

Asian broadcasters telling compelling stories using technology: a case study from Malaysia.

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Abstract

Stories are significant on their own when they are given meaning as a consequence of the process by which they are constructed. Technology enables new forms of storytelling among broadcasters, eventually getting the message out impacting larger audiences. Audiences understand reality in a way that is congruent with the constructions of meaning either directly or through mediated socialization. Today, the media has become a powerful tool in this socialization process that audiences tend to refer to reality as portrayed in media. A collaborative research with the Asian-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD) elicited and received feedback from 28 of their member countries. The study enquired how Asian broadcasters perceived their challenges in storytelling and crafted their opportunities for broadcasting. It became evident that broadcasters tell 'big stories' in quick succession to be relevant by using strategic enablers in particular ways. The transition from traditional media platforms to social media platforms was reported to reinforce storytelling skills. This finding was triangulated empirically at a mass celebration and storytelling event. The technological disruption experienced throughout this study shall be the future challenge to engage 'a streamlined world of shared platforms that will empower broadcasters'.

Keywords: storytelling, broadcasters, social media technology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is an ancient craft still relevant today in shaping peoples' perception of the events happening around them. It is the art of delivering stories in their most engaging ways about themselves in the past and now. The art is a time-tested technique and tool that has held audiences informed from Adam's.

1.1 Background on the "24-hour *Kenduri Rakyat-show*"

Three isolated villages perched on the northern mountains of Peninsular Malaysia, accessed only by a narrow gravel road and surrounded by a large lake. The villages are located only 15 km from the nearest town, Sik, and 70km from the state capital. Two out of 3 villages were abandoned for years until recently. Raja Azahar told the plight of his folks many times to many authorities, all in vein falling on deaf ears. The media looked the wrong way; Politicians came and went every 5 years but electricity did not come. He used media technology to reach out to the authorities, telling them how much his village folks needed electricity. Even pointing out, pursuant to the UN 7th SDG that they were all entitled to clean energy.

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Then his children, studying mass communication, decided to use social media technology and blow it real big. They organized the “24-hour *Kenduri Rakyat-show*” invited 100,000 people from the region, gave away free SIM cards to upload the show. But there was no tower nearby to transmit the signal. Now the event just got bigger. They planned to record and stream the event on Facebook and upload on to YouTube. It was planned just after the Ed Festival, when people were still celebrating.

The media refused to cover the plight of the people or the event. But who will not cover when you pay for their services. ASTRO, a private media company, was hired. Multiple camera production, 24 hours OB coverage was organized. Maxis was hired to install towers to provide up to 3G coverage. SIM cards were given away free. People from the neighborhood came on foot and boats, and slept in camps. They were fed and entertained. Raja Azahar, told his story by singing his heart out, along with Ghazal music, about the plight of his villagers through social media coverage and technology. The hidden agenda behind the 24-hour coverage got out. Did the authorities get the message? Will electricity come to the villages? For sure the elections came instead (9th May 2018).

1.2 Research purpose

The study enquired how broadcasters in Malaysia and member broadcasters from the Asian-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD) perceived their challenges in storytelling and crafted their opportunities in new media broadcasting. AIBD is an inter-governmental organization that manages general professionalism and the human capital development matters of broadcasters from the region.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is pertinent to note Leinaweaver’s (2015) comment that storytelling by nature is inherently invisible. Therefore, the challenge for broadcasters is to understand how to make the invisible visible, to make stories tangible, valuable and impactful for their audiences.

Stories are significant on their own when they are given meaning as a consequence of the process by which they are constructed (Borchers, 2011; Carter, 2013; Couldry and Hepp, 2016; Luhmann, 2000). The construction of such meaning is situated in the social processes of local societies. Every member of a society understands reality in a way that is congruent with the constructions of meaning, through direct and mediated socialization, from other members of the same society (Couldry and Hepp, 2016). However, in modern societies, the media has become a powerful tool in this socialization process that audience tend to refer to reality as portrayed in media when they too construct their respective realities.

Scholars have positioned stories and explicated storytelling as approaches used by media that construct realities intended to influence audience in an aspired way (Frunza, 2011). Hernandez (2017) in the preface of his latest book, “The Storyteller’s Dilemma ...” tells us that to share stories is intrinsic to humans. That the connection between storytellers and their audiences these days is a digital expression; the way audience enjoy the creative expressions of storytellers is shaped by technology and internet.

