

# Digital storytelling as sociotechnical imaginary

## The performative power of journalistic innovation discourse

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### Abstract

This article zooms in on the sociotechnical imaginaries within the discourse on digital storytelling as journalistic innovation in the Netherlands. It analyzes how digital storytelling is discussed since 2015 on the online platforms of the Dutch Journalism Fund and the Dutch Association of Journalists, two central intermediary organizations within the Dutch journalistic landscape that play a vital role in the debate about journalistic innovation and journalism's future. My analysis shows that this discourse provides a rather one-dimensional and uniform sociotechnical imaginary that presents the future concerning the story forms journalism employs as one in which digital-savvy news consumers need to be engaged through a more captivating way of reporting, allowing for more interactivity and forms of storytelling that draws them into the story on an experiential and emotional level. In terms of storytelling, the techno-centric focus reinforces the already prevalent understanding of journalistic innovation as primarily a matter of mastering and exploiting the digital affordances of new technological tools and platforms without questioning or problematizing how this impacts journalism's professional ethics and subsequently its cultural authority.

### KEYWORDS

journalistic innovation, digital storytelling, sociotechnical imaginaries, technological drama, innovation discourse

## Introduction

For over two decades, journalism has been grappling with the challenges of the digital era. A key concern is journalism's difficulties with attracting and engaging news consumers in the highly competitive context of the digital era (Broersma & Peters, 2013). This struggle has prompted gloomy narratives of decline from both journalists and scholars, raising the alarm about journalism's survival and the societal impact of its decline in a post-truth age. In response, people within and outside journalism have – with increasing urgency – been calling for rapid and far-reaching changes in journalism (Hepp & Loosen, 2022; Creech & Nadler, 2018). The term 'innovation' has become a driving force within this debate and is widely embraced as a panacea that promises to safeguard journalism's future in the digital age (Bossio & Nelson, 2021).

Exuding a utopian aura of novelty and (radical) progress, journalistic innovation promises to fundamentally reinvent the profession (Creech & Nadler, 2017). In doing so, innovation discourse performatively naturalizes the idea that innovation is crucial for journalism's future, and projects specific images of journalism's future that include “a diagnosis that points to the need for a fundamental change in the shape of pressure to innovate: journalism or media organizations would have to do this or that so as not to miss trend x, to meet challenge y.” (Hepp and Loosen, 2022: 118). As such, it establishes an intricate relation between the way journalism's future is envisioned and what 'innovation' entails and how it should be implemented, which steers the direction in which journalism develops as practice and industry. As Godin (2015: 284) argues, “discourses make innovation happen.” Yet, innovation as a notion is seldom problematized within discussions on journalism's future, resulting in the uncritical acceptance of such claims without critically assessing the promises that are made (Creech and Nadler, 2018).

To elucidate the performative nature of innovation discourse, this article zooms in on the discourse in the Netherlands on digital storytelling as journalistic innovation. My analysis of the debate on digital storytelling in the Netherlands acts as an insightful case-in-point, but the article centers on the development of a theory-driven argument about the role discourse on innovation play in shaping journalism's future, which I believe holds merit for other journalistic cultures and contexts as well – particularly concerning journalism in the West. In the theoretical framework following the introduction, I start by arguing that innovation is a fuzzy, value-laden, and performative notion, which is strategically exploited by journalistic actors – journalists, news media, intermediary organizations as well as journalism critics and scholars – to paint a picture of what

journalism's future hold, and which developments and initiatives are necessary to make this future happen (Godin, 2015; Creech & Nadler, 2018).

Subsequently, I discuss how this discourse, which is rather utopian in nature, presenting innovation as something of a 'magic bullet', can be fruitfully analyzed through the conceptual lens of 'sociotechnical imaginaries', i.e., specific images of journalism's role in society and its use of technology that affords this, are conveyed within this discourse (Jasanoff, 2015). Such imaginaries are often presented with a high degree of certainty about what the future holds, aimed at convincing people within and outside of journalism of the necessary actions necessary to realize this future (Schiolin, 2021; Ruotsalainen et al., 2021). As such, a key focus of the empirical analysis of this article is to scrutinize what imaginaries are put forward with regard to digital storytelling as innovation, and how they shape and constrain how journalism's future is envisioned.

With the growing attention for journalistic innovation, ancillary intermediary organizations such as professional associations, innovation labs, funding agencies, and incubator and accelerator programs have started to discuss, encourage, support and fund journalistic innovation (Lowrey et al., 2019). Therefore, the discourse on journalistic innovation – in the form of news and background articles, announcements and interviews on journalistic innovation ranging from new outlets and ideas, predictions of journalism's future, to coverage of research projects and announcements of support programs – to a large extent takes place on their websites and platforms, and is strongly shaped by their understanding of innovation and journalism's future. By highlighting and providing a platform for different actors to convey specific sociotechnical imaginaries, they steer how journalism's future is envisioned, and, particularly through the support, funding, and prestige these intermediary organizations distribute, they actively shape, but also limit the direction in which journalism develops (Lowrey et al., 2019; Willemssen, Witschge & Sauer, 2021).

