

DOING GOOD JOURNALISM IN UNEXPECTED WAYS

The Evolution of Storytelling on New Platforms and Technologies

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NIEMAN-SDF PLANNING COMMITTEE



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INTRODUCTION

The theme of this white paper, and the Seoul Digital Forum session on which it is based, is “Doing Good Journalism in Unexpected Ways: The Evolution of Storytelling on New Platforms and Technologies” is how journalists are using new technologies and new platforms to push creative boundaries while upholding the highest journalistic and ethical standards.

To explore the newest innovations in storytelling, however, I would like to begin by exploring a much older storytelling form, *sijo*, the unique Korean poetic form that began some 700 years ago in the 14th century.

Poems written in the *sijo* form have a very specific structure. Each *sijo* consists of three lines, each of which has a specific number of syllables and a very specific purpose. The first line introduces the poem’s theme, the second line develops and embellishes that theme, and the third line introduces a turn or a twist by which the poem pivots to a memorable and often surprising conclusion.

One of the most famous *sijo* is by Yang Saŏn, who was a government official and avid mountain climber:

Men may say, “The mountain’s high,” but all of it’s beneath the sky.

There’s no reason we can’t climb to the top if we so decide, but usually we never try.

We only say, “The mountain’s high.”

The *sijo* structure is almost identical to the structure of a traditional American journalistic feature story. A feature story typically begins with the *lede*, a scene or some other sort of description that sets out the theme of the article and corresponds to the first line in a *sijo*. After the *lede* comes the *nut graf*, a paragraph or two near the top of the article that elaborates on and embellishes the theme and corresponds to the second line in a *sijo*. And at the very end of the article comes the *kicker*, which ties the story together with a smart and often surprising insight or observation, just like the third line of a *sijo*.

Today, traditional structures of journalism like the feature article are being challenged and renewed in exciting and creative ways. Virtual reality is enabling journalists to immerse users in situations or environments. Social media platforms are proving to be unexpected venues for long-form narratives. And audience engagement means that users are no longer passive recipients of journalism, and sometimes are actively involved in

creating it.

The rapid pace and dramatic nature of storytelling's evolution raise important questions: What journalistic and ethical rules will guide our use of these new storytelling technologies? What is the role of the professional journalist when so many people have the most powerful storytelling tool in the world, the smartphone, right in their pockets? What role do the traditional values of fact-based reporting, accuracy and fairness play in a media environment increasingly ruled by opinion? And, when it's so easy to dramatically alter reality by manipulating a few pixels, what responsibility do we—journalists and non-journalists alike—have to the 'truth'?

The challenges facing journalism today—economic, demographic and technological—are very high, indeed. But, as Yang Sañ wrote in his sijo, all of them are still beneath the sky. As journalists innovate new ways to engage and inform audiences, there is no reason we cannot rise to meet those challenges.

Let's not just say, "The mountain's high." Let's climb.



James Geary
Deputy Curator
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NARRATIVE STORIES

Journalism is in a profound moment of transition. The dominant forms of storytelling of the last few decades, including the longform magazine article and the investigative documentary, are being challenged by dynamic new platforms and technologies. These platforms, including social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat; short digital video; and virtual reality (VR), offer media outlets exciting new opportunities to engage with audiences, particularly younger audiences who are less likely to engage with more traditional forms. They also present new challenges for journalists in story structure, ethics, editing, and audience participation.



A panel at the 2016 Seoul Digital Forum examined the evolution of storytelling, with innovators sharing examples of work where they're pushing creative boundaries while honoring high journalistic standards

This paper looks specifically at narrative stories, as opposed to news reporting. Despite new developments in technology, the basic elements of storytelling haven't changed. They still follow a linear structure with a beginning, middle, and end, often including a dramatic twist that spurs an emotional reaction in the reader or viewer. We depend on stories to help put us into other people's situations, gain insight into their lives, and

None of the innovations here change that fundamental purpose of storytelling—in fact, in new and profound ways they look to enhance it.

understand our world in an emotional rather than a purely intellectual way. None of the innovations here change that fundamental purpose of storytelling—in fact, in new and profound ways they look to enhance it.

A recent panel discussion at the [2016 Seoul Digital Forum](#) (SDF) examined these disruptions. SDF, organized by [Seoul Broadcasting System](#) (SBS), a Korean radio and television network, is one of the world's largest international conferences examining international trends in digital media. In past years the conference has featured such speakers as Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, World Wide Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee, former Google CEO & Chairman Eric Schmidt, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, actress Jessica Alba, and *Avatar* director James Cameron.

