

**FACULTY OF MASS MEDIA COMMUNICATION**

University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia

# MEGATRENDS AND MEDIA

## DIGITAL UNIVERSE



Zuzana Bučková  
Lenka Rusňáková  
Martin Solík  
(eds.)

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Conference Proceedings  
from the International Scientific Conference  
16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> April 2019  
Congress Hall of the Slovak Academy of Sciences  
Smolenice, Slovakia



Trnava  
2019

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Conference Proceedings from the International Scientific Conference  
“Megatrends and Media: Digital Universe”, 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> April 2019,  
Congress Hall of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Smolenice, Slovakia.

**Editors:** Mgr. Zuzana Bučková, PhD.  
Mgr. Lenka Rusňáková, PhD.  
JUDr. PhDr. Martin Solík, PhD.

**Technical editing:** Mgr. Zuzana Bučková, PhD.  
Mgr. Lenka Rusňáková, PhD.

**Production:** Mgr. Zuzana Bučková, PhD.  
Mgr. Lenka Rusňáková, PhD.  
PhDr. Jana Radošinská, PhD.  
JUDr. PhDr. Martin Solík, PhD.

**Cover:** Mgr. Martin Klementis, PhD.

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*All submitted papers have been individually reviewed in an anonymous double-blind peer review process, on basis of which the editors have decided about their publication in the conference proceedings.*

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ISBN 978-80-572-0015-4

ISSN 2453-6474

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# STORYTELLING METHOD IN POPULAR SCIENCE JOURNALISM

*Svetlana Paniukova*

## **ABSTRACT:**

In this study, the storytelling method and its type - digital storytelling is considered. These are the classic techniques used in the media for a long time. In this case, we are investigating the use of digital storytelling in an atypical segment - Russian popular science journalism. At present, this media field is going through a stage of active development. Journalists and bloggers who have devoted themselves to the topic of science are looking for new formats and techniques for creating high-quality content for a mass audience. The research material is 38 videos of popular Russian channels "Utopia Show" and "Topless", published on YouTube video hosting. The analysis of these sources helps to conclude on the frequency of use of the digital storytelling method in modern popular science materials, to formulate its main functions and advantages of integration into the content.

## **KEY WORDS:**

digital storytelling, popular science blogging, popular science journalism, video blog, YouTube

## **1 Popular Science Journalism in Russia**

Today we can observe an increasing level of interest in scientific information from a mass audience, as a rule, of a rather young age, not directly related to the scientific world. The growing interest in the materials of the popular science format is confirmed in their work by Russian media researchers. For example, M. Litke<sup>1</sup> and S. Simakova.<sup>2</sup> There are several reasons for the popularization of scientific thematics in Russia in recent years. Firstly, this is the striving for the development of science in Russia, which is propagandized and financed at the state level. New research centers and laboratories are opening, organizations engaged in scientific and educational activities are being sponsored (for example, branches of the Atomic Energy Information Center in

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1 LITKE, M.: Epistemological and Communicative Attitudes of the Authors of the Magazine "Around The World". In *Vestnik Tomskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta, Filologiya*, 2013, Vol. 21, No. 5, p. 118.

2 SIMAKOVA, S.: Visual Content on the Page of the Magazine "Around The World" as a Means of Broadcasting Popular Science Information. In *Znak: Problemnoye pole media obrazovaniya*, 2016, Vol. 29, No. 4, p. 21.

many cities of the country organize free mass educational events). And although the level of development of science in Russia and some of the initiatives in this field are subject to criticism, it is necessary to note the qualitative, systematic work in this area. Secondly, it is a natural change in the anti-scientific trend that swallowed up the country in the 90s. Researcher A. Tertychnyi noted that the main danger for Russian science lies precisely in the replacement of critical thinking by pseudoscientific myths.<sup>3</sup> Gradually, this problem is overcome, and belief in paranormal forces (healing, conspiracies, evil eyes), global conspiracies (theories about flat earth and the dangers of vaccination) are replaced by scientific knowledge. Thirdly, scientific and educational activities become a platform for the self-fulfillment of creative, talented and active young personnel who want to change the lives of others for the better, but who do not have entry points to the political world. They actively implement their ideas in popular science work by developing new community projects. The influence of this factor in his public lectures was also noted by scientific popularizer G. Tarasevich, creator of the “Schrödinger’s Cat” publishing.

All the factors mentioned above suggest that in recent years the scientific sphere has ceased to be the prerogative of a highly educated part of society, it becomes interesting and accessible to a mass audience. It confirms the popularity of new educational projects, popular science media, resources and blogs (Open University, Schrödinger’s Cat, Gutenberg’s Smoking Room, TED, Post-Science, arzamas.academy, nplus1.ru). The audience of these projects requires transmission of specific knowledge from various scientific fields in a convenient form and in a modern language. At the same time it is necessary for the form of information presenting to be fascinating. The creator of popular science content must combine both entertainment and education. One of the techniques that helps to achieve such a combination of functions is use of the digital storytelling format. Both professional journalists and bloggers use it in their work.