It is understood that stories entertain and teach us moral values; storytelling is a practical approach deeply embedded in historical and cultural contexts (Kelsey and Zaliwski, 2017). Mileski, Schneider and Bruegge (2013) contend that the storytelling approach also connects facts into a logical stream of information to make a memorable conclusion seems like an aspect of human nature. These authors claim that human knowledge is based on past narratives; that the human brain processes these stories to understand, remember, and propagate fresh stories.

Kinnebrock and Bilandzic (2006) point out that corporate communications; marketing, science communication, and management consulting and employee engagement are just some of the fields where storytelling is part of the lingua franca. Interestingly, scholars (East et al., 2010; Linebarger and Piotrowski, 2009) also highlight that stories and storytelling have long been used in business, healthcare and science to get across to their respective audience. Now social media and digital platforms have opened new and popular approaches of storytelling (Ohler, 2013). It represents a novel distribution of a scarce resource – the ability to represent the world around us – using a shared infrastructure (Lambert, 2013).

New media enabling technologies, the infinite distribution networks, and the abundance of resources are new interventions that complement traditional storytelling. On the part of the listeners, they trust storytellers will respect their time by telling stories that make sense and resolve a state of expectation.

To Haigh and Hardy (2011), the sharing of stories creates a bond between the teller/writer and the listener/reader. In addition, scholars (Ford, Ford and D'Amelio, 2008; Gold and Watson, 2001; Leinaweaver, 2015) also argue in support for change agents who go beyond the surface and tap into something deeper and essential. Tangible change does not happen through shallow stories. Change only happens when people are convinced by the intangible and undeniable truth told through stories.

3. METHOD

A collaborative research with AIBD concluded in April 2018, was undertaken to elicit responses from 28 of their full member countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The results of the original report were derived from two sets of questionnaires, and presented as quantitative and qualitative responses from broadcasters and audiences. The first set of questionnaire was specifically meant for senior, editorial and decision making broadcasters. These questionnaires, where ever required, provided ample space that sought qualitative response to 79 items related to storytelling and technology spread over seven sections.

The response rate for full members was 60.7% (or 17 out of 28). For statistical analysis, this percentage is considered adequate in light of the 25–30% average for external email surveys with no incentives or follow-up communication (Yun & Trumbo, 2000). The high representativeness among full members lowers the risk of response rate bias and provides a basis for cautious generalisation to the broader AIBD broadcasting community.

A second set of online survey received a total of 54 responses from 19 countries across the continent of Asia from China to the Middle-East, from countries in the Indian Ocean and the South-Pacific.

The research team randomly met with broadcasting practitioners who came from across the Asia-Pacific region to AIBD in Kuala Lumpur for courses and workshops. Face to face interviews were conducted with these broadcasters who provided their perspectives as audiences in their respective countries. They were selected on the basis of being active consumers of content from mainstream and social media broadcasting sources.

This was necessary considering the diverse nature of broadcasters the Asia-Pacific region whose responses were important to answer the study purpose. The study arrived at saturation point after eight face to face in-depth interviews were conducted with experienced Malaysian and Asian broadcasters. This opportunity was thought necessary owing to the subjective nature of stories and storytelling given the diversity of informants.

The study conducted an on-site participant-observation for 48 hours at the mass “24-hour *Kenduri Rakyat*” to understand similarities and differences in the local storytelling context.

This study has taken the qualitative approach to describe self-reported opinions and concerns of broadcasters and audiences. Where relevant, the authors have examined opinions, behaviours and informants' concerns as reported in their feedback. Authors of the study also offer explanations of broadcasters' practices related to storytelling and make conclusions within the scope of Asian broadcasters' mandate.

4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

The study reports its findings on how broadcasters and audiences perceived their experiences of storytelling through new media broadcasting. The perspectives of broadcasters in the context of their engagement with new media are reported first.

4.1 Broadcasters' response

4.1.1 Broadcasters' response to new media broadcasting.

Informants suggest that digital medium or specifically new media have given new impetus of growth to storytelling through their integration with traditional media. Traditional concepts like hot clock and niche programming, audience segmentation have lost some of their relevance with the prevalence of digital media.

The “long tail” demand curve and audiences’ share demonstrate a dramatic shift in favour of consumers and social networking services for instance the use of Facebook as an extension to regular linear programming.

Informants also report that the current social media tools have taken away the flare and rich social storytelling ways of the analogue era. The analogue format was a monologue era where the storyteller reigned supreme with their prowess of storytelling that captured a mass audience then. The situation now is quite different where digital storytelling has made broadcasting look more like an IT industry with computers and technologies enabling the work of broadcasters. Broadcasters agree that new storytelling ways will prevail. This is evident from the number of broadcasting organizations constructing a dedicated unit and recruiting new media expertise to ensure the role of new media is effectively executed.

