still going strong. Most journalists believe that nothing can replace written journalism for complex and deep storytelling. These are some of the key trends here:

- *Powerful headlining*: Clutter breaking and descriptive headlines are the norm, and becoming more important especially in the context of mobile platforms.
- *Brief "news shots"*: These provide the opportunity to get the gist and provide the option to dig deeper with a second more detailed layer.
- *The long format article endures*: A Buzzfeed study shows that long format articles of over 3000 words have a higher probability of being shared. Further, it is a fallacy to say that Millennials do not read - a Pew study shows that 18-24 year olds in the US actually read more than the older audiences. Deeper and complex stories can be dealt with only through long format articles. These are now enriched with visuals and video for easy consumption.

What does the future hold? The movement towards "immersive content": Virtual reality

In March this year CNN launched a virtual-reality division within CNN Digital as "a new immersive journalism unit." In July, BBC launched new mobile application called BBC Taster VR to experiment with transforming BBC content into VR experiences.

Figure 7.

What do we make of all this?

This media environment is bound to shape client expectations of research as well. We need to keep in mind that the audience is the same, and our outputs are only a part of the overall information they receive from multiple sources.

Enriched content, more immersive outputs are called for:

- *Media enriched storytelling* - photo, video: Building in different layers of storytelling from different formats - combination of audio, video, visual and text. We also need to look at sharability within the client community. In case clients wish to amplify or publicise any part of the report, can we provide 'tweetable' content?

  Use of photo-stories and visual enriched narratives, short video stories are all formats that will be user friendly and easy to absorb. Researchers underutilize original on-field visuals. It is important to train researchers on visual and video capture for storytelling. Pulling together short one or two minute videos of story essentials can be a strong output for easy sharing within the client community.

- *Long and brief formats*: there is a place for both the long and the short format reports - we need to layer our narratives, use powerful headlines and short summaries, leading to longer reports if there is a need to read on. Clients could also create templates with short "brand stories" that encapsulate and archive each succeeding research for ready reference, stored multi-media.

- *Format sensitivity*: Creating reports for different formats - our clients often access reports or immediate feedback on the go, on their mobile devices. We should try to vary the formats for easier readability on mobile devices.

We need to take "story craft" as seriously as the story, and could do with more flair in our reporting - impactful headlines, clear language, strong and real visuals, and where warranted humour as well, to engage our audience.

Speeding to the break

Journalists operate on a different time scale than we are accustomed to in research. Stories need to break in real time, and updates need to be frequent. Even a day to pull together data from multiple sources for a news story is considered a reasonable amount of time.

But today the challenge journalists face is to deliver swift and accurate stories to an increasingly impatient and judgmental audience. Simultaneously, news breaking has become more complex- multiple data to pull together from a growing number of sources, myriad perspectives, all of which have to be reflected. A misstep and the feedback can be swift, vicious and very public.

Here are some ways journalists are addressing this need for speed:

- *Breaking news in stages, across platforms*: First the "breaking news" and short update- followed by the more detailed or analytical pieces as the facts get verified. It is interesting to see how strengths of multiple platforms are leveraged in breaking news: e.g. first break on social media such as Twitter and later update onto digital platforms, with a final detailed version in longer format digital pieces, on physical newspapers or weekend magazines.

- *The rise of MoJo – Use of technology:* Today's mobile devices can capture, edit and upload stories in minimal time, and stream events realtime. This is giving rise to a new class of amateur and professional Mobile Journalists or MOJO's.   MoJo's harness the power and features of the mobile phones to create swift and evocative stories. *"Mobile journalism involves people realizing that they and the gear they carry are like a Swiss army knife, with lots of attachments. You choose the one you need."*

- *The citizen journalist- increasing role of the amateur***:** Technology has enabled the amateur journalist / eyewitnesses to be part of news-gathering. An example is Sohaib Akthar, a.k.a. @ReallyVirtual, a resident of Abbottabad, who live-tweeted the raid in which terrorist Osama bin Laden was killed without quite knowing what he was actually witnessing. Today using "citizen journalists" is an established practice, and there is a rigorous process of fact-checking them.

