

CLWSTWR POLICY BRIEF NO 2

# **JOURNALISM QUO VADIS? NEW WAYS OF STORYTELLING**

FINDINGS FROM A CLWSTWR PROJECT ON STORYTELLING IN ONLINE NEWS

Shirish Kulkarni, Richard Thomas,  
Marlen Komorowski & Justin Lewis  
February 2021

## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report is part of the Clwstwr programme, a five-year project that aims to put innovation at the core of media production in South Wales - moving Cardiff's thriving screen sector from strength to leadership. Clwstwr wants to build on South Wales' success in making creative content by putting research and development (R&D) at the core of production.

For further information please contact:

**CLWSTWR**

City Hall  
Cathays Park  
Cardiff CF10 3ND.  
Phone: 02922 511434  
Email: [clwstwrcreadigol@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:clwstwrcreadigol@cardiff.ac.uk)  
Twitter: @ClwstwrCreu  
[www.clwstwr.org.uk](http://www.clwstwr.org.uk)

# SUMMARY

---

MAINSTREAM JOURNALISM IS IN THE MIDST OF AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS WHICH THREATENS NEWSROOMS, MEDIA ORGANISATIONS AND, BY EXTENSION, THE NATURE AND QUALITY OF INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO CITIZENS. THIS POLICY BRIEF INVESTIGATES HOW CREATING NEW FORMS OF STORYTELLING MIGHT INSPIRE JOURNALISM THAT IS FIT FOR THE FUTURE.

This Policy Brief is built on the findings of a Clwstwr funded project, drawing on data collected from focus groups, the development of innovative prototypes and extensive user testing of over a thousand audience members. We find that by focusing on content that is genuinely useful to readers and viewers, using linear narratives, providing broader context, and giving users more agency in how they engage with stories, it is clearly possible to provide news which is trusted, informative and engages audiences from all demographics. This Policy Brief introduces seven building blocks of reflective journalism and suggests multiple new ways of narrative storytelling that point the way to more effective forms of news.

Note: This Policy Brief is a pre-publish version of an academic article that is under review for publication.

## Introduction to the Policy Brief

### Journalism in crisis and need of change?

Mainstream journalism is in the midst of a multi-layered crisis which threatens newsrooms, media organisations and, by extension, the nature and quality of the information available to citizens in the future.

On one hand, *technological developments have clearly created new challenges for journalism*. People increasingly access news via online platforms rather than print, radio or television. This is especially true of younger audiences – 16-24 year-olds – who are now significantly more likely to use the internet for news than TV<sup>1</sup>. The drift of both readers and advertisers to online sources (where advertising revenues are much lower) has decreased the revenues needed for quality news production. This has led to the widespread closure of local news outlets, fewer journalists producing more content and an increasing dependence on news agencies, advertorials and PR.<sup>2</sup>

This trend sits alongside a decline in *trust in mainstream news organisations – even though the need for authoritative public service news has never been greater*. In the UK, just 28% of people say they can trust most news most of the time, and only 39% of people trust the news they use<sup>3</sup>. This is a reflection of (as well as often being driven by) changes in the global political landscape and public discourse.

The lack of trust in traditional media creates a form of relativism, in which all information sources – regardless of their provenance - are regarded as equivalent. Barriers to entry are significantly lower than they once were, leading to a significantly more fragmented market and equally fragmented notions of quality. A well-researched piece of journalism may be seen as having equal status with an unfounded statement of questionable origin.

Thirdly, the questioning which followed the Black Lives Matter movement has led, at least in some circles, to a tentative acknowledgement that *the industry*

---

<sup>1</sup> See: [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0013/201316/news-consumption-2020-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0013/201316/news-consumption-2020-report.pdf) Figure 2.3

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14616700701767974>

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/united-kingdom-2020/>

*has systematically failed to reflect, understand and represent the diversity of the population* across not just race, but also gender, class, disability, sexuality and geography. One reason is that the industry itself is not diverse<sup>4</sup>, and this has meant that a particular world view (largely white, male, and increasingly privately educated<sup>5</sup>) has dominated editorial decision making and storytelling, driving which stories are prioritised and how they are told.

