Normative Legitimation of Digital Longforms in Journalism: Three Arguments for Complex Digital Storytelling

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Zusammenfassung

Digitale Langformen sind aufwendig produzierte Multimedia-Stories, die ihre User*innen über eine komplexe Thematik informieren und dabei verschiedene Perspektiven einbeziehen. Für Medienhäuuser stellen diese Stories eine Chance zur Prestigesteigerung dar, doch müssen dafür überdurchschnittlich viele personelle, zeitliche sowie monetäre Ressourcen aufgewandt werden. Im Hinblick auf eine normative Legitimierung digitaler Langformen untersucht dieses Paper drei Argumente für deren Produktion: Für Digitalen Journalismus (I) stellen Langformen eine Möglichkeit zum Ausdruck von Qualität im digitalen Bereich und zum Erfüllen der demokratischen Funktion dar; für Journalist*innen (II) beinhalten sie die Chance, neue Produktionsroutinen und Kollaborationen zu etablieren; und dem Publikum (III) ermöglichen digitale Langformen, sich fundiert und mitunter immersiv über Themen zu informieren und einen Wissenszuwachs zu erlangen. Mögliche Gegenargumente und Bedenken werden ebenfalls adressiert.

Keywords: Digitale Langformen, Digitaler Journalismus, Normative Legitimierung, Multimedia, Storytelling

Summary

Digital longforms are extensive, technologically advanced multimedia stories which inform users about a complex topic and thereby integrate different perspectives. While media outlets benefit from the prestige-enhancing potentials of these stories, their production bundles timely, monetary and human resources above average. In light of a normative legitimation, this paper critically explores three arguments for the production of these complex digital longforms. It argues that for digital journalism (I), longforms can be seen as a means for demarcation and for fulfilling its democratic role; for the producing journalists (II), longform production bears the chance to establish new production routines and collaborations; and for the audience (III), digital longforms provide the potential for users to immerse into a topic and to gain profound knowledge about it. Potential counter arguments or related concerns will be addressed.

Keywords: Digital Longforms, Digital Journalism, Normative Legitimation, Multimedia, Storytelling

1) Introduction: Legitimizing Digital Longforms

"Immersive longform (...) is characterized by both completeness of experience and depth of critical engagement" (Dowling, 2019, p. 1).

Critical engagement can be considered among the most valuable pillars of journalism, indicating both the journalistic rigor with which debatable topics need to be approached as well as journalism's independent fourth estate function (Carson & Farhall, 2018, p. 1900). In fact, considering the changes within the public communication market, "(...) journalists cast themselves fundamentally as sense-makers rather than information-gatherers during an era in which information gathering has been widely networked" (Coddington, 2014, p. 678).

Due to internet-specific potentials and qualities such as ubiquity, permanent access and constant updates (Neuberger, 2009, p. 25; Wolf & Godulla, 2016, p. 7), information gathering indeed rapidly became a practice everybody with the necessary technological means could exercise. "In a time when all sorts of information is freely and readily available to everyone", it became crucial for journalism to establish tailored formats for providing background information and creating context for complex issues in order to inform the public (Gambarato & Alzamora, 2018, p. xiv).

One of these tailored formats are digital or immersive longforms (Dowling & Vogan, 2015; Dowling, 2019; Wolf & Godulla, 2016), also referred to as longform storytelling (Hiippala, 2017; Planer & Godulla, 2020; Tulloch & Ramon, 2017) and longform news stories (Jacobson, Marino & Gutsche, 2018). Media outlets worldwide produce these "complex journalistic projects rich in text and multimedia elements" (Planer & Godulla, 2020, p. 1) because they assist in "informing and showing, highlighting, addressing, raising awareness, uncovering and defining a specific topic" (ibid., p. 11). While these stories can vary significantly in style, entertainment function, informative nature and integrated multimedia elements – i.e. being heavy in video or photo or focusing primarily on interactive data visualizations – they carry a range of similar values and potentials.