In that sense the quality of the debate about innovation and journalism's future is important as it plays a central role in shaping the way journalism evolves and changes. The discourse on innovation on the websites of these ancillary organizations thus provides highly relevant research material. In the method section following the theoretical framework, I discuss and justify how I have conducted a textual analysis of a sample of 68 articles on digital storytelling from the websites of two central intermediary organizations within the Dutch journalistic landscape with a strong focus on journalistic innovation, respectively The Dutch Journalism Fund ([www.svdj.nl](http://www.svdj.nl)) and

Villamedia ([www.villamedia.nl](http://www.villamedia.nl)), part of the Dutch Association of Journalists.

The remainder of the article is devoted to a theoretically driven discussion of the characteristics of the way digital storytelling is discussed as journalistic innovation that can safeguard journalism's digital future. Overall, my analysis shows that within that debate on innovation, journalists of established outlets and of novel journalistic initiatives and startups as well as journalism scholars regularly point to digital storytelling as an important innovation that has the potential to attract audiences, particularly a younger generation, and re-engage them with journalism. They clearly have a techno-centric perspective on digital storytelling and emphasize how the affordances of digitalization enable a new type of storytelling that appeals to the audience through captivating, interactive and immersive multimedia stories (Cf. Vázquez-Herrero, López-García & Irigaray, 2020). Moreover, the discourse lacks a comprehensive perspective on the lineage of and relation between the different storytelling trends, which are as a result largely discussed in isolation.

Based on these findings, I argue that the emphasis within the discourse on digital storytelling is too much on the 'bright shiny things', providing a one-sided techno-centric perspective on digital storytelling without considering the impact the implementation and use of these news technologies might have on journalism's core values and professional ethics. Ultimately, this means that digital storytelling as innovation is taken for granted as a positive development without a thorough critical discussion about the impact it has on journalism as a professional practice.

## **An overemphasis on innovation and change**

Journalism's focus on 'innovation' aligns with a broader trend of embracing 'innovation' beyond its original economic and business context. In the last decades, the concept entered the debate in many public sectors, like health care, education, or the environment, and is now an integral part of their political agendas (Ampuja, 2016; Perren & Sapsed, 2013). The EU's Horizon Programme, for instance, allocates 10 billion euros to the European Innovation Council between 2021 and 2027 (Horizon Europe, 2022), which demonstrates the growing belief in the efficacy of 'innovation' to solve public issues.

So, innovation is a 'hot' topic, which has put it high on the research agenda, with journalism studies being no exception. Research into journalistic innovation has grown considerably in the last decades. Many scholars have examined how both existing

outlets and new actors have experimented with and tried to adopt new ideas, ranging from the use of new technologies, and business and distribution models to the implementation of alternative work routines and journalistic norms and forms – with more and less successful results (Bélaïr-Gagnon & Steinke, 2021; Garcia-Aviles, 2021). While this has rendered many important and insightful studies into which aspects of journalism are subject of innovation and how journalists and outlets have implemented – or tried to implement – innovations, this focus on innovation has somewhat obscured the aspects of journalism that have remained stable.

For this reason, Peters and Carlson (2019: 638) argue that journalism studies subscribes to a ‘change paradigm’, with which they mean that “the idea of change, and especially forward-looking change, gains almost paradigmatic status.” Carlson and Lewis (2019: 643) further develop this idea and point out the often a-historic, future-oriented nature of research into journalism. While they understand how the concerns about journalism’s future have encouraged and justified this research focus, they argue that journalism scholars run the risk of only examining “trends and fads without sufficient critical reflection”, thus disregarding the ongoing interaction between stasis and change in the way journalism develops. To counter this ‘tunnel vision’, they call for more ‘temporal reflexivity’ in research to get out from under the pull of ‘the new’.

While these scholars talk about journalism studies in general, their argument applies *a fortiori* to research into journalistic innovation, which has mainly focused its attention on the latest industry trends (Posetti, 2018; Bélaïr-Gagnon & Steinke, 2021). As such, many journalism scholars studying innovation implicitly seem to accept the promise of innovation that is central to its discourse:

The ‘innovation’ discourse seems to fulfil an important purpose: It contributes to a general self-assurance of ‘innovation’s’ importance. This discourse acts as a driving force for the initiation and legitimization of processes of institutional change, leading us to believe observers would agree that both journalism and journalism research are primarily concerned with future trends.

(Hepp & Loosen, 2022: 118)

While there is research pointing to the potential negative consequences of digital technologies for journalism and highlighting new media’s resistance to change (e.g., Cohen, 2015; Hendrickx & Picone, 2020; Bossio & Holton, 2019; Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021), only few studies problematize the notion of journalistic ‘innovation’ itself (Creech & Nadler, 2018; Bossio & Nelson, 2021). To counter this, I do not only argue for more temporal reflexivity, but also for a

more reflexive and critical stance towards journalistic innovation, which acknowledges the value-driven and performative nature of the understanding of and debate on journalistic innovation (Godin, 2015; Creech & Nadler, 2018).

## **Innovation as a strategic and performative concept**

As much as ‘innovation’ is being studied, the concept remains “ill defined”, lacking a shared understanding (Bleyen et al., 2014:29; Garcia-Aviles, 2021). The term is used rather loosely, encompassing any effort to adapt journalism to the digital age (Küng, 2013; Bélair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2021). What the many different perspectives have in common is a rather broad definition of ‘innovation’ as something ‘new and improved’, which is used commonsensically (Bélair Gagnon & Steinke, 2021; Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013; Garcia-Aviles, 2018).