Most broadcasters prefer the introduction of a new unit with talents in their organization to integrate the use of new media strategies in production. Lister et al. (2012), among others, observes that “[c]onsumers and users are increasingly able to customise their own media use to design individualised menus that serve their particular and specific needs” (p. 33). Broadcasters realise that audience expect differentiated programme presentations. Entirely new media technologies and men are required to manage such expectations.

4.1.2 Broadcasters’ popular social media platforms

Broadcasters agree that cultural and traditional stories have better chances of flourishing when they are published through new media platforms for their accessibility and exponential increased usage. Each of the social media platforms has its own merits and popular in specific regions. However, broadcasters have chosen Facebook and twitter as being effective in transmitting content because of their respective audience reach thus far.

Almost all broadcasters interviewed were of the opinion that their choices were spread across strategies: most chose new media for cross promotion, describing sharing to make content more viral, to create station/channel awareness, to attract and engage more online users to mainstream programmes.

4.1.3 Broadcasters’ new media strategies

New media strategies have made it possible to share individual and personal stories, re-tell and recast stories (Wilkins 2004). Over and above sharing stories through multiple social media platforms, new media appear to co-exist as complementary to mainstream broadcasters in their roles as contributor to public-sphere discourses and remain involved in the social construction of what constitutes successful development practices. Public broadcasting media in particular have an obligation to broadcast development stories – whether global, regional or local reach – and to function as agenda-setters.

New media followers watch content online for the popularity of specific websites. Attractive websites sustain the interest of followers through reviews and providing critical information and analysis. Currently, established linear broadcasters with a global presence such as CNN, BBC, NHK and CGTN are also popular on multiple new media platforms.

4.1.4 Broadcasters’ approach to storytelling

The convergence of media technologies and access to broadband internet has distinguished four storytelling enablers and audiences’ consumption patterns. A good story is backed by a skilful storyteller, availability of resources, its distribution network of platforms and technology, terming these backers as enablers.

Table 1: Enablers that best complement the delivery of messages in the contemporary storytelling context.

| Enablers | 80-100% | 60-79% | 40-59% | 20-39% | 0-19% |
|-------------|---------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| Storyteller | 11 | 6 | 6 | 2 | 1 |
| Resources | 7 | 12 | 6 | 0 | 1 |
| Networks | 9 | 10 | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| Technology | 8 | 9 | 5 | 2 | 2 |

Majority of the responses (26/28) were skewed positively identifying the storyteller as the best enabler that complemented the delivery of messages in the contemporary storytelling context. This is followed by the availability of resources; otherwise all the enablers generally contribute to the delivery of messages.

Responses from broadcasters point to approaches to storytelling as dependent on the nature of content and its delivery enablers. They are closely dependent on each other. They insist that equal emphasis must be given to both content and delivery. To rely on the storytellers' articulate experience, oratory skills and body language alone is inadequate. They realise that new media strategies offer immense possibilities that complement delivery.

Meanwhile, broadcasters also put their weight behind 'broadcasters' inclination to use technology' as a factor that has diminished the significance of traditional storytelling because audiences are connected to storytellers by technology and internet as espoused by Hernandez (2017). Broadcasters hinted at the failure of the storyteller as diminishing the significance of traditional storytelling when he/she outlives his/her useful years and has not mastered new 'tricks', hence the need to train new talents or retool experienced staff.

4.2 Audiences' response

Findings from the audiences' response have to be seen in the dual context of audiences' sources of media consumption and their engagement with new media.

1. Lately, binge watching has become a popular mode of broadcast content consumption among diverse groups of audiences, irrespective of their age group. This development is a result of accessibility of affordable online broadcast content through multiple platforms. However, this celebrated development is becoming a concern for stakeholders and decision makers of traditional broadcasting, rendering their agenda setting role insignificant.

This concern among decision makers comes at a time when traditional media is gradually losing its popularity to new media (Salman, 2011). Adult audiences reveal that they watch foreign TV content on an average of six hours a week or just about an hour daily. This can mean less audience are following local content produced by their own broadcasters. The explanation to this shift can be aligned to audience who are actively watching foreign content with localised dubbing and sub-titles.

It is speculated that soon new media will have the lion's share of the advertising revenue as well. Audiences' engagement with content generated by new media users is making the concept of Web 3.0 sought after. Storytelling through new media will indeed be a viable option simply for its wider ubiquitous reach.