The general problem is simply stated – too often the *wrong stories are being told, in the wrong way, by the wrong people*. In these circumstances, many citizens often don't feel their needs are being met by news journalism, prompting them to ignore it or seek out alternatives, whether different sources or on different platforms.

Journalism's response has, in general, been to look at technological fixes rather than considering broader cultural and systemic questions about the nature and purpose of news. Journalism tends to rely on 'instinctive' notions - based on long-standing traditions - to inform editorial decisions. Innovation in *journalism has often met the needs and interests of journalists, rather than audiences* (in anything other than a superficial sense). The problems described here are deep-rooted and serious, and it may be that much more radical change is required – obliging us to examine the fundamentals of what news is and who it is for.

THE AIM OF THIS POLICY BRIEF IS TO SUGGEST BUILDING BLOCKS FOR NEW MODELS OF JOURNALISM, AND PRESENT RESEARCH INTO NEW WAYS TO PRESENT NEWS STORIES. IN TURN, WE AIM TO POINT THE WAY TOWARDS NEW FORMS OF STORYTELLING THAT ARE BOTH ENGAGING AND GENUINELY INFORMATIVE.

---

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://womeninjournalism.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Press-Release-WIJ-2020-research.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> See: [https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Leading-People\\_Feb16.pdf](https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Leading-People_Feb16.pdf)

---

## The confines of traditional journalism

The formulaic approach to news journalism is exemplified in the so-called “*inverted pyramid*” structure, a system of news writing that arranges facts in descending order of importance (see figure). As the cornerstone of journalism, the inverted pyramid is still the predominant way of writing “hard news” stories.<sup>6</sup>



Some earlier forms of journalism were delivered in the same way as for example fairy tales — starting at the beginning, “Once upon a time...” and proceeding to a satisfactory ending. *The introduction of the inverted pyramid style was, in part, a response to technological and practical issues in news dissemination during the growth of newspapers in the 19th century.* It

served both readers and editors – readers could skim articles, capturing the key elements of a story in the first few lines, while the lack of linear narrative allowed editors to cut easily from the bottom up, secure in the knowledge that the article would still make sense. Technologies like the telegraph created a similar imperative to make sure key information was prioritised.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the new forms of news dissemination developed in the last century – radio, TV and online – this tradition remained in place. The formidable presence of tradition is inscribed in the language we use – so, for example, we still describe news agencies like Associated Press or Reuters as “wire services”. The unspoken assumption that this is the most effective and engaging way to communicate information is rarely questioned. If the inverted pyramid style was a response to a fundamental change in forms of dissemination, its utility in broadcast news is less tangible, *while the technical,*

---

<sup>6</sup> See: Norambuena, B. K., Horning, M., & Mitra, T. (2020). Evaluating the Inverted Pyramid Structure through Automatic 5W1H Extraction and Summarization. 1–7.

<sup>7</sup> See Pöttker, H. (2003). News and its communicative quality: The inverted pyramid—When and why did it appear? *Journalism Studies*, 4(4), 501–511.

*social and cultural transformations of online communication create opportunities to imagine new forms of news.*

#### Methodological note

This Policy Brief is based on findings from the [Clwstwr research project “News Storytelling through Modular Journalism”](#) conducted in 2020. The authors of this report used a two-stage mixed-methods approach. First, qualitative data from a series of workshops and stakeholder consultations was gathered to develop a number of principles that might support a more user-focussed approach to online news storytelling. These were developed into a series of new “prototypes” of online storytelling for news. The general appeal and usefulness of these prototypes were then analysed using large-scale audience testing (N=1268) comparing the new developed prototypes to the traditional pyramid style of news. Contact us via [clwstwrcreadigol@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:clwstwrcreadigol@cardiff.ac.uk) to find out more about the methodology.

## Journalism quo vadis?

### New building blocks of reflective journalism for the future

One way to overcome the current challenges facing journalism is to adapt and change the way the news is told. We synthesised the first stage of our research into *seven building blocks for reflective journalism*. “Reflective” because we believe that they represent a thoughtful, considered and purposeful approach to news journalism, and also because the aim is to better *reflect* the reality of life of readers, rather than being simply a reflection of industry norms:

**(1) NARRATIVE:** This overarching principle represents both the simplest and most radical suggestion for change. The inverted pyramid structure is not effective in inspiring engagement or interest for a number of reasons. At a basic level, presenting key information in the headline or top two or three paragraphs is an incentive to skim, rather get engaged in a story. More importantly, the inverted pyramid conflicts with the way we are conditioned - at a neuroscientific and anthropological level - to understand and follow stories. Developing more linear narrative forms – used in most other forms of storytelling - may be more engaging and more informative.

