

The Evolution Of Storytelling In Modern Culture

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Abstract

Culture is inherently oral in its roots, handed down and evolved through word of mouth. It is an inherent tendency of human beings to retell and to narrate experiences, foster tradition, customs and practices to future generations in order to retain culture. Traced back to pre-historic periods, storytelling, or the art of narrating stories, experiences and customs has been rooted at the earliest pinnacles of human civilization. However, due to its non-generic nature, the art and practice of narration and retelling of stories has been highly fluid, developing and evolving with each new advancement in mannerisms, cultural evolution as well as technological innovation. As the evolution of storytelling is explored, emphasizing its transformation in the modern digital age, despite the rise of written and digital media, oral traditions persist, adapting to new platforms such as podcasts, audiobooks, and social media. Digital storytelling has democratized the art, enabling cross-cultural exchanges and empowering marginalized voices. While Cultural Studies provide insights into storytelling's ideological and societal roles, showing how narratives reflect and shape cultural identities and power structures, modern storytelling incorporates hypertextuality and participatory culture, enabling audiences to co-create and reshape narratives.

Introduction

It is a continuing tradition for a majority of world communities to rely upon the tradition of oral narration to preserve histories, beliefs and traditions, customs and values in the absence or predating the invention of the written word. Oral narration, an ancient practice where stories are passed on from one individual to another by word of mouth has been a crucial medium employed by many communities and societies as a crucial component to convey moral lessons, religious discourse and societal norms, especially in cultures where written language was limited or non-existent. It has been deeply woven into the fabric of human culture, interwoven with human civilization from its earliest beginnings. Folklore scholar, Jan Vansina observes upon the continuing practice of oral dissemination by saying that “Oral traditions are a testimony of the past and carry the weight of generations. They serve as the voice of ancestors, linking the present to a time before memory” (Vansina 12).

A derivative of oral tradition is the constructing or fabrication of stories known as storytelling. An important highlight of this paper therefore, is upon the definitive “telling” aspect which emphasizes upon its general oral nature as opposed to the written word. Before the invention of the written word or literacy, orality had been the key factor of communication as well as dissemination of community and folk tradition. Narration or narratives both for education or entertainment, of which storytelling is a definitive factor, predates the written word. In many indigenous and pre-literate societies, oral storytelling was not only a form of entertainment, but also a powerful educational tool. Elders and community leaders used oral narratives to pass down important knowledge and lore about their society, culture, history, and spirituality both through instruction and through entertainment. This practice is highly definitive in creating a shared communal experience where stories – fabricated or factual were adapted over time, shaped and shared by both narrators and listening audience alike. Mikhail Bakhtin stresses through his introduction of the concept of dialogism that the storyteller's perspective and historical context are inter-related by stating how two temporalities, the historical or chronological time, and the storyteller's construction of time are both essential in shaping narratives, highlighting the interplay between the storyteller's perspective and the historical context (255). Unlike written stories which are fixed once transcribed, oral stories are more fluid and allow for adjustments in response to the needs of the audience, and accordingly, storytelling is not just a cultural artifact but a fundamental mode of human thought, where narratives help individuals make sense of the world and interpret human actions and intentions (Bruner 340). In storytelling, oral narratives can, besides performing the role of factual interpretation, also take the form of fictional fabricated narratives often told for entertainment, amusement, instructions, warnings or precautions. The UNESCO has highlighted the variety and versatility of this medium by stating that “the oral traditions and expressions domain encompasses an enormous variety of spoken forms including proverbs, riddles, tales, nursery rhymes, legends, myths, epic songs and poems, charms, prayers, chants, songs, dramatic performances and more. Oral traditions and expressions are used to pass on knowledge, cultural and social values and collective memory. They play a crucial part in keeping cultures alive.” (UNESCO 1).

Therefore, storytelling, from its earliest oral origins, was a vital tool for community cohesion as well as for retention of culture through not only education, but also through entertainment. Walter Fisher stresses upon the universality of the medium of storytelling through this statement, that “All forms of human communication need to be seen fundamentally as stories, as interpretations of the world, occurring within social context” (58). In the case of Indigenous people in a global scale, many tribes' oral traditions use storytellers who play a key role in preserving historical narratives and genealogies. It is through such stories, that history of ancient empires and culture have emerged long before written histories. (Conrad 12). Through these emergences, factual findings are derived where oral storytelling has played a key role in ancient civilizations.