The panel, "[The Evolution of Storytelling](#)," was jointly organized by the [Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University](#) and the SBS Cultural Foundation. It featured several prominent writers, editors, and producers, including:

- [James Geary](#), deputy curator for the Nieman Foundation
- [Yuliya Parshina-Kottas](#), graphics and multimedia editor for The New York Times
- [Neil Shea](#), a contributing writer for National Geographic magazine
- [Andrew Metz](#), managing editor of Frontline on PBS
- [Kang Hyung Cheol](#), professor of media at Sookmyung Women's University and president-elect of the Korean Association for Broadcasting and Telecommunication Studies

The panel featured a wide-ranging discussion on how journalists are using new technologies and platforms to push the traditional boundaries of storytelling, while at the same time maintaining the highest standards of the profession. This white paper explores the issues raised during this discussion, as well as reporting on these trends by [Nieman Reports](#), a website and quarterly print publication covering thought leadership in journalism; [Nieman Storyboard](#), a publication which showcases exceptional narrative journalism and explores the future of nonfiction storytelling; and the [Nieman Journalism Lab](#), an online forum that examines the future of journalism in the digital age.

VIRTUAL REALITY

Virtual reality is a form of video and audio technology in which viewers wear a specially designed headset that projects an experience 360 degrees around them. Those viewing the videos can turn their heads to experience content in all directions, to some extent choosing how to engage with a story or scene. A pioneer in VR, The New York Times has experimented with a 6-camera setup with GoPro cameras facing in each direction capturing video footage that is then “stitched together” using special post-production software to create a complete canvas.



Media professor Kang Hyung Cheol emphasizes that maintaining trust is essential for news organizations foraying into VR storytelling

The first film the Times produced with this technology was “[Vigils in Paris](#),” which captures the memorials set up to honor victims of the November 15th terrorist attacks last year. In the aftermath, two journalists put on the camera rig and walked around the city creating footage of the many candlelit vigils that flooded the streets of Paris. They also recorded audio which provides a voice over for the track. The entire film was created in the span of a week. Another VR film created by the Times is “[The Contenders](#),”

which takes viewers inside the presidential campaigns of four candidates; the publication sent out three teams with five journalists to capture the footage.

The Times has made a big push to deliver VR video to its audience. Last fall, it screened its film "[The Displaced](#)" —an 11-minute video following the lives of three refugees—in a theater in Manhattan, distributing Google Cardboard headsets to members of the audience for viewing. At the same time, it delivered more than a million Google Cardboard sets to home delivery subscribers so they could view the video at home. Readers have responded positively to the new technology. According to the Times, the VR app was its most successful app launch to date.

The footage captured by VR is emotionally powerful and engaging, immersing viewers in the events that seem to be unfolding around them in real time.

[Other outlets are also experimenting with VR technology.](#) Last fall, PBS Frontline produced [a documentary about the Ebola crisis in Africa](#), and in December received a grant of over a half million dollars from the Knight Foundation to produce more VR content over the next year and a half, partnering with the studio [Emblematic Group](#). The Associated Press has also partnered with a Los Angeles-based production company to produce a series of VR videos. The Washington Post has released [an interactive VR video that simulates the surface of Mars](#).

This spring, The Guardian created a video, "[6x9](#)" that [simulates the feeling of being imprisoned](#) in solitary confinement. To create a story around the experience, The Guardian added voiceovers by former inmates walking the viewer through the experiment, as well as background audio from actual prisons. The experience effectively recreates the claustrophobia and anxiety of solitary confinement arguably better than an article on the subject could do. The footage captured by VR is emotionally powerful and engaging, immersing viewers in the events that seem to be unfolding around them in real time. "It really pulls at their heartstrings and allows the viewers to feel a lot more empathy than traditional media is able to provide," said Yuliya Parshina-Kottas, graphics and multimedia editor for The New York Times, at the SDF conference in Seoul. "In a way, it leaves viewers a lot more vulnerable to the content they are experiencing."

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

The complexity of the equipment used to make virtual reality video presents significant technical challenges that videographers must struggle to overcome in the field. The cameras present all of the usual difficulties of video equipment, multiplied by six or ten or twenty depending on the

number of cameras used in the setup. In addition, the camera rig must be placed in a precise location in order to capture footage in a way that the viewer will experience it properly: in the center of events, a certain distance from people and objects, and at a height approximating eye level of the viewer. Crews must work hard to shield themselves from the cameras, hiding behind objects while the film is rolling so as not to appear in the frame.