Yet, what counts as ‘something new’ cannot be established objectively and always refers to something being perceived as new (Steenen, 2009). This goes a fortiori for what ‘improvement’ entails. Whether an outlet, tool, or practice is considered ‘innovative’ or not is ultimately rooted in a normative perspective on what journalism is and should be to ensure its future. So, innovation is by no means ‘simply’ a neutral, descriptive concept (Hepp & Loosen, 2022).

In his comprehensive study of innovation as a concept, Godin (2015) argues that the meaning of the concept and its ‘utopian’ aura, is too often taken for granted and unreflexively embraced. According to him, “researchers have asserted that innovation is good and have sought the conditions under which innovation takes place, the conditions which facilitate its diffusion, and the characteristics which distinguish more innovative individuals, groups, and organizations from less innovative ones.” (Godin, 2015: 283). Conversely, Godin (2015: 284) conceives innovation as a value-laden concept that has strong performative power. According to him innovation is:

[A]n abstract panacea, anti-historical and disconnected from the study of social problems (the problems are taken for granted) but aimed at solving all of humankind’s problems and bringing about in a radical way a perfect society.

Thus, the discourses about innovation have a lot of performative power: “[D]iscourses make innovation happen” (Godin, 2015: 284).

More specifically, Godin warns against uncritically accepting the promises of innovation due to the market-oriented nature of the way the concept is widely understood, which “evolves around a key ideology of modernity, namely economic issues, and the ‘positive’

contribution of industrial/technological innovation to economic growth.” (Godin, 2015: 284). This is nicely illustrated by the role innovation plays in the EU’s Horizon program, which clearly embraces the promises of innovation by emphasizing how it “support[s] breakthrough technologies and game changing innovations to create new markets and scale up internationally”. This quote not only shows how innovation is understood as radical change and improvement, but also reveals the underlying ‘entrepreneurial’, market-driven goals (Horizon Europe, 2022; Godin, 2015).

Critics fear that such ‘innovation fetishism’ results in the adoption of an entrepreneurial logic in which commercial motives invalidate public values as key drivers of policy decisions (Ampuja, 2016; Van Dijck, 2019). However, Montgomery (2016) highlights that this plea for how to understand innovation isn’t settled yet. He argues that despite the popularity of an entrepreneurial understanding of ‘innovation’, the right way to understand ‘innovation’ is still part of an ongoing negotiation about what innovation means and what role it should have in tackling societal problems.

While the notion of innovation often goes unquestioned, this struggle over the way innovation should be understood is also evident within journalism. Its strong commitment to public ideals like independent reporting and a well-informed citizenry, and professional values such as truthfulness, factuality, and impartiality, under score why the emphasis on technological advancement and entrepreneurship in the debate around journalistic ‘innovation’ has been criticized for abandoning these core values (Posetti, 2018; Ward, 2009; Garcia-Aviles, 2018). Innovation is thus a concept that is highly value-laden – often combined with adjectives like ‘disruptive’ or ‘radical’ – aimed at fundamentally changing journalism to safeguard its future.

This perspective is established performatively; people within and outside journalism need to be convinced of its value (cf. Godin, 2015). Within the context of the discussion on journalism’s reluctance to innovation, the strict protection of journalism’s professional ethics is often framed as the losing battle of a stubborn, nostalgic “rearguard” that is wasting precious time to reinvent journalism (Kleis Nielsen, 2019). By accepting such a perspective innovation is performatively established, presenting fundamental change as the only way to ‘save’ journalism. This “pro-innovation bias” assumes that “exceptional contemporary conditions require journalism to shed many of its historical accretions” and shows how successfully ‘innovation’ has naturalized the idea that fundamental change is urgent and inevitable to secure journalism’s future (Creech & Nadler, 2017:192,188; Godin, 2015).

Moreover, this understanding of innovation and the way it shapes how journalism's future is envisioned, steers the distribution of already scarce funds and resources within the industry (Creech & Nadler, 2018; Carlson & Usher, 2016). This has made the term a strategic asset in the ongoing competition for legitimacy and resources between established journalists and new contenders of competing outlets, but competition can also occur within journalistic organizations (Ruotsalainen et al., 2021; Holton & Bélair-Gagnon, 2018; Vulpius, forthcoming). Like the concept of journalism in general, journalistic innovation is also involved – implicitly and explicitly – in a definitional struggle, in which different voices attempt to performatively establish its meaning as well as the way journalism's future is envisioned (Carlson, 2016). How 'innovation' is understood and imagined therefore steers and legitimizes the way journalism's future is envisioned and which new journalistic initiatives need to be funded (Hepp & Loosen, 2022; Creech & Nadler, 2018).

### **Sociotechnical imaginaries of journalism's future**

A useful way to gain insight into the way innovation is understood and how journalism's future is imagined is to study the 'sociotechnical imaginaries' that are strategically put forward in this debate. A sociotechnical imaginary entails a selective portrayal of journalism's future in terms of its technological affordances, revenue models, societal and professional values and practices, and audience behavior and expectations (Jasanoff, 2015). These imaginaries are an important discursive strategy in convincing people of the value of journalistic innovation as well as delimit what type of ideas and initiatives are legitimized as innovative – i.e., fruitful – ways to change journalism to sustain it in the digital age.