The most obvious potential of digital longforms are their "promotional functions" (Dowling, 2019, p. 5), which is why media outlets aim at serving "commercial strategies" when producing digital longforms (Dowling & Vogan, 2015, p. 210). When a complex longform goes viral throughout the internet, it is not only "building prestige for a media outlet's brand" (Dowling & Vogan, 2015, p. 210), but furthermore transfers this level of sophistication and intellect to its readers when they share these stories through their personal social media channels (ibid.).

This potential radiance of digital longforms, which oftentimes generates not only prestige but also bestows digital journalism awards upon its producers, might be considered one of the main reasons for journalistic organizations to invest in their production. When leaving the profit-driven arguments for the production and further establishment of digital longforms for a moment aside, it remains questionable which purpose or normative role digital longforms play for journalism as a whole. Short news for example is an established journalistic format for both journalists and the public, where production and reception routines are clear and routinized; it serves the purpose of truthfully, immediately and at best correctly providing the public with relevant information fairly fast. Similarly, one might question the normative legitimation of the relatively new format of digital longforms. With each established journalistic format come different skills that journalists need to acquire, different job circumstances and conditions, as well as different modes of reception and understanding on the side of the users, and in this regard, research into the case of digital longforms is not yet exhausted. This paper tries to critically elaborate on the arguments that serve a potential normative legitimation of digital longforms in journalism. In order to do so, three different angles are taken: first, the format itself is examined in terms of inheriting a normative legitimation; second, a potential normative legitimation for the producers and the overall production is discussed; and third, the purpose of longforms for the users is explored.

2) Digital Longforms: Outstanding Value for Digital Journalism

"The epitome of the digital longform [is] The New York Times' 'Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek (2012)" (Hiippala, 2017, p. 430).

Both journalism scholars as well as practitioners seem to agree that the above-mentioned story "Snow Fall: Avalanche at Tunnel Creek" (Branch, 2012) stands genre-defining for digital longforms: The story, circling around only one topic – a violent avalanche that happened in Washington State – displays different aspects of this topic on a website within six different chapters and a range of multimedia elements , such as interactive graphics, looping videos, and moving images (Planer & Godulla, 2020, p. 2) and was published in 2012. Soon thereafter, both public and private media outlets as well as big and small ones imitated – or snow-falled (Dowling & Vogan, 2015) – digital stories as well, hence putting "one's best product in the market in a way that participates in these trends in digital design and narrative" (ibid., p. 219).

The topics and themes found in these digital longforms are topics with great depth and profundity which usually require the provision of context, explanation and different points of view; frequent topics are "politics, climate, or war" (Planer & Godulla, 2020, p. 4). Longforms are in their nature predestined to display background information rather than hard news; their content is therefore usually not at risk of becoming outdated very fast. It only seems natural that they are mentioned alongside magazine journalism (Hiippala, 2017, p. 435), and that the time for reception of such stories is rather long. Thus, longforms "represent a major shift away from brief breaking news toward a business model built on a carefully crafted multimedia product" (Dowling & Vogan, 2015, p. 220).

However, since the short breaking news are the go-to method to receive information quickly in the digital age, one might hypothesize that the complexity of longforms is rather a disadvantage of the format. While this might be a rightful concern, the format's "stickiness" (ibid.) – the potential to captivate the users and to provide the technological and content-related environment to immerse them into a story – is counteracting the "predictions of [...] superficial online reading practices" (Dowling, 2019, p. 1). In fact, "a renaissance in deep reading and viewing associated with the literary mind" (ibid., p. 3) has taken place. In times when "digital media technologies (...) enable the viral spread of disinformation" (Carson & Farhall, 2018, p. 1900), a growing quest for understanding and critically engaging with topics is rising, potentially driving users towards digital longforms.

Thereby, digital longforms could stand for what Esser and Neuberger (2018) call a "demarcation" in journalism (p. 196): When they reflect upon journalism's democratic function, they argue that it is crucial for today's journalism to develop an outstanding value that "journalism claim[s] when executing its informational and power-scrutinizing role" (ibid.). In fact, for a long time, online journalism was busy reproducing information from the offline world (Jacobson, 2010; Wolf & Godulla, 2016) and did not immediately create a new added value. This is a phenomenon that has been observed ever since journalism existed: Every time a new informational sub-system was emerging – whether it was a radio, a TV or the internet – journalists first resumed their tried and tested routines, programs, and formats and took them to the new sub-system, before slowly establishing new ones that were adapted to both the technological as well as the reception-related possibilities of the new medium (Wolf, 2014). According to this principle of inertia, they first simply reproduced offline news in the online world, before they started experimenting with the multimedia possibilities.