The GoPro cameras used by the Times are sensitive to temperature extremes. For a segment of “The Displaced,” filmed in South Sudan, producers wanted to capture a day in the life of a boy, Chuol, as he traveled in a boat through the swamps. They placed a 360-degree camera rig in the boat with the boy; however, when he came back a few hours later, they realized the cameras had overheated and most of the footage was lost. They eventually asked the boy to head out in his boat at a different time of day than normal, during which temperatures would be cooler so the cameras would work.

Frontline detailed some of its difficulties [in a report](#) on its video “[Ebola Outbreak: A Virtual Journey](#),” released last November. In addition to the technical difficulties of the equipment, the report identified difficulties with storytelling techniques. “For example, directors cannot quickly cut between angles or scenes,” the report stated, “without severely disorienting users. There is practically no 360-degree archive footage directors can draw upon. The camera cannot be panned or zoomed, and if a videographer wants to light a scene for narrative effect, the lighting equipment is difficult to hide.”

The Frontline producers partially got around these difficulties by using computer-generated graphics to serve as breaks and introductions in the film; and layering in 2-dimensional video clips into 360-degree scenes.

Finally, VR films face difficulties in creating a pleasing experience for the viewer over the time it takes to watch an in-depth film. [Last year, CNN used VR headsets to broadcast the presidential debates to a test audience.](#) Many of those exposed to it however, found the Samsung VR headsets to be uncomfortable over time; and once the novelty wore off, the overall experience became a bit boring. Despite the excitement surrounding the new platform, clearly the technology has a long way to come before VR can be presented in a way that allows filmmakers to create a lasting and satisfying experience for viewers.



VR camera rig placement can present ethical considerations, like it did in this low shot from “Vigils in Paris”

ETHICAL DILEMMAS

The use of VR equipment in the field also presents new ethical dilemmas for journalists. In the example above in which filmmakers for “The Displaced” asked the South Sudanese boy Chuol to travel in his boat at a different time of day, the journalists deliberately changed the timing of the events, a move that some might consider “staging.” The filmmakers presented the issue to the Times’ standards and ethics editor, who judged the change not to be an ethical violation, since even though the footage was not entirely candid, it still presented the details of the boy’s life in an honest and authentic way.

Ethical considerations can also arise in the placement of the VR camera rig during a scene. In one scene during “Vigils in Paris,” the crew put the camera at a low angle, so that the viewer was looking up at women praying; the effect raised questions about the viewer’s relationship to the scene. For viewers, it seemed as if they were part of the memorial—even as one of the dead—changing the experience of the video in ways the filmmakers did not intend. In another video, about a Mexican boy shot while crossing the US border, the filmmakers unintentionally placed the camera rig too high, causing the viewer to look down on the boy’s family. Due to the sensitive, racially-charged nature of the film and the implications of superiority that angle implied, the Times decided they could not use the footage.

The way that films are altered in post-production can also lead to ethical dilemmas. Due to the way that the different camera angles are “stitched together” by the computer software, video editors are forced to

make decisions about how they will combine the footage, for example, emphasizing objects in the foreground or background at the expense of objects to the sides. Some filmmakers may be critical of those necessary choices about how to combine the footage as manipulating the film footage.

In addition, the Times has sometimes altered the footage in order to create what it considers a better experience of the subject for the viewer. For example, the Times science desk recently created a VR film based on footage collected by the New Horizons spacecraft that passed Pluto last July. Called "[Seeking Pluto's Frigid Heart](#)," the film premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival, and [the Times sent out another 300,000 Google Cardboard sets](#) for subscribers to view it. The filmmakers labored to present the experience of traveling through space authentically, paying close attention to the position of the stars and constellations. They did, however, take some creative license with the way they presented the experience for the viewer, for example adding virtual specks of dust in the frame to show speed of motion. The filmmakers justified those changes as small details that enhanced the VR experience without interfering with the truth of the story.

While those may be small changes, overall they call into question the traditional journalistic value of "objectivity"—presenting reality without changing it or injecting personal opinions. When something as simple as the camera placement changes the way a video is perceived, journalists have to take extra care to ensure that they are presenting the reality of the situation in the most honest way possible. "It is very important for journalists in the field to be aware of [ethical] issues and solve them creatively in a conscientious way," noted Parshina-Kottas, "because there is a very fine line between painting a portrait of someone's life and altering their reality."