As Schiolin (2020) shows, such imaginaries attempt to predict what the future holds for society – often in an authoritative way. They provide a scenario of how certain new developments will change society, but at the same time, he argues, these descriptive statements are highly normative claims about "what the world and humans *ought* to be" (Schiolin, 2020: 544). These scenarios are often typified by what he calls 'future essentialism', which he sees a discursive strategy that "produce[s] and promote[s] an imaginary of a fixed and scripted, indeed inevitable, future, and that can be desirable if harnessed in an appropriate and timely fashion but is likewise dangerous if humanity fails to grasp its dynamics" (Schiolin, 2020: 545). It highlights the inevitability of certain (technological) developments, thus emphasizing the urgency to act and invest in certain initiatives.



Schiolin (2020) critiques this strategy of presenting the future as a given. The authoritative way of establishing what the future holds reduces the complexity and open-endedness of the way society develops. It is not only “imagining and defining the future” but it also means “deciding and governing it” (Schiolin, 2020: 543). The certainty with which these narratives about the future are presented leaves no room for contestation, debate, and alternative scenarios. Thus, convincing people of the merit of a certain imaginary “restrict[s] which kinds of futures for journalism people can imagine and what they can reasonably expect” (Ruotsalainen et al., 2021: 4). In other words, these sociotechnical imaginaries of the future project a diagnosis of how the present falls short, which determines which ‘innovation’ efforts are considered necessary to bring about this future (Hepp & Loosen, 2022). This reaffirms the idea about the power these intermediary organizations wield by facilitating and steering the debate about innovation; even more so, as they also have a central role in distributing scarce resources (Creech & Nadler, 2018; Willemsen, Witschge & Sauer, 2021).

While these sociotechnical imaginaries are compelling, as the rise of innovation as a buzzword proves, research shows that “the culture of professionalism in the newsroom remains remarkably resilient and resistant to change, as changes in practice may implicate changes in identity” (Hendrickx & Picone, 2020: 2028). Carlson (2015) conceptualizes and illustrates this resilience nicely in his case study into ‘automated journalism’, i.e., journalistic articles written by an algorithm. He argues that when it comes to journalistic innovation, scholars have focused too much on “shallow questions of usability” than delve deeper into the way technological developments “reshape the cultural practice of news creation” (Carlson, 2015: 417).

Through the lens of ‘technological drama’, Carlson (2015) analyzes the debate about automated journalism which ensued between different actors within and outside journalism after the introduction or push to exploit the technological opportunities these algorithms offered. Drawing on Pfaffenberger, Carlson defines technological drama as conflict between different actors with different “axiomatic commitments” which brings them to make competing claims of what impact and opportunities these technological developments have and hold for journalism’s professional practice. As Carlson (2015: 418) formulates it, “the question becomes not only how technological changes alter news practice, but more importantly how they alter the ways in which practice is imagined by the actors involved.” It is exactly that insight into the discursive and social nature of technology, which makes this conceptualization so fruitful. It acknowledges the interaction between technological

affordances and professional practices that together determine the uptake and further development of new technologies.

In terms of sociotechnical imaginaries, technological drama can be regarded as a debate in which alternative imaginaries compete for legitimacy. It implies that there is debate about what the future holds, allowing for different scenarios to be weighed against each other. Building on Schiolin (2020), a healthy amount of technological drama – i.e. a balanced exchange of different normative perspectives on how journalism future could look like and how journalism needs to develop, in which, for example, the pros and cons of new technologies in relation to established professional practices are carefully discussed and negotiated – could be considered an antidote against the future essentialism that only presents one scenario, obscures alternatives, and disavows the inherent high level of uncertainty of any attempt to predict the future. A healthy pluriform debate about innovation and journalism's future would acknowledge this uncertainty and do justice to the different perspectives and ways of imagining journalism's future. Analyzing the sociotechnical imaginaries in this discourse is therefore a fruitful approach to analyze and assess how these ancillary intermediary organizations understand journalistic innovation and to what extent they facilitate a fruitful debate about journalism's future.

## Research design and method

A textual analysis was conducted to examine which sociotechnical imaginaries the discourse on digital storytelling showcased, and how digital storytelling is discussed and understood in relation to innovation and the future of journalism. Textual analysis is a suitable method for this as it is an in-depth interpretative method of analysis that employs a contextualized way of analyzing how “the meanings of our social realities are constructed” (Brennen, 2012: 192). As a qualitative method, it provides a useful way of analyzing texts in terms of their content, structure, style as well as its ‘absences’ – aspects of an issue that are downplayed or disregarded altogether, which all are an integral part of the meaning-making process. As such, it is a fruitful method to analyze how digital storytelling is being discussed in relation to journalism and its future. It can analyze the thematic focus and rhetorical devices used to highlight certain aspects of digital storytelling while downplaying or disregarding others.

Because of their central role in shaping the debate on journalistic innovation, I have conducted a textual analysis of the discourse on digital journalistic storytelling since 2015 on the websites of the

Dutch Journalism Fund [Stimuleringsfonds voor de Journalistiek; [www.svdj.nl](http://www.svdj.nl)] and Villamedia, an editorially independent online platform on Dutch journalism, that is part of the Dutch Association of Journalists [Nederlandse Vereniging voor Journalisten, [www.villamedia.nl](http://www.villamedia.nl)]. The Dutch Journalism Fund and the Dutch Association of Journalists are two central intermediary organizations within the Dutch journalistic landscape, which devote considerable attention to journalistic innovation and therefore are pivotal in shaping the debate about journalistic innovation and journalism's future.