Longforms can be seen as one outcome of such an experimentation and adaption phase. Due to the profundity of the format, it is said to "represent an imperative counterweight to conventional journalism that is essential for both our emotional and intellectual survival" (Berning, 2011, p. 12). Some even refer to digital longforms as a "supreme nonfiction" (Boynton, 2013, p. 125), or as having the potential to make journalism rise to "supreme heights" (Dowling, 2017, p. 104). Following a train of thought sketched by Neuberger and Esser (2018), then digital longforms with their potential to provide context and include different perspectives could add an outstanding value to both the public and the journalistic profession and thereby assist journalism in retaining its democratic importance to society (p. 196). Summarizing, this can be seen as the first argument this paper makes in terms of a normative legitimation of digital longforms in journalism:

(I) As a context-providing counter genre to short news, digital longforms have the possibility to represent an outstanding value to digital journalism through presenting complex, in-depth and multi-perspective information online and thereby helping journalism fulfilling its democratic role in a 21st century networked society.

Therefore, it is crucial to take a look behind the curtains of the production processes of these stories. Considering the complexity of the format, it seems obvious that it might take longer than a usual journalistic production does, since a high number of different multimedia elements not only have to be produced but also put into a "unified whole" (Hiippala, 2017, p. 420). Which implications this might have for the producing journalists also on a normatively legitimizing level will be outlined in the following.

3) Digital Longforms: New Pathways for Journalists

"It is the means by which journalists and photographers fulfil their central role of making sense of the plethora of information that surrounds us (...)" (Caple & Knox, 2017, p. 357).

Preparing a digital longform that allows for deep reading and viewing can take up to twelve or even more months; it not only requires more time than the production of a regular news article, it also takes a significantly higher amount of "specialized knowledge, and money to produce" (Jacobson, Marino & Gutsche, 2016, p. 2). This is why initially, longform production was reserved for legacy outlets (Tulloch & Ramon, 2017, p. 652) who had the necessary means for production. A novelty in this regard is that the mentioned specialized knowledge is not seldom found outside the newsroom as well, for example when a new code has to be written in order to implement an idea, when an interactive graphic has to be developed or when a data set has to be bowdlerized and calculated. In this respect, a qualitative analysis of ten award-winning longform productions found that successful longforms "can only be produced if different departments of a newsroom and of an organization (e.g. IT department) work together and collaborate" (Planer & Godulla, 2020, p. 12). Some tasks, such as for example the inclusion of a VR experience into a story, can even be outsourced to specialized enablers who early on unlocked the technological know-how of these resources and thus can become important cooperation partners (Godulla & Wolf, 2017).

This ties to the second pillar Esser and Neuberger (2018) mention regarding journalism's future and maintenance of its democratic power: the importance of cooperation, meaning that journalists should find ways to work together with alternative organizations

that pursue the same monitoring role (p. 196). Due to the contextualist nature of digital longforms, they tend to inherit an investigative notion, since they might as well point out social problems and their persons responsible (Walth, Dahmen & Their, 2019).

Within (digital) investigative journalism, considerable amounts of information can be shared internationally like it has been the case with the Panama Papers, and newsrooms increasingly collaborate – also in digital journalism – in order to produce high quality investigative output (Carson & Farhall, 2018). Woodall (2018), who analyzed the three mega leaks in the affairs of Snowden, Manning and Doe, found that this kind of collaborative work was encouraged. Carson and Farhall (2018) examined the rise of award-winning newsroom collaborations, and concluded that "the shifts from single newsroom investigative journalism to collaborations, to the use of multimedia, data and crowd-sourcing in storytelling suggest that despite challenging economic conditions [...], quality investigative journalism continues in the digital age" (p. 1909). Surely, these investigative works are outstanding and might not be the everyday practice of digital longforms. Nevertheless, working collaboratively and digitally, "across outlets, media platforms, national borders, and with non-media like academia" (ibid.), has certain benefits like "sharing costs and information; increased story reach and a strengthened ability to set the news agenda" (ibid). This proves true for the collaborative production processes of longform storytelling as well, which includes an extra effort that is willingly welcomed by the journalists "in order to reach the overarching goal" (Planer & Godulla, 2020, p. 11). Hence, digital longforms could be regarded as a core part of quality journalism in the digital age, not least due to their collaborative nature of production.