In one sense, VR can be seen as more "honest," since it allows the viewer to have some control over how they take in the experience and explore the scene around them, rather than being controlled by the choices of the director. As the technology expands, it is bound to give the viewer even more freedom. Already, new Vive Stream VR headsets allow users to move through the space as well as looking in different directions.

Whatever the actual use of the equipment, journalists making VR video are striving for transparency. "The question is about being transparent," said Andrew Metz, managing editor of PBS's Frontline, at the Seoul Digital



“The question is about being transparent, about taking into account what the viewer is thinking is real, or if they recognize that it has been created or manufactured in some way.”

Andrew Metz, managing editor of PBS's Frontline

Forum, “about taking into account what the viewer is thinking is real, or if they recognize that it has been created or manufactured in some way.” No matter what changes or manipulations makers of VR video make in order to create the optimal experience, it’s important that they are clear with the viewer what liberties they are taking, anticipating what the viewer may be thinking when they approach a situation, whether or not they are aware that the experience is being manipulated or created by the filmmakers, and being clear about the choices they have made to create the film. “Trust becomes more important here,” said Kang Hyung Cheol, professor of media at Sookmyung University and president-elect of the Korean Association for Broadcasting and Telecommunications Studies. “With this new world of new players coming on board, it is the professional journalists’ role to keep trust in the news.”

INTERACTING WITH DIGITAL VIDEO

Platforms like Facebook and YouTube present particular challenges to mainstream documentary producers who have been creating long investigative documentaries. Frontline, for example, has excelled in producing hard-hitting nuanced investigative documentaries for PBS for more than 30 years. For a long time, it has increased its impact by producing ancillary stories to support its documentaries, for example, radio stories for NPR and text-based stories for the Web.



Andrew Metz of PBS's Frontline stresses that journalists making VR video must strive for transparency

With the short attention spans it promotes, however, social media would seem anathema to the organization. Investigative journalists are by nature allergic to condensing their reporting; the very nature of the form relies on space in order to tell nuanced, complex, and in-depth stories about important social issues. On the other hand, many audiences—particularly younger audiences—may not watch a serious hour-long documentary. The outlet was faced with the challenge of adapting its content to a shorter form without losing the integrity of the story.

We use interactive storytelling. 🌐



To complement “My Brother’s Bomber,” Frontline produced an interactive animation integrating images as well as audio and video

To solve this problem, Frontline has begun producing short videos, some as short as 2-3 minutes long, specifically for YouTube and Facebook with unique qualities adapted to the form. The videos point back to the hour-long documentary with which they are associated. Importantly, however, these videos are not just traditional trailers for the films, but rather standalone stories with their own narrative drive.

One video that Frontline produced for Facebook was based on a documentary it produced called “[ISIS in Afghanistan](#),” in which journalist Najibullah Quraishi secured extraordinary access to the terrorist group. Rather than condensing the entire documentary into a two-minute teaser, the producers decided to excerpt a two-and-a-half minute segment about a school to train young children to become jihadists that could stand on its own as a smaller story—with a beginning, middle, and end. In order to make it accessible to the audience on Facebook, which often watches video without sound, the producers stripped the narration off of the video clip and added subtitles. The video, “[School of ISIS](#),” went viral, with [22 million views](#) within a few days. “Keep in mind that the film itself was viewed by maybe 2.2 million people,” Metz said during the SDF panel. “So there was a perfect example of us reaching a new audience, hopefully also bringing more people back to Frontline, to our full films.”

In other videos it’s produced, Frontline has taken advantage of the interactive qualities of social media. For a documentary “[My Brother’s Bomber](#)”—a three-part film about a filmmaker whose brother was killed in the Lockerbie bombing attacks over Scotland in 1988—the producers

were confronted with three hours of intensely emotional, detailed footage. Rather than excerpt the film, however, the filmmakers used additional material that they weren't able to fit into the production, focusing on [a box of artifacts](#) that the late brother gave to the filmmaker before he died.