## **2 Transformation of Storytelling to Digital Storytelling**

At the moment, there is no single generally accepted definition of the term “digital storytelling”. In this paper we will focus on the variant proposed by Alena Anyukhina: “this is a method of consistent presentation of

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3 TERTYCHNY, A.: Whether to be Popular Science Journalism. In *Vestnik VGU. Seriya: Filologiya. Zhurnalistika*, 2013, No. 2, p. 216-217.

history in the Internet space using all modern types of media”.<sup>4</sup> And although some researchers do not associate the emergence of this multimedia format with the development of computer technology, we believe that digital storytelling can only exist in the digital space. It should be noted that traditionally storytelling is a “narrative” communication – a “story” appealing to a myth or using mythological images and scenarios to solve any socially significant problem.<sup>5</sup> The scenario of the story can be presented as follows: introduction, description of the problem, its solution, conclusions. The necessary components are: the character, important changes, emotional intensity, reality and concreteness of the event (some facts). However, unlike the classic storytelling, digital allows authors to “tell” the story not only with the help of verbal means (text, speech), but also with modern visual, audio and audiovisual formats like video, podcasts, photos, illustrations, infographics, timelines, maps and other. It is important that these traditional and digital elements in aggregate complement each other and work to build a single story. Such a synthesis helps to keep the attention of readers for a longer time, because it makes it possible to change the types of information consumption. In addition, it helps to convey the details of the story more accurately and precisely, since the author chooses the most appropriate formats for the realization of various aspects of his story. For example, it is always easier to offer your reader a look at the map, rather than trying to verbally describe the location of an object or a route. It is not surprising that, for all its advantages described above, the digital storytelling method is often integrated into materials of a popular science nature.

### **3 Using the Digital Storytelling Method in Popular Science Video Blogs**

As part of this study, we paid attention to the most famous Russian-language popular science YouTube channels: “Utopia Show” and “Topless”. The YouTube video hosting platform was not chosen by chance. First of all, this is the most popular video platform in Russia, and representatives of the scientific world recognize its importance in the formation and maintenance of audience requests for entertainment and informational content. Secondly, this resource provides an opportunity

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4 ANYUKHINA, A.: The Phenomenon of Multimedia Longrid and Digital Storytelling in Online Media. In *Znak: Problemnoye pole media obrazovaniya*, 2017, Vol. 30, No. 2, p. 16.

5 FADEYEVA, O.: Storytelling as a Symbolic Information and Communication Technology. In *Politicheskaya lingvistika*, 2015, Vol. 4, No. 4, p. 151.

to implement the most non-standard ideas, since most of the popular content producers are not represented here by media industry professionals, but by amateur bloggers who have a fresh approach to this activity. Channels “Utopia Show” ([https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8M5YVWQan\\_3Elm-URehz9w](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8M5YVWQan_3Elm-URehz9w)) and “Topless” (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2Ru64PHqW4FxoP0xhQRvJg>) attracted our attention because they are the most popular (over two million subscribers on each channel) blogs of popular science topics. They cover various issues related to the fields of humanitarian and natural science knowledge. At the same time, the authors of the channel reject the utterly scientific nature of their content and inject entertainment elements into it: sketches, jokes, precedent texts, and so on. Also named bloggers are shooting content in different locations, depending on the topic, using graphics and chromakey. It helps to diversify the video, make it dynamic and make transitions between various semantic blocks of videos more smooth. Storytelling is one of the commonly used methods that implements two main functions on these channels (entertainment and education) at once. The format of the Internet video distributed in social networks and presence of the verbal and non-verbal component when telling a story allows us to designate this type of storytelling as digital. On both resources, the frequent use of the storytelling method was revealed regardless of the topic being discussed and the format of the video: the channels used this media in 34 out of 38 published works for 2018.

Let us consider an example of the use of digital storytelling on the Topless channel. In the video “Can I Erase Memory?” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHHmJjPnezU&t=151s>) dated November 6, 2018, the possibility of modern medicine, psychology and cybernetics to erase memories is explored. The host begins the video with a personal story from his childhood about the loss of his father, which he tells viewers while walking around the cemetery. Both the visuals and the words of the author act as an transition to the topic: with the help of an emotional story, the question is posed and its relevance is substantiated. Further, in addition to the disclosure of the main topic, there is a gradual development of the history stated at the beginning. The host returns to it and she concludes the video with it. His hero goes through different stages and comes to the acceptance and reflects on the power of memories in the formation of personality. Through this story, viewers do not get acquainted with the new factual scientific material on the topic, however, they get the opportunity to look at the situation

differently, become emotionally attached to the host, receive additional motivation to watch the video to the end to find out how it all ended. And also the personal history of the presenter acts as a clear example of the theoretical material described.