An important example is how the Greek epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are believed to have been part of an oral tradition before being transcribed by Homer. These epics, apart from narrating definitive stories which may be fact or fiction, also convey heroic values and societal ideals, serving as both entertainment and instruction for the audience (Nagy 9). However, equal importance must be paid upon translation of narratives and determining between interpretation which can determine meaning, for which the role of the storyteller is of equal importance.

Cultural studies emphasize upon how storytelling is deeply embedded within the cultural context. Through representational narratives, meaning is given to things depicted (Hall 15) emphasizing that storytelling involves both reflecting and constructing cultural meanings within specific contexts. This is an encapsulation on the importance of storytelling in the formation and evolution of cultural identities, which are constantly shaped by societal shifts. In the same way, storytelling can also function as a vehicle for ideology because of the capacity of the narratives in carrying messages which may reinforce, or question existing social structures. By analyzing stories, cultural studies examine how ideologies are naturalized in societies through repeated narrative patterns and representations. Stuart Hall argues that "the media's representations can make the constructed meanings they offer seem 'natural,' inevitable, even neutral" (Hall 74). This underscores how stories can embed ideological frameworks, making power relations appear normal or unchallenged. In the modern, globalized world, storytelling is increasingly cross-cultural. This is particularly relevant in cultural studies, as the theory investigates how stories from different parts of the world intersect, influencing and reshaping each other in a global cultural marketplace. This exchange can result in hybrid narratives that blend elements from various cultural traditions or reinforce Western cultural hegemony. Hall also discusses this globalization of culture, noting that "what we see in the world today is not cultural homogenization but a new form of 'global postmodern' where identities are being re-constructed, contested, and negotiated through cross-cultural interactions" (Hall 79). In this view, modern storytelling is shaped by the diverse interactions of global cultures, which both challenge and enrich traditional narrative forms.

In the modern age of digital advancement and technological innovations, oral storytelling has, instead of receding to make way for new technological novelties; still continued to play a pivotal role in the preservation of culture and tradition. As UNESCO also underscores; "Oral traditions are still very much alive in the 21st century, and they form part of the intangible cultural heritage of many societies" (1). These may be through interactive or broadcast of audio that recount personal histories, or virtual reality experiences and role playing that immerse participants in narrative worlds; or even interactive videos and games that engage players in story-driven action. This endurance of tradition not only preserves the past, but it also adapts to the present, demonstrating its lasting impact on culture and society. The UNESCO further states that oral traditions are the "vehicles by which knowledge, cultural and social values and collective memory are conveyed and preserved. These stories often reflect communal knowledge and experience, embodying the values, customs, and traditions of a particular group of people." (1). Jan Vansina further defines it as "the process of transmitting history and culture through spoken word," which he emphasizes as a foundational element of human culture. (Vansina 19).

The concept of storytelling has now encompassed not only spoken words or oral practices, but involves various techniques that enhance the storytelling experience. These techniques have been refined over generations to captivate audiences and contribute to positive memory. Repetition and rhythm are two common techniques in oral storytelling. These methods aid in memory retention, ensuring that important parts of the story are emphasized and remembered by listeners. In many communities where storytelling is involved, repetition creates a sense of ritual and performance, turning the story into a communal experience. Many instances of oral storytelling involves audience participation through a call and response method. This technique involves the storyteller making statements or asking questions that the audience responds to, creating an interactive and engaging narrative experience.

Despite the rise of written and digital media in current social and cultural strata with enhanced technological developments, oral storytelling still remains a resilient and evolving art form. Many contemporary media continuously conform to the tradition of the oral narrative in the form of radio shows, podcasts, video narrations and spoken word poetry and other narrative sessions before a listening audience. It can be stated that many modern techniques of oral narration are still to be considered modern extensions of the archaic oral traditions which can be seen as not only enduring, but also adapting, as well as evolving. Even as societies shift toward more technologically advanced means of communication, the core elements of oral tradition—voice, narrative, and human connection—continue to influence how stories are shared and experienced. According to Walter Ong in *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*, "Oral cultures learn through doing, engaging and interacting. Their stories are performances meant to be experienced in real time, not merely read" (Ong 45). The invention of writing allowed oral stories to be preserved in written form, a process that both enriched and limited storytelling traditions. On one hand, written texts allowed stories to be passed across time and space with great accuracy. On the other hand, the performative aspect of oral storytelling: intonation, gesture, audience interaction, was lost in transcription (Child 93).