They publish articles on all kinds of aspects relating to journalistic innovation and change, highlighting new initiatives and startups with regard to challenges, such as finding new online business models, new digital technologies, changing journalistic practices and forms, covering conventions and conferences on innovation as well as the latest research projects and insights into journalistic innovation. As such, they also provide a platform for a mix of actors in and outside of journalism, such as most obviously journalists, editors-in-chief, journalistic entrepreneurs, digital media professionals as well as a few journalism professors and so called 'lectors', a specifically Dutch title for the equivalent of full professors who work at a university of applied sciences and have a much more practice-oriented research focus.

Through a keyword search in their online archives for "Digital Storytelling" OR "Storytelling" – to make sure I wouldn't miss articles on digital storytelling that didn't explicitly mention the term 'digital' – a sample of 68 articles was compiled for analysis.<sup>1</sup> While it seems to make sense for analysis of storytelling as a form of innovation to include 'innovation' as an associated search term, I didn't use this term to narrow down my search query. By not including this term, I took a more inclusive approach, making sure I wouldn't miss articles on digital storytelling that didn't explicitly mention the term innovation, but clearly discussed digital storytelling with regard to journalistic renewal, change and/or journalism's future. All articles only very briefly mentioning, but not really discussing, storytelling – for instance, by announcing a specific award category – were discarded. Similarly, all articles discussing digital storytelling without any reference to innovation, renewal, change or the future of journalism – for instance, a 'how-to' article solely on the best way to structure the plot of a journalistic story – were also discarded.

Inspired by the inductive analysis process of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), the textual analysis was conducted in three consecutive rounds of analysis. In the first round, the material was labeled staying quite close to the original wording in the texts, inventorying several aspects of the text, such as who is given the floor to speak; what characteristics of digital storytelling are mentioned in

terms of its journalistic aim, function, form, practices and professional ethics, what is considered novel or innovative about digital storytelling, which digital affordances and requirements are discussed mentioned, and which characteristics of journalism's future are offered. In a second round the material and the initial labels were revisited, while connecting and clustering these labels into more abstract categories (e.g., immersive abilities of digital storytelling; audience engagement strategies). These categories were used in the third and last round to formulate, as it turned out, one sociotechnical imaginary, which is thus ultimately an analytical construct.

### **The affordances of digital storytelling: immersion, emotion, and interaction**

So, what findings did the examination of the discourse about digital storytelling render? The textual analysis clearly shows that digital storytelling is considered a novel practice and viable alternative to tackle the challenges journalism faces in the digital era. Yet, storytelling is generally not very well defined in these articles and used loosely as novel forms of reporting that have the potential of really grabbing the attention of news consumers who have embraced the affordance of the digital era (Cf. Roiland, 2015). This also relates to the fact that while digital storytelling as a term is mentioned, most of the articles focus on one particular type of digital storytelling. Overall, there are quite a few forms of digital storytelling discussed: multimedia storytelling; cross-media storytelling; transmedia storytelling; interactive storytelling; visual storytelling; podcasting as intimate storytelling; and immersive journalism. Yet, questions pertaining to how the different forms of storytelling relate to each other or why digital storytelling wasn't immediately embraced aren't tackled or only addressed superficially within this discourse.

In most cases, however, digital storytelling refers more specifically to a move beyond the traditional short, factual, and 'linear' news stories in which journalists attempt to "sketch the entire story in a bone-dry way" as a foreign correspondent at commercial broadcaster RTL puts it (Schohaus, 2021). It is considered to offer a promising alternative, in which the online possibilities in terms of length, interactivity, or combining different media are exploited to write captivating stories that exploit narrative means, such as point-of-view reporting, emplotment, the use of dialogues and scene reconstruction, and the detailed and colorful portrayal of setting and atmosphere (Van Krieken & Sanders, 2021) – even if these specific terms aren't often mentioned themselves.

Those narrative characteristics of the different forms of digital storytelling are seen as the reason for their potential to appeal to groups of news consumers who aren't interested (anymore) in traditional forms of journalism, often (implicitly) related to the objectivity regime (Harbers, 2016; Boesman & Costera Meijer, 2018). What is for instance always mentioned is the need for engagement of the news consumer with the story. There are different ways in which this is envisioned for storytelling. In some articles it is suggested to exploit the possibility of publishing different stories on different media channels as a way of creating a story 'universe' in which the news consumer can play – often via social media – a much more active role in different phases of the production process. As one of the co-founders of documentary platform The Case, which received an innovation grant from the Dutch Journalism Fund, states:

At The Case it is possible to follow a story and its possible development from the start. 'In that way communities of diverse target audiences emerge automatically, people who are interested in a particular topic and who can make a difference together'.

(Lina, 2016)

Another central way in which different types of storytelling are considered to engage news consumers is by drawing them into the story and making it tangible on an experiential and emotional level. As a lector in cross-media journalism explains in an article on the future of journalism: "The idea is that, if you do it well, you can generate more emotional involvement and impact with the user than with a printed piece of 'flat' text" (Nab, 2019).

Somewhat unsurprising, this is also the core claim of 'immersive journalism', a form of reporting that attempts to exploit the opportunities of augmented or virtual reality (AR or VR). The project leader of Media Valley, an innovation project in which students of the Academy of Media, Design and Technology collaborate with regional newspaper *De Limburger* to experiment with digital technologies, stresses the opportunities of this technology to create a captivating and vivid experience of the news as if you were actually present:

One of the things we would like to do is work with immersive journalism: to immerse the public in stories by means of 360 degrees videos. It is still in its infancy, but we have the ambition to reconstruct factual news in way that people can relive these as if they were themselves.