**(2) CONTENT:** Traditional ideas around what news content is useful or informative are largely driven by habit and convention, rather than an analysis or interest in information that citizens might find useful for understanding the world. For example, reporting of individual ‘newsworthy’ crimes is seen as a basic part of news, although research repeatedly tells us that this *works against* an understanding about the world of crime or levels of risk. Similarly, we define “better off” solely in individual monetary terms when we discuss economic decisions, rather than looking at broader social impacts. A more thoughtful and purposeful approach to what constitutes news or useful information may yield interesting answers about what different approaches to journalism might look like.

**(3) CONTEXT:** A running theme raised during our research was the demand for news to provide greater context in news coverage. Mainstream news tends to prioritise breaking or “moving” news, but often to the detriment of context, analysis or understanding. We are rarely given a sense of *why* a story matters or *where* it fits into a larger context. Most news stories contain significant assumptions about audience knowledge and understanding which is, for many, a barrier to engagement. The focus on breaking news – or, indeed, big ongoing news stories that assumed prior knowledge - felt confusing to audiences who didn’t read the news every day, and who found it hard to find a comprehensible entry point.

**(4) AGENCY:** News consumers and storytelling experts told us that agency was important on both the input and output sides of news coverage. Storytellers spoke about how they work to leverage our inbuilt sense of curiosity to drive story



engagement and memorability. Journalists could use similar techniques to enable users to express their curiosity and engage more actively with stories.

**(5) TONE:** One of the key findings from a workshop we carried out with young people was that the voice that traditional news media uses to communicate is seen as “old-fashioned” and “formulaic”. This chimes with the Reuters Digital News Report (2019) which found that just 16% of users worldwide agreed that “the news media uses the right tone”<sup>8</sup>. Journalists need to find a more appropriate way of talking to news consumers more suitable for modern forms of consumption, rather than leaning on habits drawn from newspaper writing.

**(6) DIVERSITY:** Innovation in storytelling isn’t just about telling stories differently, it’s about telling different stories. To get those stories, journalists need to listen to different perspectives and reflect them in their accounts of the world. This is not about a glorified set of vox pops: journalism has to be about reflecting and amplifying a diversity of experiences. As a simple example, less than half of the UK’s “national” broadcasters have a correspondent based in Wales, and even fewer of the “national” newspapers have one.<sup>9</sup> This says out loud that Wales and the Welsh are not important to them, yet they still expect people in Wales to trust and engage with them.

**(7) TRANSPARENCY:** To address the existential problem of trust, journalists need to be transparent about what they’re reporting, how they’re getting the information and acknowledge gaps in knowledge where they exist. Without that explicit transparency there is always space for bad actors to fill in gaps and see or suggest conspiracy where there is none.

AT THE CORE OF EACH OF THESE PRINCIPLES ARE *THE NEEDS OF NEWS CONSUMERS*. THESE PRINCIPLES ENCOURAGE JOURNALISTS TO TAKE A MORE CONSIDERED AND LESS FORMULAIC APPROACH TO WHAT CONSTITUTES “CONTENT”. THIS OPENS UP OPPORTUNITIES TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE FLEXIBILITY AND SCALABILITY THAT ONLINE JOURNALISM ENABLES, AND TO INNOVATE MORE DIRECTLY IN THE INTERESTS OF CITIZENS.

---

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/what-do-people-think-about-the-news-media/>

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/nationals-not-covering-news-in-wales-new-report-claims/>

## Online news storytelling prototypes

We used these seven building blocks to create a series of different prototypes for news storytelling. Each of the prototypes used a linear narrative style and addressed the question of content with a user-focussed “what do I need to know?” approach.

**(A) NARRATIVE ACCORDION:** This prototype allowed audiences to make choices about how to read the story. It tells the story in a linear narrative but separated by expanding and collapsing questions. The user can choose to read these questions from start to finish, working through the narrative in a straightforward, linear way. However, they can also choose to go through the questions in whichever order they like.