In the 21st century, oral storytelling has found new life in the digital world. Podcasts, audiobooks, and storytelling events celebrate oral narratives and bring them to a global audience. These modern platforms mimic the communal and performative aspects of traditional storytelling, allowing listeners to experience stories as they are spoken rather than read. Digital platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have also fostered new forms of oral storytelling, where individuals can share personal stories with large audiences in short, engaging formats. The rise of spoken word poetry, rap, and slam poetry can also be seen as modern iterations of oral traditions, where performance, rhythm, and storytelling are intertwined (Somers-Willett 47). Accordingly, the modern age has witnessed a profound impact and resurgence in storytelling, fueled by technological advancements that have reshaped the way narratives are created, shared, and experienced. While traditional oral storytelling remains important in many cultures, digital platforms have democratized the art form, allowing for new forms of expression and wider dissemination. This modern evolution of storytelling combines ancient oral traditions with

digital technologies, creating hybrid forms that reach global audiences. With the rise of digital media, oral storytelling has experienced a renaissance in the form of podcasts, audiobooks, social media platforms, and online video channels. These modern platforms not only preserve the oral tradition but also expand its reach, allowing storytellers to connect with diverse and widespread audiences. They offer listeners the experience of traditional oral narratives but with the convenience of on-demand access through showcasing personal narratives told by everyday individuals, a continuation of the oral tradition where storytellers engage listeners with their voice, pacing, and emotion. Additionally, audiobooks have redefined how stories are consumed in the 21st century.

Social media platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, have transformed how stories are shared and consumed by allowing quick, dynamic forms of storytelling that often combine oral narration with visual elements, such as video or animation where the creators use the platform to share personal stories, documentaries, and even fictional narratives. Vlogs, or video blogs, are a form of storytelling where individuals narrate their daily lives, offering insights, humour, and reflections on personal experiences. This format echoes traditional oral storytelling, as it often relies on spontaneous, unscripted speech and direct engagement with an audience. Instagram and TikTok have popularized short-form storytelling through features like stories and reels where influencers and storytellers use the platform's "story" feature to share short narratives, often combining text, images, and spoken word. The algorithmic structures of these various platforms enable storytellers to reach millions of viewers in a matter of hours, showcasing the power of storytelling in the digital age.

While oral storytelling was historically the primary medium for transmitting cultural narratives, it has evolved alongside written and digital media and has evolved in its own right. Stuart Hall draws in the relationship between storytelling with cinematic representation by expressing how film, as a modern form of storytelling, plays a significant role in shaping collective memory, identity, and ideology. Cinema, through its visual narratives, constructs meaning in ways that deeply influence societal perception of culture and identity. Hall explains that cinematic narratives are "sites of ideological struggles, where different cultural forces are played out in a highly visible form" (Hall 73). Here, storytelling in film and media is not just a reflection of society but an active participant in the cultural and ideological battles within it.

One of the most significant changes in storytelling in the digital world therefore, is hypertextuality, a modern term denoted upon the use of digital technologies to create non-linear, interactive narratives which allows readers to navigate through texts in multiple ways. Hypertext, first conceptualized by Ted Nelson, allows for the creation of digital narratives where "each story thread is connected to other threads, leading to multiple possibilities in how a story is experienced" (Nelson 34). This fragmentation and decentralization of narrative also reflects postmodernist ideas about the breakdown of grand narratives and the rise of multiple, localized stories through the non-linear structure of digital storytelling where coherence and unity are replaced by multiplicity and ambiguity through interactive participation.

Therefore, digital technology has democratized and revolutionized storytelling to allow and re-define the narrative through direct audience participation in creation and evolution of narratives. Henry Jenkins through the concept of Participatory Culture explores how digital platforms like blogs, social media, and fan fiction communities enable users to contribute to and remix stories. This shift represents a move away from the traditional model of storytelling, where a single author controls the narrative, to a more collaborative and collective process (Jenkins 3) as readers, viewers, and gamers are empowered to interact with and reshape narratives. Through this, the storytelling process, once confined to the author, now becomes a collective endeavor shaped by a community of contributors. These digital platforms illustrate the adaptability of storytelling, showing that the core principles of narrative: engagement, emotion, and relatability, remain consistent even in new formats. Henry Jenkins notes, "The art of storytelling in a digital age is about navigating between old media and new, between oral traditions and interactive participation" (Jenkins 45). This level of interactivity builds on the communal and performative aspects of traditional oral storytelling, where the audience's reactions can influence the direction of the story (Murray 24), and through audience participation this version of storytelling brings narratives into the spaces we inhabit, creating new layers of meaning and experience.