(Van der Meer, 2017).

Interestingly enough, this claim of immersing the news consumer also figures prominently in the discussion of multimedia storytelling, and podcasting. As the newly appointed editor-in-chief of podcast network ‘Dag en Nacht Media’ [Day and Night Media] argues:

Podcast is often an empathetic medium. It hits home, touches you because there are no visuals to distract you. I am crying on my bike with some stories. Preferably people become smarter or happier from our podcasts. They should learn something or be touched by them. Sometimes more of the first, sometimes more of the latter. As long as it does something to you.

(Madou, 2021)

What is interesting about these quotes above is first and foremost that it shows there is no clear consensus on what creates an immersive experience; do we need a virtual reality environment a news consumer can enter, or can a mix of text and audiovisual material be enough? Or are visual elements even too distracting for someone to really get immersed in a story?

The articles specifically about immersive journalism do suggest that – if properly exploited – the affordances of AR and VR are necessary for an immersive experience, which is at the basis of the claim to innovation. As the earlier mentioned lector in cross-media journalism explains in a different article:

An immersive journalistic production can create involvement or a sort of presence, as the researchers call it. It is the feeling that you get when you can fully project yourself into the story. That feeling results in a fading awareness of the real world around you.

(Cools, 2020)

Yet, she emphasizes that the use of AR or VR technology in itself is not enough. Without the use of narrative means, such as a first-person point of view, to create a captivating and compelling story, a story doesn’t create an immersive sensation: “Moreover, the journalistic story needs to be central. If you film a location in 360-degrees video, but there is no story, you won’t get much involvement from the user” (Cools, 2020). However, to what extent this could mean that other forms of storytelling drawing on such narrative means, can still accomplish an immersive experience is not addressed.

So, a key part of the sociotechnical imaginary that is conveyed in the discourse on digital storytelling presents journalism as a practice and industry that needs to adapt itself to the rapidly changes of a digitized society. In the digital era, tech-savvy news consumers are no longer interested in a static, top-down form of journalism that

presents the news in the form of detached factual information. This change is taken for granted as inevitable and basically already as journalism's new reality and isn't being problematized or discussed. As such, the only way for journalism to ensure its future is to embrace the affordances of the available digital technologies to cater to these preferences of the news consumers. This point is emphasized in one of the articles by highlighting the frustration with the slow pace of the developments in this respect. In response to a question whether the opportunities that digital storytelling provides should be central in journalism's future, a journalist at the Dutch data journalism platform Pointer says:

'Future? It should have already been reality! Sticking to a specific form, like newspapers do, is hopelessly old-fashioned. This should have been journalism's reality ten years ago and we are very happy that we are getting the opportunity to do this now.'

(SvdJ, 2019)

This adds urgency to the call for journalists to realize the necessity to innovate the way they tell their stories.

## **A techno-centric focus**

Like much of the debate on innovation in general (Posetti, 2018; Godin, 2015), the discourse on digital storytelling also shows a techno-centric focus. The specific occasion for many stories is connected to the latest technological trends. An article about the reappearance of multimedia storytelling, for instance, relates this to the invention of foldable phones, which will enlarge the screen in a way that is expected to make multimedia storytelling user-friendly and appealing again for smartphone users (Van den Bos, 2019). Technology is seen as a pivotal aspect of digital storytelling and constitutes an important part of the promise innovation holds for journalism's future. One of the strongest examples of this perspective is voiced by Mir Wermuth (2017), board member of the Dutch Journalism Fund between 2009 and 2019, who writes about journalistic innovation in general:

The top trends in technological development, relevant for the media sector, this year are Artificial Intelligence and chatbots. In the US, these buzzwords are everywhere, from the influential innovation conference SXSW to the editorial offices of Associated Press, Vice and Huffington Post. And again, this is how we are startled by technological applications journalism needs to engage with.

(Wirmuth, 2017)

Particularly with concerning to VR, Wirmuth represents a form of techno-utopianism that is reminiscent of Silicon Valley's innovation rhetoric (Schiolin, 2021; Godin, 2015). Despite the slow uptake of VR in journalism, she professes its merits and foresees a bright future for this technology in media and journalism:

A tour along American media companies displays an untethered optimism towards VR. VR is exploited for both entertainment and more serious media purposes, because of the enormous impact on the individual experience. According to many, the issue of the currently low user penetration is a matter of (only limited) time. The price of hardware is decreasing, the user-friendliness of the VR-goggles is improving, and with the launch of Facebook 360 the most low-key form of VR, 360 degrees video is ready for general use.

(Wirmuth, 2017)

This leads her to claim with authoritative certainty that VR in journalism "is here to stay" (Wirmuth, 2017). This emphasis on the importance of new technologies is reinforced by several articles in which the authors, all journalists, mainly discuss technological tools or software that are able to smoothen the implementation of digital storytelling practices (Visser, 2016; Piels, 2017a, 2017b; Van den Beld, 2017; Van den Griendt, 2019). One of the few attempts to define what (journalistic) innovation entails, is also striking in that respect, as the tech journalist who wrote the article defines innovation as: "trying something new, often (but not always) through technology" (Kivits, 2020). Innovation is thus considered to be almost inextricably linked to technology. It is this emphasis on the 'bright shiny things' that Posetti (2018: 8) warns against in her critical report on journalistic innovation:

[R]elentless, high-speed pursuit of technology-driven innovation can be almost as dangerous as stagnation. In the absence of a purposeful strategy and reflective practice, ad-hoc, frantic and often short-term experimentation is unlikely to lead to sustainable innovation or real progress.