The mentioned extra effort is also mirrored by the fact that up to 20 people or even more can be involved in the production of a story; each one of them contributes to the story with his or her individual skills. A longform production team can easily occupy several texters, photographers, videographers, data and IT specialists, graphic designers, developers, and more; outstanding is that they work toward one higher goal and altogether "apply their multimedia mindsets, do cross-checking with the work of their colleagues as well as multiskilling" (Planer & Godulla, 2020, p. 12). They go through the different phases of production together, from the initial idea pitch to the conceptualization phase, to the actual collection of

footage and material and to the final editing phase (ibid.). Thereby, they oftentimes broaden both their horizons and their skillsets by taking over responsibilities or at least cross-checking content for media formats they previously have not been specialized in. Interviewed producers of successful digital longforms were overall "proud and satisfied and perceived their work as meaningful" (ibid., p. 14).

This multi-faceted production process is illustrated in the figure below, highlighting the importance of the collaboration in order to create the demarcation in the form of a digital longform product. The newsroom and organization departments establish (oftentimes new) collaborations and adapt to the complex production setting, while together passing the different production phases (idea pitch, conceptualization, field work and editing) and implementing the multimedia strategies (Fig. 1).
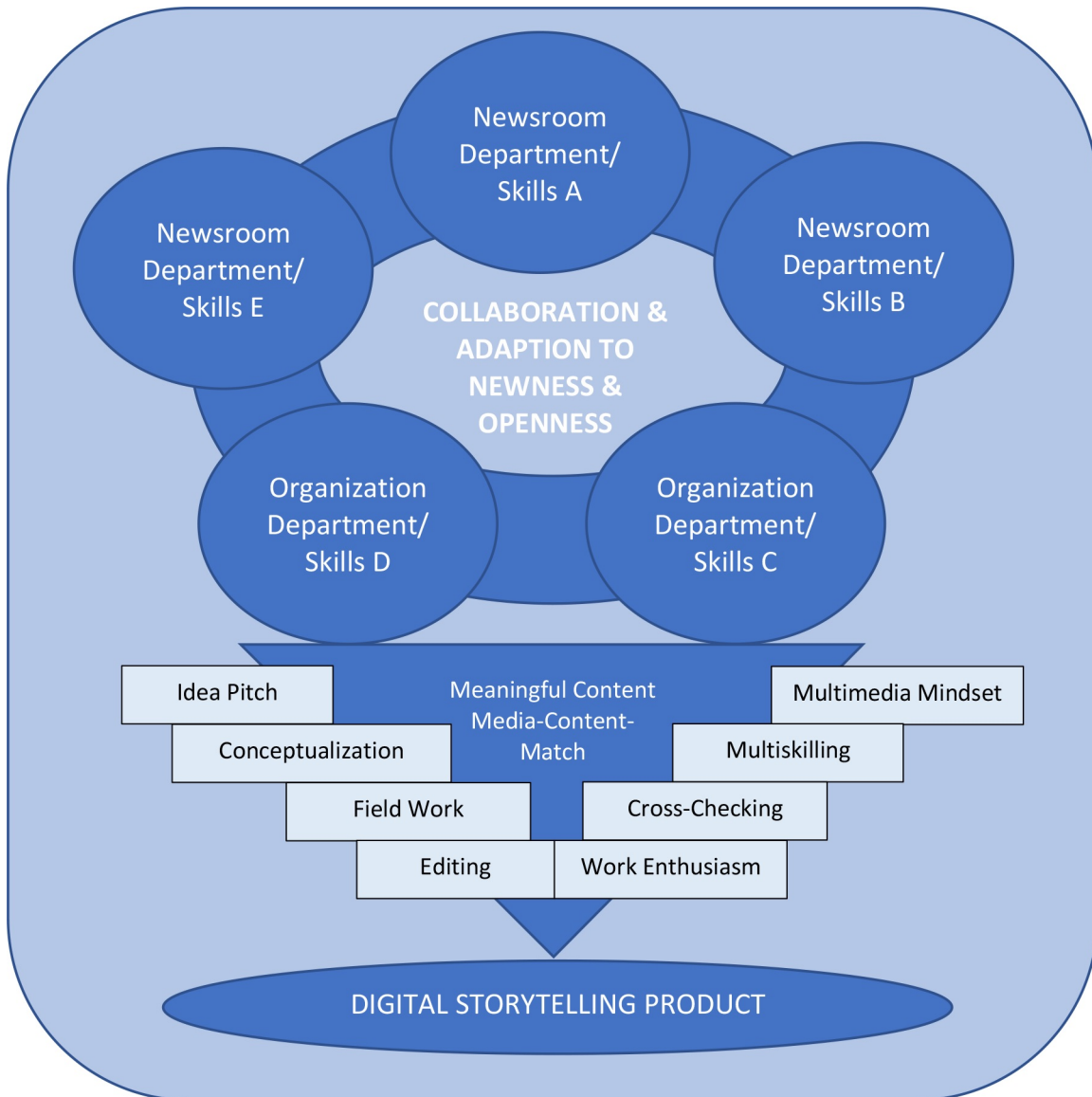
Figure 1: Newsroom organization of the production of longform stories.