Frontline produced an interactive animation that allowed viewers to click on objects and scroll through descriptions of them, integrating images, audio, and video as part of the presentation. The result is a multilayered and affecting portrait of the relationship that relates to the larger project, but also stands on its own. The interactive quality of the experience is a moving one, akin to rifling through a box of treasured mementoes. Even though the interactive forms seem to give the viewer more control over how they experience a story, the choices of how the viewer can interact with the objects are still being made by a filmmaker.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is clearly becoming more and more vital to disseminating news and information. According to [a recent report](#) by the Pew Research Center and Knight Foundation (disclosure: The Knight Foundation is a supporter of the Nieman Lab), more than 40 percent of Americans get news from Facebook, and more than 60 percent get news from some source of social media. (Facebook dwarfs other sites, with 10 percent of U.S. adults getting news from YouTube, 9 percent from Twitter, 4 percent from Instagram, and 2 percent from Snapchat and Reddit.) Not surprisingly, those numbers are even higher among younger users. Some 54 percent of consumers age 18–29 prefer to get their news digitally, while only 38 percent of those 30–49 and 15 percent of those 50–64 agree.



Using Instagram as a storytelling medium has allowed National Geographic to reach younger audiences that are unlikely to read the print publication, Neil Shea says

While many media brands are firmly grounded on the Web, they are confounded by social media, unable to figure out how to use it to add value to their work. The structure of social media, governed by short sharable bursts of information can be seen in some ways to be antithetical

“The part that I really like about this is its simplicity. The simplicity of the idea; the simplicity of the execution; being able to capture, in 140 characters, a life. While that doesn’t truly explore all of the contours of these people’s lives, it’s amazing how powerful 140 characters can be.”

Mashable executive Jim Roberts

to in-depth narrative storytelling. Most publications have some presence on social media, usually Facebook and Twitter, which they often use to promote stories in their print publication; or YouTube, where they may post a teaser for video featured on their website. However, many media organizations are unclear on how they can use these platforms to reach new and different audiences in a way that is authentic to their mission.

Few publications are producing content specifically aimed at social media that is different than other content they are producing for the Web. One exception is Vox.com, the explainer journalism site launched by Ezra Klein, Matt Yglesias, and Melissa Bell in 2014, which has experimented with producing a range of content specifically for different social media channels. [In a conversation at the Nieman Foundation](#) last December, co-founder Bell compared the site’s media strategy to children’s story pioneer Walt Disney, who saw all of his brands influencing each other. “The theme parks came from the movies; the movies came from his animations. The merchandise allowed for stores to be built. Some of the rides have become movies. Movies have influenced the rides,” said Bell. “They all rely on each other. I think about that when I’m thinking about our newsroom.”

With its mission to explain and demystify current events in the news, Vox.com has spent a good deal of time thinking about how it can transform that intent for different platforms. While many news organizations use Snapchat to post photos of breaking news, Vox.com has adapted it for more in-depth storytelling. One recent project, for example, [explored Islamophobia in America](#). Using Snapchat’s “swipe” feature, the site created a series of graphics and statistics that viewers could scroll through with their fingertip to learn more about the topic in a systematic way that showed the rise of Islamophobia over time.

Mashable used a different technique to tell [a longer, more in-depth story using Twitter](#), the social media site famous for distilling posts into 140 characters. Despite its popularity as one of the top social media sites, Twitter does little to drive traffic to traditional journalism outlets—accounting for just 1.5 percent of traffic, [according to a report by social analytics company Parse.ly](#). Rather than driving traffic to their website, a group of Mashable editors decided to let Twitter itself tell the story.

In covering the Paris attacks of last year, the site created a new standalone Twitter account, [@ParisVictims](#), and as the names of the victims of the attack began to be released, [Mashable tweeted each one with a photo and a brief description of who they were](#). The series was powerful in its



National Geographic's Neil Shea finds new storytelling possibilities in short posts on Instagram

simplicity, with epitaphs like “Loved roller derby and children’s books. ‘Sensitive, hip, enthusiastic.’” Offering heartbreaking images of those who had lost their lives, the tweets became more powerful when combined with the details of dozens of other victims to create an affecting toll of loss.

“The part that I really like about this is its simplicity,” then-Mashable executive Jim Roberts [told the Nieman Lab](#). “The simplicity of the idea; the simplicity of the execution; being able to capture, in 140 characters, a life. While that doesn’t truly explore all of the contours of these people’s lives, it’s amazing how powerful 140 characters can be.”

“HACKING” INSTAGRAM

In using social media to tell stories, journalism outlets often have to take a platform meant for a personal purpose and transform it into one that can be used to tell narrative stories—in a sense “hacking” the platform for a different purpose than the one for which it was created.

Instagram is a photo-sharing platform that allows users to upload and edit photos directly from their smartphones and other mobile devices. It is incredibly popular worldwide, with more than 500 million users—more people than the population of the United States—80 percent of them

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Neil Shea, photojournalist

located outside the U.S. Those users upload some 95 million photos and videos to the platform daily. The majority of this audience is young, and many of them have little interaction with traditional forms of media such as newspapers, magazines, and television, getting all of their information and entertainment online.