### What is HS2 and why has it been so controversial?



What is HS2?

Why is our rail network struggling?

How could HS2 help?

The idea is that HS2 will create more space on the network. That extra space is actually more important than the speed of High Speed 2. Express trains between the big cities will run on HS2, leaving more room for commuter and freight trains on the lines we already have.

In an ideal world, that extra space should mean that standard trains run more often,

**(B) PLAIN TEXT DRAMATIC:** This story was designed to directly test the value of linear narrative style - as opposed to the inverted pyramid. It's written in plain text, using a traditional three-act narrative structure of the kind you might read in a novel or see on stage. This was designed to pull the reader through the story in a linear narrative style, but with a sense of “character”, “dilemma” and “resolution”.

### What is HS2 and why has it been so controversial?



HS2 stands for High Speed 2. It's the name of the new high speed rail line that will run between London and Birmingham, and then on to Manchester and Leeds.

Why is it called HS2? It's actually the UK's second high speed rail line. High Speed 1 is the line from London to the Channel Tunnel, which opened back in 2007.

Most of our rail network was built more than 100 years ago, and so it's not really up to providing the services we need now. Every year, planes it's overcrowded, and there are long waiting delays and cancellations.

The idea is that HS2 will create more space on the network. That extra space is actually more important than the speed of High Speed 2. Express trains between the big cities will run on HS2, leaving more room for commuter and freight trains on the

**(C) INFORMAL VIDEO:** This video was designed to test responses to an informal and more playful tone, to see how this affected engagement, knowledge transfer and information retention. Using a treatment drawn from the style of programmes like The Daily Show, or Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj, the video tells the story in a systematic but playful way and is designed to be watched from start to finish.

### What's up with HS2?



England's getting a new high speed rail line. It's been really controversial. We'll see how we solve the problems on the rail network, or will it take too long and be too expensive? Will it be good for the environment? What will the line be like? Hasan Minhaj's got the answers to these questions and more right here.

**(D) CONTEXTUAL TIMELINE:** This format was designed to focus on placing the story in context. The story aimed to deprioritise the “on the day” event, opting instead for a much broader longitudinal view, giving the user far more entry points. The timeline looks forwards as well as backwards, giving users a sense of what might happen next as well as what's already happened.

**What is HS2?**

HS2 stands for High Speed 2. It's the name of the new high speed rail line that will run between London and Birmingham, and then on to Manchester and Leeds.

Why is it called HS2? It's actually the UK's second high speed rail line. High Speed 1 is the line from London to the Channel Tunnel, which opened back in 2007.

Most of our rail network was built more than 100 years ago, and so it's not really up to providing the services we need now. Every year, planes it's overcrowded, and there are long waiting delays and cancellations.

The idea is that HS2 will create more space on the network. That extra space is actually more important than the speed of High Speed 2. Express trains between the big cities will run on HS2, leaving more room for commuter and freight trains on the

**HS2 to go ahead**

After three years of planning, the government has decided to go ahead with the HS2 project. The government will be spending billions of pounds on the project. The project will be completed in 2025.

**HS2 to go ahead**

After three years of planning, the government has decided to go ahead with the HS2 project. The government will be spending billions of pounds on the project. The project will be completed in 2025.

Our prototypes also attempted to provide a broader contextual approach, giving less weight to events on a particular day and more emphasis on the bigger picture. Three of the four prototypes enabled the user to choose how they consumed the story and navigated the content. The inflections of tone are difficult to isolate or categorise, but the overall approach was to write the stories simply and clearly, limiting the use of journalese and avoiding too many in-built assumptions.

## CASE STUDY

The prototypes all addressed the same story - the government's decision to go ahead with the development of the HS2 high-speed rail link announced on 11th February 2020 (see figure)<sup>10</sup>. As a story with a broad context and a wide-ranging impact that had developed over time, it was well suited for this exercise. *The prototypes were tested against each other, but also against the original BBC News article which we used as an example of the standard approach to news writing* (and which was similar to approaches taken by ITV News or Sky News).