Summarizing, the production of a digital longform is as multi-dimensional as the format itself: It resembles project-based teamwork and is "an extensive enterprise that relies on the commitment of every single team player. This level of required commitment of journalists to establish new routines, to acquire new multimedia skills, to cross-check the work of their colleagues, in order to put together a story that is greater than their individual skillsets could have accounted for, is the second argument in terms of a normative legitimation of digital longforms in journalism:

(II) Digital longforms have the possibility to represent an outstanding value for journalists because they provide new pathways for journalistic cooperation in the digital age and thus lay the ground for the acquisition of new journalistic and managerial skills.

While the professionalization of these production processes yet needs to be empirically assessed, one might hypothesize that once both the internal and external collaborations have been established, the production processes might run faster and smoother. In this regard, the evident arduousness of big projects that occupy a lot of resources require mentioning as well: When a lot of people work together on one project, the collaboration can easily result in "slower processes and an extensive communication effort" (Planer & Godulla, 2020, p. 11). Planer and Godulla (2020) hypothesize that this pattern could develop in two different directions, either resulting in even more multi-skilled journalists or in a more strategic approach to project and communication management (p. 14). Further associated problems can relate to the available technology, lacking money and time or a lack of appreciation of the format (ibid., p. 11).

The fact that so many resources are needed to produce a longform seems to run counter to the possible normative legitimation of the format – or, in fact, it rather underlines the necessity of such a normative legitimation. If monetary, timely and human resources are squandered, a longform production can hardly be legitimized neither in front of the news organization, nor the public, nor the journalistic system as a whole. This would imply a disadvantage for smaller, low-budget newsrooms compared to bigger, financially stable newsrooms when it comes to digital longform production, which would add to a normative area of conflict. Following this thought, another debatable aspect lies in the different journalistic roles which could be perceived with different levels of value or

importance, when longform producers work on an extensive story for a long time and with a lot of resources, while others (have to) stick to the day-to-day-routine. Further research has yet to investigate the specific role dynamics in this context.