In the video clips of the Utopia Show video blog, most often several small digital stories appear during the release. Let us consider the “HIV / AIDS = CONSPIRACY?” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbVuM2GH7fY>) clip dated July 27, 2018, in which a conspiracy theory about these diseases non-existence is dispelled. In this video, the format of digital storytelling is used four times. Unlike the described example from the “Topless” channel, the stories here are not divided into several parts, they are told in one piece. However, they do not look so large-scale and fundamental to the concept of the video. Here, stories are more likely to act as an evidence or argument for the voiced scientific facts. The first story is based on the personal experience of the author and is placed at the beginning of the video. In this story blogger talks about how he learned about popular myths on the subject, believed in them, and then came to scientifically reasoned knowledge. In this case, the analyzed method is used to lead the viewer to the topic, to intrigue him, to establish a trusting relationship between the author and the audience. The second story is based on scientific sources and is intended to acquaint viewer with the origin of the virus, the emergence of HIV and AIDS. This element provides scientific information to the audience in an entertaining way. The third and fourth stories are based on the experiences of specific people. They demonstrate the negative consequences of treatment of HIV and AIDS refusing and visually illustrate the frightening statistics of deaths from these diseases, voiced by the author of the video. So, in this case, all the used digital stories are based on various sources, are accompanied by additional visual elements (photographs, video clips, infographics, scenery, music inserts) and perform several functions of an entertainment and educational shape. As we can see from these example, the reason for the popularity of storytelling among these bloggers lies in its broad functionality within the framework of popular science discourse.

The use of storytelling allows to solve several tasks at once: to provide high-quality translation of knowledge in an entertaining form, to form a trusting relationship between the host and the audience (if the “story” is based on the personal experiences of the host), to simplify understanding and memorizing the topic of the video, to give the opportunity for the viewer to compare theoretical knowledge with his everyday life

experience. We also found out that storytelling is mostly used at the beginning (as an intriguing approach to the topic or a demonstration of the usefulness of the material for the audience) or in the middle (as an explanation, proof or refutation of the voiced theses) of the analyzed videos. Among the main specific features of the popular science storytelling, the following can be singled out: intentional “simplification” of the story (its structure and volume of events), mostly playful or ironic tone, expressive narrative style (using slang language and common language) and sound.

## Conclusion

In his research, the Russian philologist A. V. Kolesnichenko said that even if the future of journalism is behind the storytelling, most likely, it will be impossible to achieve this in Russia only because of lack of resources.<sup>6</sup> There is not enough time for journalists to work on the visual component, to embed elements of storytelling into basic texts. After all, such quality work takes time, and most online media are not willing to sponsor such experiments and give them the necessary amount of effort and time. However, now we see that the digital storytelling method, on the contrary, has become actively used in Russia not only in its traditional fields, like advertising and PR for example, but also in non-typical fields, including popular science journalism. And this is done not only by large media, such as PostScience or the Internet portal oLogy.sh, but also by amateurs. Without having special professional resources, they not only find and process theoretical material, but also integrate interactive and entertaining elements into it. And although we are used to the fact that journalists writing about science more often appeal to rational thinking of the audience and give priority to educational rather than entertainment functions, now it is increasingly possible to see the synthesis of these elements in the materials of popular science media. It can be concluded that recently, digital stories are more and more often successfully integrated into popular science content through the fusion of traditional and multimedia technologies. This allows you to visually and attractively show information that the reader could previously visualize only through their own imagination. Perhaps that is why this format is so convincing and emotionally attractive for a modern audience, which is more familiar

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6 KOLESNICHENKO, A.: Long Texts (Longreads) in the Modern Russian Press. In *Mediascope*, 2015, No. 1, p. N/A. [online]. [2019-04-05]. Available at: <<http://www.mediascope.ru/1691>>.

and more comfortable to visually perceive information. The extensive capabilities of digital history make it possible to use it for information and entertainment purposes, as well as a powerful educational tool that can facilitate the process of learning or the formation of general scientific knowledge.

**Acknowledgement:**

*Prepared by Svetlana Paniukova article, was written with the support of RSF, 18-18-00007.*

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**Contact data:**

Svetlana Paniukova  
Chelyabinsk State University  
Faculty of Journalism  
Pobedy ave. 162B  
454 084 Chelyabinsk  
RUSSIA  
s.panukowa@mail.ru