Use of artificial intelligence is just around the corner.

- *AI for breaking news*: We are now seeing the use of AI in filing the first breaking reports. Recently, Los Angeles Times used its "QuakeBot" tool to generate an early article on an earthquake. (And alarmingly, there are studies that show that unless readers are specifically told, they do not notice the difference!)

- *AI for increased audience interactivity*: There is experimentation ongoing with chatbots such as TrumpChat or Washington Posts Kikbot for interactivity with audiences

Figure 6.

Researchers face a similar pressure to provide findings faster, without compromising on depth and quality of analysis. Certainly greater use of technology in the process is indicated.

- *Using technology – Rise of MoRE? Mobile Researchers::* We use mobile devices for data capture, but we are yet to harness the power of mobile to convert data into quick stories. There are apps used by MoJo's such as Storify for pulling together first level "breaking news" which could be explored.

  We also need to explore how we can use multiple platforms to deliver our findings – e.g. closed social media groups such as WhatsApp – these could provide clients a sense of update and movement, while a project is on.

- *Using "citizen researchers":* There is certainly greater potential for using respondents as researchers for ongoing insights - provided we are able to verify and fact-check them rigorously. This goes beyond panels into creating 'quasi researchers' who can be trained to be amateur ears and eyes on the ground.

- *AI for swift first reports*: Eventually, AI (Qualbots?) could be used in chats with respondents and filing the "first report" or the key research highlights in highly standardized studies.

Creating impact: Activism in a time of fake news

News journalists are driven by a strong activist streak and are happiest when they can provoke and create an impact with their stories. The central dilemma is around how to perform the activist role, without appearing motivated and biased. This is a tough task in this era of Fake News, with media credibility at an all time low.

Journalists today seek to build credibility through organised fact checking - and also a strategy of representing different points of view while putting forward a perspective.

.Researchers have an opposite problem to journalists. Where journalists are accused of too much activism and too little objectivity, we are being pushed to be more 'activist' and take a stand, abandoning some of our neutrality. Researchers lack the "Activism streak" and the drive to make an impact. In part this is because researchers lack an appreciation of the significance of their work, and do not believe their studies have high impact. Helping researchers recognize the value their projects bring can help trigger the activist urge, and increase push for actionability.

Conclusions

This analysis has shown us that we have much in common with the news media - not just in terms of the work we do, but also in the audience we share. Our clients form part of the audience that the news media accesses, and their expectations are being molded by their experience with the media: they wish to be constantly updated, with sharp, brief and impactful content in engaging and convenient formats.

The way the media is assembling and playing out stories is modifying their needs on a constant basis, and we need to be mindful of this.

This study has shown us that the news media have much to teach us on how to find and build sharp and impactful narratives, and on the art of engaging the audience.

If researchers are to tell better stories, it is important to evolve a self-image of being storytellers. This will create a story focus from the start. It is worthwhile also to consider personalizing narratives, as this will help in conveying the experience and emotions to the audience. This requires some suspension of the detachment we are trained into.

An examination of journalistic output shows us the variation of storytelling genres and methods used to make the content enriching and immersive experiences. These are being updated constantly with changes in their audiences and their use of technology. Researchers need to likewise stay updated.

Journalists, on the lookout for new stories, are continuously tuned into their environment. There is a need for researchers to be likewise sensitive to changes taking place in their environment.

- Awareness of trending topics and viral themes can help in providing proactive inputs to clients without waiting to be briefed, and delivering to their evolving needs.
- Sensitivity and awareness of changes will also help in contextual understanding of consumers and their evolving needs - therefore we can engage with them in better and more efficient ways

Finally, a trace of the journalist's drive to make a difference with each story, if imbibed by researchers, will go a long way to creating stories with impact.

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The Author

Shobha Prasad is Director, Drshti Strategic Research Services Pvt. Ltd, India