We recruited 1,204 people (see table 1) to view the prototypes – a sample was split into five groups (with similar demographic profiles) to view each prototype, with a control group viewing the BBC version. *We asked questions before and afterwards to see what they had learned* (enabling us to see the extent to which the story added to people's levels of understanding) and to assess the news items against a number of measures. Each participant self-assessed their levels of knowledge about news in general on a 10 point scale – as table 1 shows, overall levels of confidence tends to increase with age.



<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-51461597>

Table 1: Survey respondents demographics and breakdown of self-assessment of how informed participants rated themselves.

Age range	Under 24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	Total answering question
Age distribution	23.5% (250)	35.5% (378)	22.2% (236)	10.8% (115)	8.0% (85)	100.0 % (1064)
Average age of respondents	20.9	29.1	38.9	49.5	61.8	34.1
How well informed do you feel about news?	6.34	6.48	6.83	6.84	7.26	6.63 (1204)

# Where could or should journalism be going?

WE FOUND THAT INNOVATIVE LINEAR FORMS OF STORYTELLING - RARELY USED IN NEWS - ARE BOTH MORE EFFECTIVE IN TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE AND SEEN AS MORE ENGAGING, CONVENIENT AND USEFUL THAN THE TRADITIONAL NEWS STRUCTURES.

## Our findings

Before testing our prototypes, we were mindful of the scale of the challenge. Our experimental prototypes not only upset audience assumptions but were going up against the UK's most popular and respected news provider. We were, in this context, struck by how effective some of the prototypes (one in particular) were in providing *more information, in a shorter time, in ways that were more engaging and enjoyable than the BBC version*. Some of these responses were particularly strong in younger audiences (clearly a key focus for news organisations) but were broadly positive across all demographics – pointing to some universal solutions. *There are clear advantages to writing linear, rather than inverted pyramid-style narratives*. The findings about the value of the new prototypes are summarised in table 2.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Note: The N on the tables in this report varies. This is because not all participants answered all questions. The subsequent percentages are therefore calculated based on the number of people who actually answered the questions, and the N is indicated for each table.

Table 2: The "value added" provided by each prototype.

552 participants answered both questions					
N	BBC version	(a) Narrative Accordion	(b) Plain Text Dramatic	(c) Informal Video	(d) Contextual Timeline
Under 24	2.65	3.85	2.54	2.32	1.62
25-34	2.20	3.41	2.72	1.63	1.72
35-44	2.32	2.53	1.99	1.74	1.65
45-54	2.48	2.00	2.25	2.08	1.48
55+	2.18	3.10	1.12	0.99	2.29
Average	<b>2.38</b>	<b>2.96</b>	<b>2.23</b>	<b>1.84</b>	<b>1.48</b>

For example, when we asked our respondents how much more informed they felt after reading or viewing our prototypes, *the Narrative Accordion format provided 24.3% more added value for readers than the BBC version* (2.96 value added rating versus 2.38). This was especially true for the under-24 age group, for whom the *Narrative Accordion provided 45.2% more added value than the BBC version* (3.85 v 2.65). By this measure, it was clearly the best performing prototype and had a particular appeal and value for younger audiences.

Table 2 also shows some fairly age-specific responses. The over 55 age group for example, were notable in finding the informal video unhelpful while being the most appreciative of the contextual timeline prototype.

However informative an article is when people are asked to view it, it is unlikely to be read/viewed if people don't find it appealing. We therefore asked participants a series of questions on their affective responses – how interesting the prototypes were, how enjoyable, useful, and so on. Combining those results *we found that the Narrative Accordion was by far the most successful text-based story overall, scoring twice as many points as the closest text-based alternative.*

Respondents ranked the Plain Text Dramatic prototype highly for being “interesting” and “enjoyable”, with users responding positively to its use of language. It was also regarded as the *most* informative, users reporting that it increased their confidence about and understanding of the subject. Given that these are clearly key goals for journalism, it's worth noting that the “innovation” in this story is simply that it's a straightforward, linear narrative. The fact that it meets user needs so squarely, with little other editorial or technical intervention, is especially striking.

The Informal Video also did well overall, in terms of how engaging, interesting and relatable it was perceived to be. For users who prefer to consume their news visually, it had the advantage of being the only video-based prototype, although this medium requires more editorial and technical resource. The Contextual Timeline performed well on the questions around layout, format and navigation but (perhaps because it's designed for a very specific

purpose) was less successful on other measures such as being “engaging”, “useful”, or “relatable”. It may be more useful as a format that could be a useful complement to other types of content.