2. Audiences' engagement with new media: Audiences these days consume content on the go with devices appropriate to one's own convenience. Content consumption has become even more accelerated and accessible with the internet of things (IoT). It is therefore only natural for audiences to spending more time with social media. Such a preoccupation with social media does explain audiences' deep engagement with binge watching.

This raises a vital question about traditional media and linear programming. Will traditional media see the end of daylight? Just as radio survived when TV came into being, TV broadcasting too has evolved and transformed with the integration of new media programming strategies, cross media and transmedia broadcast. This prediction also emanates from among the broadcasters who report the prevalence of new media users through a 'dedicated unit' which supports audiences' engagement with new media are also of the opinion:

- That media should focus on human development stories;
- That media should emphasize educating the masses;
- That media's main function is to inform its audience in an unbiased, truthful and universal manner relevant to them;
- That media is expected to focus on promoting culture as well.
- These responses run counter to the responses from audiences on the focus of stories. They would like to see more air-time apportioned to a variety of genres instead of development stories. The larger percentage of broadcasters weighing on more development stories can be understood from the fact that they are public broadcasters whose goals are people development.
- Finally, audiences are inclined to believe that stories can become commercially successful even without celebrities or star value but spiced up with other storytelling elements and served with an emotional

appeal. These believe aligns to Leinaweaver's (2015) prerequisites of good storytelling which are: memory, conflict, plot, resolution, setting and character. Audiences also reported that, "At different parts of a story, different elements of the storytelling become important". Some of these storytelling elements were well exemplified in the case of Raja Azhar's "24-hours Kenduri Rakyat".

5. SUMMARY

It is realised from the results obtained from broadcasters and audiences that: a) broadcasters are uniquely positioned and multi-talented to execute their obligations of realising their respective organisational and societal needs; b) while audience are still engaged with mainstream traditional broadcasting, broadcasters do not shy away from adopting new media enablers to engage with social media audiences.

Broadcasters are indeed moving forward to renew models of operation that have proven to be productive in the digital age. This is evident from their response to use 'powerful visual medium'; adopt suitable 'storytelling approaches'; 'integrate new media technologies'; endeavour to reach larger audiences through 'multiple platforms' all through the creation of a 'dedicated new media unit' in their organisation.

Broadcasters' adoption of a variety of new media strategies to produce and deliver their content using new media platforms to attract and engage wider audiences who are online followers is a significant move away from traditional linear broadcasting. The study observed this significance on the ground when audience uploaded Raja Azhar's show without hesitation, given the availability of timely enablers.

Wilkins (2004) rightly predicted that to share content broadcasters could use social media strategies. Over and above sharing stories, from the feedback received, new media appears to co-exist as complementary to mainstream broadcasters. New media strategies are used as a conduit for messages to audience and society, adopting fresh storytelling techniques to enhance broadcasters' creative production and effective delivery methods.

Broadcasters are convinced that they must now tell 'big stories' to be relevant during times of great change. This they must do by telling many more stories and in quick succession. This is only possible by using several strategic enablers in particular ways.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The Asia-Pacific region constitutes people of diverse cultures and the stories they tell define storytelling in many different ways. Most stories may embed a conflict between good and evil, protagonist and antagonist. Leo Tolstoy in "War and Peace" implied that the best stories are not those between good versus evil but between good versus good. Today's stories have moved away from the archetypal hero, the anti-hero to the trickster hero, the reluctant hero to the unlikely hero.

Joseph Campbell (2008) says that a "hero with a thousand faces" is someone who gives his life to something bigger than himself. Likewise, the study concludes that Asian broadcasters are the unlikely heroes who wear many hats when telling stories, at times sliding into their personal narratives; that broadcasters are constantly challenged to live out their experiences and personal stories, in search of the hero within.

Broadcasters are more than ordinary talents. They are called to service for a purpose larger than themselves. Broadcasters' responses in this study reflect their deep concerns for acquiring new knowledge in order to align their over-arching responsibilities towards organizational and societal needs. In their heroic journey of storytelling, broadcasters are always seeking new pathways to move up from the attributes of little stories about themselves and individuals, to higher levels of big stories about socio-cultural organisations, economy and education.

In the quest to attain such high order in storytelling, the study proposes that aspiring broadcasters adopt new ways that would potentially benefit them, their organisations and their society. The technology disruption being experienced by broadcasters currently are only challenges that must be turned into opportunities to overcome even more challenges to come. The resulting benefits, as Hernandez (2017) points out, would be 'a streamlined world of shared platforms that empower storytellers'.

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