The vast size of that audience represents a huge opportunity for publications to expand their readership. At the same time, the size of the audience also makes it very difficult for traditional news organizations to be seen through the huge numbers of users and feeds vying for attention on the platform. “I sometimes like to think of Instagram as the world’s most successful magazine,” freelance writer/photographer Neil Shea said at the Seoul Digital Forum. “Each post is a dispatch and a story from somewhere out there in the world.”

Shea has overcome the challenge in using Instagram to reach audiences [for a series he did for National Geographic](#). He spent two months in the desert of northern Kenya to write an article for the magazine; while he was there, he took photos of interview subjects on his iPhone so he would remember them better. During his travels, he ended up with much more material than he could fit in one feature article, and so began posting the photos of interview subjects to [National Geographic’s Instagram feed](#), which has some 57 million followers (by contrast, the magazine has only 6 million subscribers worldwide).

Shea posted one story a day, accompanying each photo with a story of no more than 300 words, trying to keep descriptions brief and powerful. Given the casual, visual style of the platform, he was careful not to overload stories with facts and figures that might be more appropriate for the print magazine. “Normally, journalists and editors want to cram into that space a whole bunch of boring stuff—facts, statistics, names,” Shea said. “But that doesn’t work on Instagram. When you are working with social media, it’s important to take into consideration the nature of the platform you are writing for.”

Instead, he employed a creative and even poetic style. For example, [one photo](#) of a crocodile biting an underwater camera in Lake Turkana told a story from the perspective of someone standing on the shore deciding whether or not to go into the water.

The series was incredibly successful from a readership perspective, receiving more than 10 million likes and tens of thousands of comments.

“I’m interested in the snapshot aesthetic, in all the ways in which this breaks out of our convention, out of the golden age of longform, which really has never been more formulaic. Instagram radically opens up who gets to tell stories by doing some of the same things for journalism that YouTube has done for video.”

Jeff Sharlet, a contributing editor to
Virginia Quarterly Review

The audience was overwhelmingly young, including many users who would never read National Geographic, and engage with the publication only through its Instagram feed. “People under 30, they know what National Geographic is only through Instagram,” Shea said. “They don’t read the magazine. They don’t watch the television channel. And they don’t visit the website.”

National Geographic isn’t the only journalism outlet experimenting with Instagram. The Virginia Quarterly Review (VQR), a literary magazine published out of the University of Virginia for nearly a century, has also recently been [experimenting with posting photo stories](#) under the hashtag [#VQRTrueStory](#). Each story includes a photograph of a person and is accompanied by text of 300 to 400 words describing their lives. The first posts, by journalist Meera Subramanian last December described life in changing India. The photos are colorful and candid, but the accompanying text isn’t always light. Subramanian’s [first post](#), of a woman picking cotton, included commentary on pesticides and Monsanto’s corporate control of the cotton market.

Since then, VQR has produced similarly hard-hitting images in the series, such as [a moody black-and-white photo](#) of an Iraq War vet who is now homeless on the streets of New York. Writer Jeff Sharlet, a contributing editor to VQR and Dartmouth College professor, has posted his own Instagram stories [that include interviews with nightshift workers at a New Hampshire Dunkin’ Donuts](#). The stories accompanying the photos share the literary magazine’s elevated tone. They are made engaging through the high quality of the photos, [which draw the user in and make him or her want to learn about the person being depicted](#).

“I’m interested in the snapshot aesthetic, in all the ways in which this breaks out of our convention, out of the golden age of longform, which really has never been more formulaic,” Sharlet [told Nieman Lab](#) earlier this year. “Instagram radically opens up who gets to tell stories by doing some of the same things for journalism that YouTube has done for video.”

[The Washington Post has also been experimenting with using Instagram to tell stories](#). After the curfew was lifted in Baghdad last February, the Post’s Beirut bureau chief, Liz Sly, traveled to the city to report on the return of its night life. To accompany the piece, she created [a new Instagram account](#) and posted several pictures of the new stores and nightclubs, including a beauty salon named the “[Barbie Clinic](#)” that stayed packed with women late. Sly now has close to 40,000 followers on her feed, and

the Post has been encouraging its other international reporters to post stories on their own Instagram feeds.