Some articles convey some awareness of a techno-centric perspective on journalistic innovation and digital storytelling. A few consulted sources, like the earlier mentioned lector in cross-media journalism as well as the chief of cross-media journalism at national newspaper *de Volkskrant*, explicitly state that the merit of new technologies should not be taken for granted, but rather they should be assessed with the journalistic aim and added value to the content in



mind (Van der Steen, 2016; Cools, 2020). While this adds a bit more ‘technological drama’ to the discourse, it remains a minor part of the discourse and doesn’t go beyond the idea that journalists should first envision the story and how it can be best told before focusing on the technological possibilities. This is reflected in the emphasis on research and experimentation with new technologies rather than immediate adoption. A good example of this is what a lector of journalistic innovation says about the purpose of the newly installed ‘VR-cave’ at the journalism school in Tilburg:

Innovation is often driven by technology: ‘we are able to do something, so we are doing it’. But the question what the actual added value of the new technology is, can easily disappear to the background. Our pairs of students should specifically focus on what VR can add. With the VR-cave we want to look beyond just the hype.

(Kivits, 2018)

Another article on the same VR-cave, indeed, reveals the tension between such a critical and reflexive stance and the initial enthusiasm about the promise of new technology as a journalistic skills-teacher states that their students “should be frontrunners in seizing new forms” to teach them that “opportunities need to be seized the moment they present themselves” (Katzenbauer, 2018).

So overall, new technology plays a central part in the sociotechnical imaginary that is put forward. Embracing the new technological opportunities is presented as the key solution to the problem of attracting news consumers in the digital era. Moreover, the adoption of the new technologies is generally presented as feasible and unproblematic for the standing journalism practice, thus contributing to a rather uniform perspective on journalistic innovation and journalism’s future.

### **An a-historic disregard of the role of journalism’s professional norms**

What becomes particularly clear from an overview of the discourse on digital storytelling throughout the entire period is the decontextualized way in which these latest industry trends in digital storytelling are being discussed. Apart from an occasional brief mention of earlier related storytelling forms or similar prior initiatives, the different forms of digital storytelling are discussed separately from each other. Moreover, their innovative nature is pretty much taken for granted rather than being discussed in-depth. This obscures a clear picture of the stable characteristics and novel

elements throughout the long-term development of digital storytelling. It remains unclear to what extent these forms of storytelling build on each other's ideas, insights, and experiences about what works and what doesn't, and, consequently, what exactly makes these initiatives innovative compared to earlier counterparts. It is this lack of attention for the long-term lineage of new (digital) storytelling forms that reinforces the idea that journalistic innovation is prone to the "ad-hoc, frantic and often short-term experimentation" that Posetti (2018:8) critiques as detrimental to a more sustainable way of envisioning journalism's future through innovation.

Moreover, it fits in with Carlson & Lewis' (2019: 643) critique on the future-oriented perspective on innovation and its attention for the latest "trends and fads" at the expense of a more reflexive approach that studies novelty and change in journalism against the background of the complex and long-term interaction of continuity and change. This not only becomes apparent in the lack of a comprehensive long-term perspective on the development of (digital) storytelling in journalism, but also in the general disregard for the connection and impact these digital developments and opportunities might have on journalism's professional values and practices.

On the few occasions when this issue is addressed it either relates to the importance of better and earlier collaboration between journalists and designers or programmers (SvdJ, 2019; De Laet, 2019) or to a very brief remark on journalism's professional values. In one of these instances regarding immersive journalism, the professional values of journalists are presented as the reason for journalism's reluctance to innovate (cf. Ferruci & Perault, 2021). As the earlier mentioned lector in journalistic innovation, who has a background in the field of design, claims: "Generally speaking, designers dare to try a little more. (...) Journalists are held back a bit more by the journalistic morals, while a designer just starts to play" (Kivits, 2018). This example echoes the idea that journalism's professional ethics are excess counterweight when it comes to innovation (cf. Kleis Nielsen, 2019).

On another occasion, what is presented as a factual statement – rather than being problematized – is that journalists "are allowed to take a much more subjective role" since "the objective role is eroding and there are several types of authorial journalism emerging" (Katzenbauer, 2018). So, in none of the articles there is a substantial discussion about the possible tension between these new digital storytelling technologies and forms, and journalism's time-honored professional values, which are the foundation for the trust and authority people assign to journalism (Garcia-Aviles, 2018; Broersma, 2010).

Of course, this could suggest that such tensions aren't there, and these digital storytelling forms are considered unproblematic in relation to journalism's professional values. Yet, this goes against much of the research on journalistic storytelling and narrative forms of journalism, which point to the longstanding tension between storytelling means and forms and truthful and trustworthy reporting (Eason, 1982, 1986; Hartsock, 2001; Harbers, 2014; Harbers & Broersma, 2014; Van Krieken & Sanders, 2017; Baym, 2017; Boesman & Costera Meijer, 2018; Harbers, 2023). All this research points to the persistent ambivalence both journalists and news consumers feel towards journalistic forms of storytelling. While it is indeed seen as an engaging and captivating way of drawing readers into the news, the practices and forms of journalistic storytelling keep on raising suspicion towards the truth status of such stories. Employing such narrative means remains to be strongly associated with the realms of fiction, which is clearly considered off limits for journalists (Harbers, forthcoming; Baym, 2017; Harbers & Van den Broek, 2016). Again, this shows there is little technological drama going on in the discourse on digital storytelling, which makes it rather one-sided in the image of digital storytelling as innovation that it presents.