While the original (BBC News) article scored positively on some measures – (scoring highest on its visuals for example) in most areas it was consistently outscored by the more successful prototypes – notably the Narrative Accordion. It was *perceived to be less interesting and less enjoyable than any of the prototypes, with users also expressing low scores for both language and navigation*. More detailed findings are shown in table 3.

**Table 3: Summary of participants impressions about the prototypes and numerical synthesis of the findings.**

	BBC version	(a) Narrative Accordion	(b) Plain Text Dramatic	(c) Informal Video	(d) Contextual Timeline
Most INTERESTING		TOP	3rd	2nd	
Most ENJOYABLE		2nd	3rd	TOP	
Most EMPOWERING <sup>12</sup>	TOP	3rd		2nd	
Most USEFUL	2nd	TOP		3rd	
Most RELATABLE	3rd	=TOP		=TOP	
Rated LANGUAGE		TOP	3rd	2nd	
Rated LAYOUT	3rd	TOP			2nd
Rated TONE		2nd		TOP	
Rated FORMAT	3rd	TOP			2nd
Rated NAVIGATION		TOP	3rd		2nd
Rated VISUAL	TOP			2nd	3rd
How ENGAGING (in comparison)		3rd	2nd	TOP	
How INFORMATIVE (in comparison)		3rd	TOP	2nd	
How INTERESTING (in comparison)		2nd	3rd	TOP	
How RELATABLE (in comparison)		2nd	3rd	TOP	
How USEFUL (in comparison)		TOP		2nd	3rd
How FRIENDLY (in comparison)		2nd	3rd	TOP	
Increased sense of how affects decisions		3rd	2nd	TOP	
Increased ability to take part in a debate	2nd		3rd	TOP	
Increased understanding problems with current network		3rd	TOP	2nd	
Increased confidence in discussing with friends/family	2nd	TOP	3rd		
Increased confidence in understanding the impact	2nd	TOP		3rd	
Increased confidence in being able to decide if it's good or bad	3rd		TOP	2nd	
<b>OVERALL SCORE</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>8</b>

Note: Scores shown in the table are based on questions asked participants (e.g. how interesting did you find the article?) to rate these dimensions from “Excellent” to “Below average” (most interesting, enjoyable, etc.), or the degree to which they agreed with statements (e.g. is the article more engaging than news sources currently available for you?) about them (how engaging, how informative, etc.). In all, there were 23 such “rating” categories. In order to make sense of the results, we have combined the summarised data into table 4. We analysed the scores for each prototype and focused on the top three rated prototypes in each category.

<sup>12</sup> This result is so out of sync with the others (the same version was seen as the *least* informative or useful, for example), that it suggests that people may have not have understood the meaning of ‘empowering’ (perhaps associated the classic BBC version with those in power).

One of the arguments made against providing more context and narrative in news is that it takes too much time and space. Our prototypes demonstrate that this is fallacy. In fact, the BBC version *took the audience the longest time to consume*, with 60% of survey respondents taking more than 3 minutes to read it. In contrast the Contextual Timeline and the Narrative Accordion prototypes were consumed much more quickly (only 30% and 47% of readers took more than 3 minutes). This explodes the argument that the inverted pyramid style is an effective use of the limited amount of time given to most stories. The findings are summarised in table 4.

**Table 4: Breakdown of how long readers took over each prototype.**

N	1035				
	BBC version	(a) Narrative Accordion	(b) Plain Text Dramatic	(c) Informal Video	(d) Contextual Timeline
Less than 1 min	0.9	1.5	0.8	0.7	4.3
1-2 mins	12.5	19.1	9.6	2.5	33.6
2-3 mins	26.3	32.8	29.7	11.7	32.1
3-4 mins	31.9	34.8	31.7	73.5	22.1
5+ mins	28.4	12.2	28.1	11.7	7.9
% taking more than 3 minutes	60.3	47.0	59.8	85.2	30.0
Total	100.0* (232)	100.0* (131)	100.0* (249)	100.0* (283)	100.0* (140)

Indeed, once we took stories back to their key informational components, we found that that the *clumsiness of the inverted pyramid actually impedes effective and economical storytelling*. We also found that a focus on politicians – often regarded by journalists as injecting drama into a story – takes up time and space in a way that most audiences find neither interesting nor informative.