It seems like as long as the driving force of production remains the overarching goal of creating a complex, multi-faceted, informative digital experience, such as shown by Planer and Godulla (2020), the mentioned high resources, intricacies and production-related problems and imbalances can be legitimized and also seem to be accepted by the producers of the longforms, who, according to a qualitative interview study, enthusiastically and proudly work on digital longforms. This presumes that news organizations value the format of longforms and see their potential for communicating specific profound topics, complimentary to breaking news; if this is a given within a digital newsroom, then leaders of production, journalists and staffers are likely to thrive for these "supreme heights" (Dowling, 2017, p. 104) of digital longforms. And supposedly only then there is a chance for journalism "to re-train news audiences into investing in the benefits of patience and anticipation over instant gratification" (Dowling, 2016, p. 535), and for the audience to experience the immersion and the benefits of the format first-hand. This leads to the third and last – and maybe most relevant – perspective from which a normative legitimation of digital longforms is necessary: the audience.

4) Digital Longforms: Do It for The Audience (Immersion)

"Just as production processes are becoming more networked as the products themselves become increasingly multimodal, their consumption has become distinctly more social" (Dowling, 2019, p. 29f.).

This quote emphasizes the different mentioned dimensions of digital longforms and shows how closely related they are: The production processes, the format itself and the consumption can hardly be thought of separately. While the surrounding conditions of longform production have been examined above, it is the details, small decisions and subtleties of the production that create the best possible consumption setting for the audience – one where they can explore a story on their own, navigating individually and intuitively according to their multimedia preferences without being distracted.

Crucially important in this regard seems "packaging the story in the most appropriate way for the most appropriate platform" (Caple & Knox, 2017, p. 357). Since 2012, storytelling tools such as Pageflow or Shorthand have entered the market and simplify the intricate production processes of these multi-layered longform stories and enable the inclusion of more and more multimedia elements. These multimedia elements are becoming more diverse and elaborated with the advancing technological development: Not only are videos and photos integrated into stories, but also interactive graphics and data visualizations, looping videos or 360° videos, audio slideshows, photo essays, virtual reality (VR) features, interactive maps and quizzes, moving images, and more (i.e. Ball, 2016; Good, 2017; Jacobson, 2012; Karlsson & Clerwall, 2011; Kartveit, 2017; Song, 2018). In that regard, producers need to provide clear structures, a well-arranged design and clear indications about the size of single elements, since users were found to be easily overstrained by highly innovative design and navigation principles (Godulla & Wolf 2017, p. 176). Hence, displaying a topic comprehensively in a multimedia manner does not mean overloading the story with as many shiny multimedia features as possible, but "prioritizing storytelling over displays of technological prowess" (Dowling, 2017, p. 103), so that the audience can consume a coherent, seamless product.

Producers also need to keep the different desires of their users in mind: There are more visual users who differ from text-focused users in their attention towards photos, videos, graphics and animations, while undecided users don't show a specific fondness of either element (Godulla & Wolf 2017, p. 177). Above that, there are users approaching a story in a rather structured way, hence following a strict pattern and thereby making sure to gain an overview over the story structure, while rather volatile users abruptly start consuming a story, which they continue aimlessly, changing directions as they please (ibid.). In terms of consumption intensity, Godulla and Wolf (2017) differentiate between dutiful users who consume all elements of a story in a structured way to the fullest; selective users who decide for or against the consumption of an element according to their personal preferences; and superficial users who show low degrees of engagement overall and rather skim the different elements (ibid.). Journalists have to decide which media format is best qualified to portray which nuance or facet of a topic, following a "careful editorial selection and placement of multimedia

elements" (ibid.). This "media-content match" (Planer & Godulla, 2020, p. 12), which is also displayed in Figure 1, is seemingly "the most important narrative strategy" (ibid.) when producing a longform story, because only this way, the overall aim of "informing, showing, highlighting, raising awareness" (ibid.) of a topic can be best achieved.