In part, the disconnection might be ascribed to the loosely used term of (digital) storytelling, which can lead to the idea that this practice “developed *ex nihilo*”, which “misrepresents the truth and cuts it off from important antecedents” and “divorces it from the rich lineage of literary [aka narrative] journalism” to borrow an argument from Roiland (2015: 65). By using this term, it becomes easier to disregard the central issues these storytelling practices raise concerning journalism's professional ethics. As such, Creech and Nadler's (2018: 187) more general critique on the discourse on journalistic innovation as being “merely technical and eliding the persistent epistemological and philosophical conflict between journalism and the technology industries” also applies to the discourse on digital storytelling.

## To conclude

My analysis shows how the discourse on digital storytelling in the Netherlands doesn't contain a diverse mix of sociotechnical imaginaries, but presents one rather uniform and one-dimensional imaginary, which paints journalism's future as one in which tech-savvy news consumers are no longer interested in traditional ways of reporting. In terms of storytelling, they need to be engaged through a more captivating way of reporting, which exploits the affordances of digital technologies, such as interactivity and immersion, to draw

them into the story on an experiential and emotional level. The techno-centric focus of the discourse reinforces the already prevalent understanding of journalistic innovation as primarily a matter of mastering and exploiting the opportunities new technological tools and platforms offer, without questioning or problematizing how this impacts journalism's professional ethics and practice, and the cultural authority that is rooted in them.

As such, the innovative nature of these new digital storytelling technologies and trends is taken for granted as valuable and feasible without considering their relation to the long and rich history of journalistic storytelling and narrative forms of journalism dating back as far as the 18th century (Underwood, 2008). As this long history shows an unremitting tension between narrative as form and practice and journalism's professional norms and claims concerning their trustworthy and truthful coverage of the world it is crucial to scrutinize new technologies and practices with this tension in mind (Boesman & Costera Meijer, 2018; Van Krieken & Sanders, 2017; Harbers, 2014, Eason, 1986).

In that sense, the way journalism's future is envisioned – at least in terms of its storytelling practices – shows characteristics of future essentialism as outlined by Schiolin (2021). It authoritatively claims that the preferences and needs of news consumers in the digital era have changed whether journalists like it or not. Consequently, journalists would be wise to embrace the new technological opportunities – preferably sooner than later – as they enable them to cater to these needs. If not, then journalism will make its profession obsolete – with all the consequences for a well-informed society. As Schiolin (2021) points out, such an unequivocal image of what journalism's future holds, restricts an in-depth exchange about journalism's future in which there is space for alternative ideas and scenarios. This is of particular importance as journalism, even on the level of national journalistic cultures, is not a homogenous profession, and is served by a debate that reflects the diversity in ideas about journalism's profession and its future (Carlson, 2015; cf. Hellmueller & Konow-Lund, 2019).

Therefore, this article can be read as a plea for more technological drama – i.e., more different perspectives and debate on digital storytelling as innovation – to ensure a thorough debate between different actors within and outside of journalism about journalism's future. Moreover, it argues that an integral part of this should revolve around questions concerning how new technology interacts with the way journalism envisions its profession. Ultimately, this means moving beyond a limited focus on the way technology changes journalism to a more comprehensive perspective that asks

what the impact is on the way journalism is imagined as a cultural practice (Carlson, 2015).

Acknowledging the performative power of the discourse on innovation, also reveals the central role and power of intermediary organizations, such as the Dutch Journalism Fund and the Dutch Association for Journalists, in shaping this understanding and setting the agenda in terms of what are considered promising venues for journalism to pursue. They are not just describing how journalism is changing. Much rather, they determine and delimit how journalism's future is envisioned by selecting which new ideas and initiatives they amplify and legitimize in their coverage of journalistic innovation (Willemsen, Witschge & Sauer, 2021). Take, for instance, the recurring focus on the potential and promise of VR for journalism throughout the period. The attention, in which claims are made about the value and promise of the technology for journalism – VR “is here to stay” as Wirmuth (2017) concludes – legitimizes VR as a valuable and viable innovation. In turn, such legitimacy is highly beneficial in attracting resources for the further development and application of the technology within journalism, and thus ultimately plays a role in determining the direction in which journalism will develop itself (Ruotsalainen et al., 2021).

As my last point, I argue that these intermediary organizations therefore also have a responsibility in facilitating the debate on journalistic innovation. Moreover, based on my analysis I suggest that they must step up their game to do more justice to the complex and ongoing interplay of technology and cultural practices as well as the different perspectives and assessments within the journalistic field from a long-term perspective. One way of improving this would be to find a way to integrate more of the existing academic research into journalistic innovation and change into the coverage. At the same time, this would also require a more reflexive and critical approach to journalistic innovation from journalism scholars themselves (Crech & Nadler, 2018; Godin, 2015).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Because the material was in Dutch, I also searched for “verhalende” and “narratieve” the Dutch equivalents of the term “storytelling”. This rendered only a few more hits as “storytelling” has become a highly common anglicism in the Netherlands.

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