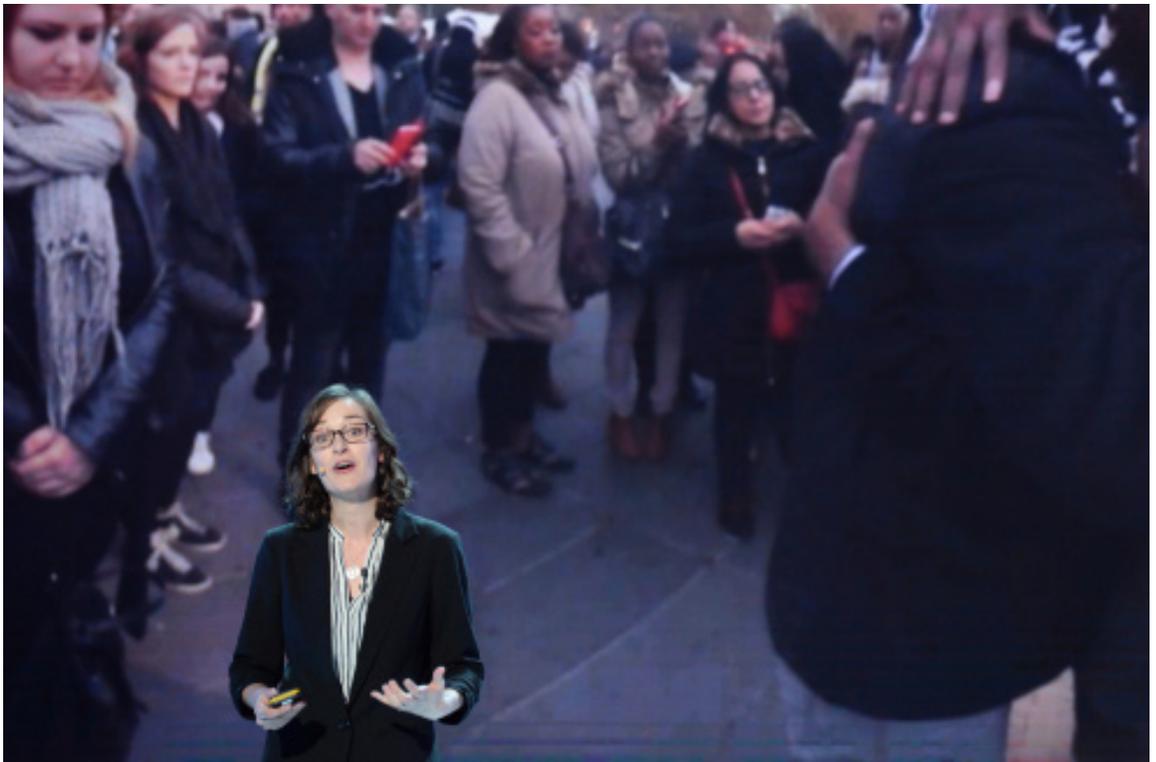
“Years ago, the whole point of social media, for a lot of correspondents and journalists, was to try to get sources, story ideas, and things like that,” Swati G. Sharma, the Post’s former foreign digital editor [told Nieman Lab](#) late last year (she is now a deputy general assignment editor). Now the platforms have gone from ways to find stories to ways to tell stories. “What’s completely changed is that our correspondents use these as storytelling tools,” she said. “It drives home to our readers that we are there in these places in a real, authentic way.” While Instagram provides a rapid way to reach a huge audience, that speed is not without its drawbacks, especially when it comes to reader feedback. One photo Shea posted on Instagram [of a young Ethiopian girl](#) smiling widely for the camera was incredibly popular, earning 500,000 “likes” in a short period of time. However, the photo was also deluged with more than 100 racist comments—which disturbed the publication so much its editors considered taking down the photo.

An additional concern for publications such as National Geographic and Virginia Quarterly Review is that posting content on Instagram or other rapid-fire social media sites such as Twitter and Snapchat, threatens to “dumb down” a complex story by distilling it into a single image. Journalists like Shea are the first to say that these social media experiments are not a substitute for long-form narrative journalism. Shea considers his Instagram stories to be more akin to good travel writing than to investigative journalism—but it still fulfills National Geographic’s mission of exposing its audience to other people and cultures around the world.

As long as these short-form social media stories are being produced with a conscious intent of how they contribute to the mission of the parent publication, they can be an added value to the brand, and even provide a back door to get new, younger audiences interested in stories in the publication itself.

