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News in portrait format

How can the story format on social media channels be used in a journalistic context?

Abstract: **For which journalistic situations are stories on social media platforms suitable? What do most young users expect from a story? This paper reveals what stories offer in narrative and journalistic formats. The author analyzed news stories, before creating a sample story, presenting it to a selected target audience, and evaluating it in an online survey. She then used this survey as the basis for a recommendation on how to use stories in journalism.**

Introduction: Story formats in journalism

Smartphones have unlocked new ways of telling, producing, and involving viewers in stories (cf. Atkinson 2016). Many social media platforms today feature a central, linking element: the story – a visual concept consisting of short, consecutive video clips with digital extensions. So far, journalism studies has paid little attention to this. How can the story be used for journalistic purposes? How can content be presented in short video clips? »Which story online has journalistic value? Who is using Instagram or other social networks for new journalistic formats?« These are just some of the questions considered by the judges for the Grimme Online Awards (Anonym 2018).

Snapchat's stories were launched in early October 2013 and, according to Philipp Steuer, were key to the app's success (Steuer 2016: 39). Journalistic services also played a role in this: »High-quality American media such as CNN are demonstrating that news topics can be presented on Snapchat – in a calm, clear, and compact form. And with no emojis« (Müller-Lancé 2017). Unique to Snapchat when they were launched, stories have now long been incorporated into Facebook and its subsidiary platforms, and are especially popular on Instagram (cf. Firsching 2018).

In the German-speaking world, correspondents from *ARD's Tagesschau* program are seen live at the heart of the action, for example with stories from the mid-term

elections in the USA or from carnival celebrations in Mainz. News magazine *stern* creates totally different stories: Similar to photo collages, they comprise multiple images with one-sentence explanations and links to the relevant *stern* articles. *ntv* and *Welt* also work with links, but in their case with brief video clips.

A story brings with it a host of limitations and special technical features. Most can only be accessed for 24 hours. Clips are published individually, so they have to be carefully planned in advance, and are limited to a certain length (videos up to ten seconds, for example). This also provides new opportunities. The new way of communicating content forces media producers to limit themselves to what really matters. Interviews have to be prepared in a different way, as the interviewee only has ten seconds for their answer.

At *Media Convention Berlin 2017*, Eva Schulz, Snapchat reporter for *funk*[1], reported on her colleagues' initial negative reaction to communicating news via Snapchat:

»Colleagues always react like that: Always the panic emoji, because their first reaction is always »What? But it's portrait!« They don't know what to do with it. »How can we tell a story like that?!« It is super short. I only have ten seconds per snap, it is awkward, it is completely inflexible, because I have to tell a story chronologically. I can't organize my material afterwards. [...] And then, something that journalists are totally unaccustomed to on the internet: there is no feedback from the masses – no likes, no favorites, no shares, no public click counts. Not even a number of followers. [...] There are no notifications. That is something where Snapchat really is totally reshaping the user behavior of the under-twenties. [...] It doesn't have such a strong focus on viral spread. Snapchat is one of the few platforms – the only one at the moment – that is not controlled by algorithms. As a »creator,« that is a huge gift« (Schulz 2017).

According to Richard Gutjahr, the disadvantage of short availability can also be an advantage. When he asked himself why he should produce news content that is no longer available after 24 hours, a Snapchat user responded with a question of his own: »How often do you read news from two days ago?« (quoted in Steuer 2016: 79). By their very nature, Snapchat stories are extremely up-to-date. Other advantages, shared by other mobile journalism formats, include flexibility, mobility, and proximity to the viewer.

»Snapchat might have some weaknesses as a tool for reporters. But the app is wonderful at one thing: It communicates a form of proximity and immediacy that hardly any other medium or social network can. Because Snapchat offers so few options for reworking videos, the down-to-earth informality of the snaps often makes them seem more authentic than television or even YouTube.« (Steuer 2016: 80)

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1 *funk* ist das Content-Netzwerk des öffentlichen-rechtlichen Rundfunks und vereinigt über 60 Formate, die für eine Zielgruppe der Altersspanne 14 bis 29 ausschließlich online distribuiert werden. Durch die Verbindung zu ARD und ZDF wird funk durch den Rundfunkbeitrag finanziert, garantiert keine Werbeinhalte und verfolgt den Bildungsauftrag.

Studies on how people use smartphones also indicate that the story is a useful format for journalistic content. A recent study by the Reuters Institute, surveying more than 74,000 people from 27 countries, showed that use of smartphones for consuming news services rose from 56% to 62% in the period 2013-18. Transmission in the form of online videos specifically has also been rising steadily for several years. Given that mobile news consumption is increasing in Germany, too, demand for mobile news content, including moving images, is not expected to fall in the near future (cf. Nic Newman with Richard Fletcher et al. 2018).