IN SUMMARY, THE DEVELOPMENT AND TESTING OF OUR PROTOTYPES POINTS THE WAY TOWARDS NEW FORMS OF NEWS THAT ARE NOT ONLY MORE LIKELY TO MEET THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF INFORMING THE PUBLIC, BUT IN WAYS THAT ARE MORE INTERESTING AND ENGAGING. THE NARRATIVE ACCORDION APPROACH, IN PARTICULAR –COMMUNICATED MORE INFORMATION IN LESS TIME, AND SCORED CONSISTENTLY WELL ACROSS NEARLY ALL MEASURES.

### Final thoughts

*It's clear that journalism needs to find answers to the deeply rooted problems that afflict the industry.* Our findings indicate that the place to begin to address existential issues is to use storytelling techniques that prioritise citizens' needs. By focussing on content that is genuinely useful to readers and viewers, replacing the inverted pyramid structure with a linear narrative, providing broader context, writing more relatable and transparently, giving users more agency in how they engage with stories and by better reflecting

the diversity of the readers, it is clearly possible to provide news which is trusted, informative and engages audiences from all demographics.

*Our findings challenge the perceived wisdom – and long-established journalistic principle – that the inverted pyramid model of news storytelling is the most efficient way to deliver news.* Even though the BBC was, by some distance, the top news choice for our respondents<sup>13</sup>, the BBC version performed poorly overall. Even in the brief time available to craft new forms of storytelling, some of our prototypes – especially the Narrative Accordion – performed *significantly* better than the classic, tried and tested inverted pyramid version – providing more information in less time. *These findings establish a strong empirical and theoretical case for adopting alternative formats for efficiently delivering both online and broadcast news.*

In a dynamic and uncertain media and political landscape – where old certainties no longer hold true – journalism can no longer cling to old habits and formulas. The industry has to be much more open to storytelling innovation which goes beyond merely tinkering at the edges of formats. *Indeed, our research suggests that it is innovation in forms of storytelling (rather than technology) that makes online news more engaging, convenient and useful.*

To date, journalism innovation has often focused solely on the “format” or the medium, without questioning the underlying nature of its journalism. This research began by asking more fundamental questions about the structure and purpose of news. *This more fundamental approach to innovation requires a deep change of journalistic mindset.* The potential rewards are, much greater than anything that might be achieved by tinkering with formats or superficial approaches to technological change.

This is not to say that technological innovation has no role to play. So, for example, the BBC’s development of ‘modular journalism’ - breaking stories down into key informational components – is well suited to the development of new forms of storytelling. It is also possible to imagine artificial intelligence

---

<sup>13</sup> See also: <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-bbc-emerges-as-the-uks-clear-favourite-information-source-in-new-audience-survey-141808>



playing a useful role in this development. Our research shows the benefits of thinking about the fundamentals of news storytelling differently. *We have no doubt that these prototypes could be developed to further increase levels of understanding and engagement. The status quo, by contrast, will only perpetuate a story of decline in the trust, efficacy and impact of public interest journalism.*



## Research team

Shirish Kulkarni

Monnow Media Ltd, Clwstwr funded project lead - [shirish@monnowmedia.com](mailto:shirish@monnowmedia.com)

Dr. Richard Thomas

Department of Media and Communications,  
Swansea University

Dr. Marlen Komorowski

Impact Analyst, Cardiff University & Senior  
Researcher, imec-SMIT-VUB -  
[komorowskim@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:komorowskim@cardiff.ac.uk)

Prof. Dr. Justin Lewis

Clwstwr Director & Professor of  
Communication & Creative Industries, Cardiff  
University

## Acknowledgement

This publication was produced with the financial support of the AHRC and the Welsh Government. Its content is the sole responsibility of the authors.

© 2020 Clwstwr, a programme at Cardiff University. All rights reserved.

## Suggested citation

Kulkarni, S., Thomas, R., Komorowski, M. and Lewis, J. (2021). Clwstwr policy brief no 2 - Journalism Quo Vadis? New Ways of Storytelling. Clwstwr publication series, Cardiff, Clwstwr.