Another definitive asset of the modern evolution of storytelling lies in the affirmation that internet and digital platforms have expanded the reach of storytelling, enabling cross-cultural exchanges and the globalization of narratives. Stories that were once confined to specific regions or communities now have the potential to reach global audiences as these storytelling platforms have also become powerful tools for marginalized voices. Indigenous storytellers, for example, have used platforms like YouTube and podcasts to preserve and share their cultural narratives. Additionally, social movements like **#BlackLivesMatter** and **#MeToo** have utilized social media storytelling to amplify personal narratives that highlight systemic injustice. These movements have shown how digital storytelling can be a tool for advocacy, allowing individuals to share their experiences with discrimination and violence, and thereby fostering empathy and social change (Clark 67).

Consequently, the digital age offers unprecedented opportunities for storytellers to experiment with new formats, reach wider audiences, and preserve oral traditions in innovative ways. As storytelling continues to evolve, it remains a powerful medium for connection, empathy, and cultural preservation. Oral storytelling, once limited to face-to-face interactions and live audiences, has found new life on digital platforms like YouTube. This digital platform is seminal in transforming how stories are shared and consumed through offering storytellers an expansive reach, transcending geographical barriers, while allowing them to monetize their content. This analysis examines the merits and demerits of oral storytelling on YouTube, with a particular focus on the commercial and economic incentives that come with the process.

Through the advancement of technology and the internet, storytellers, who previously relied on live audiences, can now share their stories with a global audience instantaneously. This has allowed marginalized voices and minority cultures to reach broader audiences, fostering cross-cultural exchanges. Digital platforms like YouTube have become essential tools for preserving oral storytelling traditions. With recordings available online, cultural and folk stories that might otherwise disappear are archived and accessible to future generations. Such platforms often offer economic incentives through monetization features such as ad revenue, sponsorships, and membership programs. Through these incentives, storytellers

can generate income from ads displayed during their videos, based on viewership. Popular storytellers may also attract sponsorships from brands or join Partner Programs, which enables them to earn revenue through premium subscriptions (Smith 42). Most platforms enable direct interaction between storytellers and their audiences through comments, likes, and subscriptions. This two-way communication is vital for fostering a community around storytelling content where the storytellers can receive real-time feedback, suggestions, and appreciations, which enhance the storytelling experience and helps content creators adjust their stories to better fit audience preferences.

In some cases, storytelling content also paves the way for storytellers to diversify their revenue streams. Popular creators can leverage their social media success to publish books, create podcasts, or secure live storytelling gigs, thus expanding their economic prospects beyond the platform itself. In this way a revolutionized oral storytelling occurs by offering a global platform for creators to share their work, preserve cultural narratives, and generate income. While the platform's reach and economic opportunities are undeniable, challenges such as algorithmic biases, commercialization, and competition can affect the authenticity and visibility of traditional storytelling. Despite these hurdles, oral storytelling on digital platforms continues to evolve, blending traditional practices with new technology to engage audiences in unprecedented ways.

While digital storytelling offers vast opportunities for creativity and reach, it also presents challenges. The ephemeral nature of social media stories, for example, can make it difficult to preserve narratives for future generations. Moreover, the rapid consumption of content on digital social media platforms may prioritize quick, sensational stories over thoughtful, reflective narratives. There is also the risk of commodifying storytelling in the digital world. The pressure to monetize content through sponsorships, ads, and algorithms may influence the type of stories that are told and who gets to tell them. Shoshana Zuboff has stated that, "The surveillance capitalism of the digital economy threatens to reshape storytelling by prioritizing data extraction over narrative authenticity" (Zuboff 94) which may prove to be an inconvenient aspect of the digital evolution of storytelling.

Conclusion :

In this way, folk culture, often associated with the traditional practices and expressions of a particular community or group, is deeply intertwined with storytelling which continues to serve as a bridge between past and present, preserving culture in an increasingly globalized world while at the same time, evolving them into modern incarnations and present new challenges in the formative process. As storytelling in the 21st century is at a dynamic intersection of traditional practices and cutting-edge technology, while its essence : its ability to convey emotions, lessons, and culture remains unchanged, the platforms through which stories are told have diversified. As technology advances, the future of storytelling will continue to evolve, offering new ways for humanity to share its most enduring art form, and as a key component of folk culture, storytelling has persisted across centuries, evolving in form while retaining its fundamental role in preserving and transmitting cultural values. Its resilience demonstrates the power of the spoken word in connecting people, fostering community, and preserving history. As oral traditions continue to adapt to new media, they remind us of the enduring importance of storytelling as both a cultural practice and a vital art form.

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