CHANGING ROLES

Traditional storytelling forms such as magazine articles and documentary films are labor-intensive projects—typically taking many months for research and reporting, followed by a rigorous editing process to vet and shape the content. The speed at which these new platforms allow content to be created, as well as the more casual and ephemeral nature of social media calls into question the role that an editor or producer typically has in shaping content.



Watching VR videos allows viewers to feel a lot more empathy than what traditional media is able to provide, says Yuliya Parshina-Kottas, graphics and multimedia editor at The New York Times

Publications vary widely in the editorial oversight they provide to writers producing new media content. VQR's Instagram stories are all photo-edited, copy-edited, and fact-checked just like any other story before going to print. Some outlets, however, gives their reporters carte blanche over what they post to social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. "The editors of National Geographic have very little to do with what we do on Instagram," noted Shea. "They just say don't mess it up, and they let us do whatever we want... So the weight is on me for this, and if I screw it up it's really on me."

Others may not look at every tweet or photo sent out on Snapchat or Instagram. However, they may look at a representative sample, and tweak style and subject matter to bring them more in line with the overall brand or mission of the publication. For reporters, the forms require more self-editing—asking themselves whether style and tone of what they are posting match the style of the publication they are representing.

Even in cases where they aren't line-editing copy, editors are still making choices in terms of the type of coverage they want their reporters, photographers, and filmmakers to prepare, often giving direction on what type of content they want to put on each particular social media platform.

In addition, editors are often making choices about what part of a video or other content they will excerpt. For "Vigils in Paris," the filmmakers came back with 8 minutes of footage from the streets of the city. Even such riveting subject matter, however, runs the risk of becoming monotonous after a few minutes. It's incumbent upon an editor to excerpt the most powerful scenes in order to best tell the story. In this case one of those scenes was a powerful moment when a young man raised a sign as a woman next to him yelled "Vive La France!" capturing the defiance of the moment. "It was a magical moment," Parshina-Kottas said. "Make sure you find it. Make sure you focus around it."

WATCH

Video of "The Evolution of Storytelling" at SDF2016:

- James Geary, "[Creating Great Journalism from Great Innovation](#)"
- Yuliya Parshina-Kottas, "[Virtual Reality Meets Journalism](#)"
- Neil Shea, "[Pioneering in Instagram Storytelling](#)"
- Andrew Metz, "[The Many Forms of FRONTLINE](#)"
- Panel Discussion, "[The Evolution of Journalism](#)"

CONCLUSION

Every time a new technological innovation changes media, it arrives with fears that it will replace the technologies that came before it. Newspaper journalists feared the rise of radio; radio producers feared that the visual imagery of television would put them out of business; and television and magazines have feared the Internet's ability to provide free content on demand to highly targeted audiences. Yet in each of these cases, these different forms of media have ended up coexisting—and even collaborating, with companies disseminating stories through multiple forms of media, and reporters finding different ways to tell stories on radio, television, and print outlets. There's no reason to think that these new forms of digital media won't follow a similar pattern.

That said, it's important not to dismiss the challenge that social media, digital video, and virtual reality present to traditional media forms. Some traditionalists may see these trends as passing fads, which young people will grow out of, gravitating toward more traditional storytelling when they enter their 20s and 30s. As the digital generation does begin to age, however, there is no indication that they are changing the way they consume the news. Journalism outlets must figure out their relationship to these new digital forms or face being left behind in the new media landscape.

Smart media outlets are using these platforms not only as a way to expand their reach into new audiences, but also as a way to experiment with new ways of telling stories they find important. The reason that journalists tell stories is to create impact, both on a personal level and to make change in the world. While the ways of telling stories may have changed, the imperative to tell them has not. Rather than letting

these platforms dictate content that is not inherently comfortable for a publication, journalists must figure out the best ways to use these new technologies to help them tell the stories they want to tell.

TIPS FOR NEWS MEDIA USING NEW STORYTELLING PLATFORMS

- Produce brand new content that caters specifically to the form of the platform; don't expect content that works in print or on the Web to work.
- Take advantage of the audiences native to new platforms, which may be younger and more diverse, and create content suited to their interests.
- Be creative; harness the interactive nature of platforms such as virtual reality, digital video, and social media, and build it into the viewer experience.
- Expect difficulties with new equipment and technologies, and leave time to address them or work around them.
- Anticipate new ethical dilemmas, and be transparent with readers about the choices you make.
- Decide in advance how much editorial oversight you will apply to writing, photos, and videos produced for new platforms.
- Be prepared to experiment; it may take a while before the "right" way to use new platforms emerges.

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