Although they are available on different networks, there is a uniform basic structure for creating stories. »All content that you publish in the story throughout the day is strung together as a long film strip, creating one long story. That's where the name comes from« (Steuer 2016: 34).

Question and method

The objective of this investigation was to develop recommendations for how to structure journalistic content in the story format. Using a ›mixed methods‹ approach, the study comprises an analysis followed by an online survey (cf. Döring/Bortz 2016: 72). The analysis of the *hochkant*[2] format on *Snapchat* examines six selected stories based on various criteria. This was then used to draw conclusions for the creation of a sample story and to produce the first draft of a set of guidelines for creating news items produced in the story format.

The sample story created by the author is based on the results of the analysis (cf. Döring/Bortz 2016: 184) and undergoes quantitative analysis with the help of an online survey. This type of preliminary study can help to generate hypotheses and define them more precisely; in this study, it helps to make the guideline criteria for the content, visual structure, and design of stories more precise.

Based on the work of Werner Faulstich (2008),[3] the following categories were used for the analysis: Active persons, Camera, Sound, Content, Text, and Graphics.

- In the *Camera* category, a distinction must be made between front and cell phone cameras. If the image examined is a clip/photo made with the help of a front camera, it is known as a *selfie*.
- *Sound* describes not the sound of the clips in general, but the form in which the spoken word appears in the clip. A distinction is made between *on-screen* (the

2 *hochkant* ist ein Format, dass vom Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg produziert wurde und im Rahmen des Content-Netzwerkes *funk* auf den sozialen Netzwerken Snapchat und Instagram, News und Nachrichtenbeiträge zur Verfügung gestellt hat. Thematisch bewegten sich dabei die Beiträge von Reportage, über Kommentare bis hin zur Kurznachricht. Seit der angekündigten Winterpause 2017 und der Jahreszusammenfassung gab es bisher allerdings keine neuen Storys.

3 Die Auswirkungen der technischen Anforderungen und Beschränkungen bei der Erstellung von Storys und daraus resultierende Anpassung der inhaltlichen und optischen Gestaltungen wurden berücksichtigt indem Faulstichs Kategorien verändert, ergänzt und an das zu untersuchende Format, die Story, angepasst wurden.

reporter/audio source is visible in the image) and *off-screen* (the reporter/audio source is not visible in the image).
- The visual and audio content is noted in the *Content* category.
- *Text* considers only writing shown on the screen. If the text has a particular function, this is also noted.
- The final point, *Graphics*, looks at all the graphical elements used, such as emojis, stickers, and geofilters. With their comic-like appearance, emojis in particular, as well as all other graphical elements used, should be viewed critically in relation to neutral, informative reporting. No studies have yet been conducted on this, but Israeli scientists from Ben Gurion University have already succeeded in proving that the use of emojis in corporate communication gives the impression of incompetence (cf. Glikson/Cheshin/van Kleef 2018).

Creation of a sample story and online survey

Based on topics from the presentation made by Snapchat reporter Eva Schulz at *Media Convention Berlin 2017* entitled »Dos and don'ts for journalistic storytelling on Snapchat« (Schulz 2017), the following recommendations for action were first derived:
- Early statement of objectives and topics
- Use of on-screen text
- Sparing use of off-screen text
- Generation of viewer loyalty

For evaluation purposes, the recommendations for action were applied in a sample story[4] in the form of variants. These variants (see Figure 1) related to the combination of multiple elements (in particular the use of emojis), the use of on-screen text, and the use of off-screen texts.

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4 Gegenstand der Muster-Story war das Wave-Gotik-Treffen 2018 in Leipzig. Die Autorin besuchte im Rahmen dieser Veranstaltung das alljährlich stattfindende Picknick im Clara Park. Die dort entstandenen Aufnahmen wurden mit den in der App Snapchat zur Verfügung stehenden Bearbeitungsmöglichkeit optisch aufbereitet und anschließend im Rahmen der Online-Umfrage gezeigt.

Variants in the investigation into the use of on-screen text in interviews.

Use as a transcript of the interview response.

Visualizing the interview question as text.

The idea is to examine the extent to which the use of emojis is tolerated in reporting. Although they are used multiple times in the stories in the analysis, their appearance does not suggest a serious character from the outset. The on-screen text is to be examined to find out whether it should be used to support the content, or simply as a transcript.

The two variants were fairly evenly matched in the analysis. One advantage of the transcript, for example, is the ability to consume the content without sound. An advantage of the supporting text, on the other hand, is that – in the form of a question, for example – it can encourage the user to switch on the sound, and perhaps keep it on for all subsequent clips. Finally, we want to examine whether using off-screen text is justified or whether, in contrast to the stories in the analysis, the viewer would like to see more off-screen text rather than selfies.