When thinking of this third perspective, longforms are „fueled by an industry's quest for audience engagement" (Dowling, 2017, p. 103), and digital longforms have the possibility to not only enhance (critical) engagement, but also to enhance the user's levels of interactivity (Jacobson, Marino & Gutsche, 2018; Riskos, Dekoulou & Tsourvakas, 2019), participation (Peters & Witschge, 2015; Spyridou, 2019) as well as immersion (Mabrook & Singer, 2019; Shin & Biocca, 2017). The latter is considered as a "state of altered consciousness – not the prim suspension of disbelief, but its joyous capsizing" (Baía Reis & Coelho, 2018, p. 1090). Although the concept of 'suspension of disbelief' has its roots in the scientific discussion about VR, drawing back to 1994 when Hand (1994) stated that "we must temporarily remove any doubt about the reality of the experience (...) in order that the user may interact as though the experience were real" (see Hand 1994, Pt. 3), the core of the concept also applies to digital longforms: When the audience is given the "capacity to delve deeply into longform stories" (Dowling, 2016, p. 541), they might not only enjoy the consumption process without being distracted similar to reading a book, they are also more likely to truly understand the topic, form an opinion or understand different perspectives. The user study by Godulla and Wolf (2017) showed that multimodality and selectivity mattered more to the users themselves than interactivity, participation and hyperlinks, since the latter might lead away from the story or distract from the actual content (p. 176). When the multimedia elements are carefully chosen, however, and the media-content match is respected, the audience can interact, immerse, engage and participate, potentially initiating a democratic discourse while respecting different points of view. Hence, such nonfictional storytelling is "perhaps the most crucial link to our humanity" (Dowling, 2019, p. 3), which leads to the third argument:

(III) Due to both their form and their content, digital longforms have the possibility to represent an outstanding value for their users who can be immersed and engaged in a way that can create sustainable knowledge and stimulate public discourse.

Even though "mobile audiences are consuming richer, more nuanced and contextualized narratives than ever" (Dowling, 2019, p. 20), the potential democratic value of longform stories is alleviated when reflecting on the fact that only people with notebooks, tablets or smartphones are able to consume these stories, hence they could be classified as an elitist format. While the access issue might be a problem for other digital formats too, such as for example VR stories, an issue closely related to longforms are the reading habits again. Even though a return to consuming longer narratives is observable, also in terms of "on demand documentary television series, branded digital documentaries, interactive online documentaries, and podcasting" (Dowling, 2019, p. 4), the question when the consumption is worth the effort, time, money, and human resources spent on the production of digital longforms remains unanswered. One might argue that again, if the higher purpose of raising awareness among the audience is achieved, the production process was worth the resources; anyway, a measurement of raised awareness or a quantitative assessment of the effects of longform story consumption is still pending. Summarizing, it seems to be the case here again that a normative legitimation is given when the overall normative purpose – in this case, the comprehensive and context-providing information of the audience – is aimed at.

5) The Future of Digital Longforms: Less Long, More Multimedia?

"The interest of news organizations in both branding and sharing reflects a strategy to stimulate audience interest in quality journalism that matters to individuals" (Jacobson et al., 2018, p. 6).

This paper tried to elaborate on the question which normative arguments for legitimation of the elaborate format of digital longforms can be found; thereby, one argument was made for digital journalism, seeing longforms as a means for demarcation and for fulfilling its democratic role in focusing on complex and relevant topics and thereby integrating different perspectives; one was made for the producing journalists who have the chance to establish new production routines and collaborations; and one argument was made for the audience that has the chance to immerse itself into a topic and gain profound knowledge about it. Each time, the potential counter arguments or related concerns have been raised, which make no claim to be complete. On the one hand, digital longform stories are a promising and

contemporary journalistic product innovation, which on the other hand open up a range of normative questions which need to be addressed within the scientific debate around a readjustment in (digital) journalism.

It will be interesting to observe – both from a scientific as well as from a user's perspective – how the not yet fully established format of digital longforms is going to develop. What is sure is that due to the rapidly changing technological environment, digital longforms are predestined to constantly alter their shape, be it due to the more frequented implementation of VR videos or 360° features or due to an increasing amount of data visualizations. A trend towards a "leaner narrative aesthetic" (Dowling, 2017, p. 103) might even drive towards shorter, but similarly or even more complex versions of stories. If monetary and timely resources can be reduced – which is imaginable due to improving storytelling tools as well as management approaches to big journalistic productions – a normative legitimation would become even better arguable. The only reduction of resources which should probably not take place and would hinder the legitimation as argued in this paper would be the reduction of minds, ideas and journalists' enthusiasm as well as content-related multiple perspectives, since these make out a digital longform.

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