As a sample story had been created, incorporating video elements was a particular requirement for the online survey tool. Creating the survey on the website onlineumfrage.com (Marbot 2014) was a simple option. The questionnaire went through a design and pre-test phase, before finally being placed online for two weeks. In order to reach the target group of 14 to 29-year-olds[5], it was predominantly sent to high school and university students and those new to the job market. The target sample size of around 100 was achieved with n=99. As it is not a random sample, the results of the survey are not representative, but nevertheless give an impression of the users' point of view.

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5   Bei dieser Altersspanne handelt es sich um die größte Nutzungsgruppe der App Snapchat.

The first step in creating a summary in the form of guidelines is to examine the results of the online survey. Almost half (42 percent) of respondents stated that they had a Snapchat account, although, when asked how often they use the app, a majority of 56 percent said »not at all.« This is not a problem for the object of the study – the story – however, as stories are also used in the other social networks listed. It is therefore not surprising that 95 percent of the participants were familiar with the term »story« in connection with social networks.

Asked which content is linked to their app use, 90 percent of respondents stated that they associated stories with following current experiences of friends/acquaintances; 59 percent sharing personal experiences with followers/friends, 28 percent advertising, and just 10 percent up-to-the-minute news. The question regarding familiarity with and examples of news content also reflects this result. Only 12 respondents stated that they knew of news agencies and journalists who publish their content in story format. The most common ones named were *Tagesschau*, *Sky Sport News* and *Vice*.

In order to find out how on-screen text is used, the survey participants were asked about the volume at which they consume media content. A slight majority said that they have the sound for media content permanently silent on their smartphone. This finding makes it clear that descriptive use of on-screen text and text as a transcript of interview and survey responses is important in order to enable use without sound. To aid comprehension, this issue was picked up on again in the sample story with the help of two versions: Version 1 in the sample story contains a question as on-screen text and a request to switch on the sound, while Version 2 shows a transcript of the response as on-screen text to enable the story to be used without sound.

Contradicting their responses on the use of media content without sound, 68 percent of the survey participants chose the first version. Combining these two results, one can conclude that the respondents prefer on-screen text that tells them to switch on the sound, so that they can also hear the audio content of the story – even though the majority has the sound switched off for media content.

The second comparative investigation conducted with the help of the sample story examined the audio presentation of content in connection with the use of selfies. Version 1 showed a video snap[6] with off-screen text from the reporter recorded live. The action on screen was also described in sound. In the second version, a selfie snap, the reporter was seen taking the image. The image related to what the reporter was saying, but was only seen in part and in the background. The content of the two snaps was identical. A majority of 77 percent of the survey participants chose the first version. This finding was confirmed by the question of

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6 Im Rahmen der Muster-Story werden die einzelnen Clips mit »Snap« benannt. Dies ist die ursprünglich von Snapchat etablierte Bezeichnung für einen Clip innerhalb einer Story. Egal ob foto- oder videografisch.

the number of selfie snaps the viewers considered appropriate. The most common upper limit named was three, confirming the assumptions made in the first version of the guidelines.

Finally, the latter two versions were used to investigate how the use of emojis is viewed. In version 1, a snap was decorated with emojis, while version 2 showed the same snap without emojis. The result was very clear here, too, with 73 percent choosing the second version without emojis.

When it came to the opinions expressed in stories, the respondents agreed with the statement that stories convey particular proximity to the viewer, as they are at the heart of the action (in the form of the reporter's smartphone). Because they are automatically deleted after 24 hours, stories help the news to stay up to date, said the respondents. Keeping things short was popular: 39 percent of those surveyed responded »strongly agree« to the statement »The longer a story is, the less willing the viewer is to watch the whole thing», while 24 percent chose »agree.«

Consuming news content in a story format was generally (still) considered unusual. However, more than half of the respondents (55 percent) said that they could imagine using stories for news consumption in future. They were then asked about the conditions a story should fulfil in order to be considered worth watching.

To finish, the sections below describe and justify the evaluated recommendations of the guidelines.

Adaption of preparation

Because a story cannot be edited later, journalists have to prepare submissions in story format differently from traditional television pieces. As the online survey focused on the viewer point of view, this issue was not examined. However, a brief estimation can be given based on the author's experience. Adapting the preliminary discussion to the features of the format has proved essential. Most interviewees and survey participants were not surprised by the smartphone as a recording device or by the time limit on their responses. They were usually able to provide well-formulated responses within the time limit even at the first attempt.

Early specification of objectives and topics

Since early specification of objectives and topics can be derived from the theory of television news and occurred in all the stories in the analysis without exception, this feature of design and content was applied directly to the sample story. Unlike in classic television formats, which often show the highlights and best images from the pieces at the start of a program, this is not possible in stories: It would lead to a duplication of clips that could irritate viewers. Stating the objectives

and topics early helps the viewer to find out what he can expect from the story. In addition, the introduction at the start of the story should not be too long. The results of the survey show that the viewers prefer brief stories.

Combination of multiple elements

The use of emojis and photo and video clips was examined. Using photos in connection with on-screen text proved a good way of communicating longer texts, as there is no distraction from a moving background. Despite this, photos should be used more sparingly than video clips. Asked about the conditions for a good story, one survey participant even said that they should not use photos at all, as they were irritating. Photos should be used in moderation, as their lack of sound and movement annoys viewers.

When it comes to the use of emojis, the survey showed that they are not well tolerated by the audience: Most viewers saw them as appearing frivolous. Emojis should be used with caution, if at all.

On-screen text

The use of on-screen text depends to a certain extent on the sound settings on the viewer's smartphone. In the survey, the balance of devices with the sound switched on and off was relatively even. On-screen text that provides a transcript is therefore to be recommended, as it enables people to consume the clip without sound. However, when asked to compare the two versions of the sample story, the responses of the survey participants expressed precisely the opposite, with a majority of 69% opting for the version with the on-screen question designed as motivation to switch on the sound for media content. The survey results thus do not provide the basis for a clear recommendation. Media producers can choose whether to use one or both versions.

Serial depiction of interview responses

No results were gained here, as the serial depiction of interview content relates to the production side of creating news pieces as stories. However, the estimation gained by the author as she created the sample story confirmed that this kind of presentation is advantageous in production. Given the short clip length, a lack of thematic order for the clips would result in the connection to the interview question being lost, e.g. if responses to the same question were spread throughout the story. Showing interview responses one after the other enables the viewer to recognize the context immediately, so that the question has to be shown only once.

Off-screen text

To examine the use of off-screen texts, one of the versions merely showed a sectional image with a recorded off-screen text by the author. To contrast this, the same scene was then recorded in selfie mode. When the two were compared in the sample story, 76 percent of the survey participants chose the version with off-screen text. This also confirms the viewers' desire for reporters to take a back seat.

Sparing use of selfies

The survey also looked at how tolerant viewers were of selfies. The respondents were asked to state a figure for the maximum number of selfies they would view in succession. Without having been given information from the analysis in advance, 35 of the 99 participants said that they would consider a maximum of three selfies in a row appropriate. Asked about the conditions a story should meet, many of the respondents also stated that selfies should be used sparingly. Justifications for this included the complaint that selfies put the focus too much on the reporter rather than the topic/event and the view that the use of selfies was intended more for the self-presentation of the reporter.

Willingness to be spontaneous

Spontaneity should also be considered a particular requirement for the reporter in a story. Spontaneous encounters with people on the ground and events that occurred while creating the sample story meant that the final version of the sample story was very different from its original concept.

Willingness to be spontaneous therefore helps to make the content of the story more authentic.

Viewer retention

In the sample story, the viewers were asked to send feedback. This could not be used as the last snap, however, as that was reserved for a thank you for taking part in the survey. As the sample story was not posted publicly due to the author's small number of followers, no conclusion can be drawn on whether viewers would have responded to the request or whether the request would have led to greater viewer retention. However, the survey did ask about the willingness to respond to the reporters of the stories. The majority – 54% – said that they could imagine sending a private response to a reporter.

Conclusion

Half of these recommendations can be brought together under the heading ›visual design.‹ The reporter's creativity and willingness to experiment play a key role here, be it in combining multiple elements, using on-screen text, presenting people active in the story, using off-screen texts sparingly, or using selfies. When multiple elements are combined, the recommendation to use photos more sparingly than video clips should be adhered to.

The second half of the recommendations for action focuses more on the content. In order to provide successful quotes that are not cut off by the time limit, interviewees and survey partners need to be clearly briefed. Willingness to be spontaneous proved an important aid and stylistic device in both the analysis and implementation phases of the sample story.

Finally, viewer retention is a point that can be justified from both an economic and a content-related point of view. Reporters have the chance to gain direct feedback on the stories they publish or to pursue topics that are of particular interest to the target group. As a result, a request for interaction should be included at the end of a story.

Since the general appearance of stories – content available for 24 hours, time-limited clips, portrait format, and visual appearance – is very similar on all platforms, the findings gained here for *Snapchat* on the visual and content-related design could also be applied to stories on other platforms.

Last year, *Facebook*'s CPO Chris Cox announced that stories were on the way to overtaking other news feeds (cf. Bogost 2018). Cristina Wilson goes a step further, claiming on NiemanLab.org that »If we as Instagram users spend an average of 24 to 32 minutes looking at stories, then we as producers have to treat them as what they are – the new television« (Wilson 2018).

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About the author

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The paper refers to the bachelor's thesis *Short mobile Journalism – Kriterien für journalistische Beiträge im Story-Format am Beispiel von »hochkant« auf Snapchat* and summarizes the investigations and results it contains.

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