

Commentary

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Storytelling on Video Is Not Storytelling

by Larry Johnson

George Gerbner of the Annaberg Foundation has frequently been-quoted, "Whoever tells the stories controls how children grow up, and television is telling most of the stories nowadays." The obvious implication, of course, is to double our efforts to tell stories in person to children of all ages, but something seems to be astir in the world of television, the world which has traditionally rejected storytelling as being "mere talking head" (unless, of course, the "storyteller" happened to be an already big name star who happened to tell stories).

A few years ago it was pretty common for most storytellers to adopt some variety of the anti-television position. The assumption always seemed to be that television was some sort of necessary or even unnecessary evil, but now storytelling has become big news, and like the reactionary "strike where the potential mass audience is" force that TV often is, television producers are beginning to approach storytellers.

Will this be a good thing for storytelling, or just for some storytellers? Will it preserve and enhance storytelling as an intimate sharing of vital, ancient truths, adapted more and more to the needs of small groups in homes, schools, hospitals, and nursing homes, or will it cause the "ultimate" in storytelling to become a position as a network TV performer, telling stories judged most salable to a mass national audience?

My own position on these questions both is and is not as extreme as the title of this article might suggest. I've been both a storyteller and a TV producer since the late 60s, but most of my TV work has been deemed "alternative," probably because my primary commitment has always been to storytelling. I have believed that ordinary

people "making their own story" on video is closer to the heart of storytelling as we have known it than is watching the expensive, professional stories created on film or video in New York or Hollywood.

In 1980 my "Electronic Get Well Card," a daily, live, call-in show done on a Minneapolis Children's Hospital CCTV channel with the help of patients who were also viewers, won a national achievement award from Action for Children's Television. This award had previously been given to shows like *Sesame Street*, but ours happened every day, all year long, at less cost than producing one hour of *Sesame Street*. Why? I believe they wanted to recognize something different. Even though it was TV, it was built on the intimate storytelling style of interacting personally with a small group, rather than the network TV way of appealing to an enormous, unknown mass.

Again in 1986, a set of video letters my wife Elaine Wynne (also a storyteller) and I helped a group of kids in London and St. Paul produce and exchange with each other, won grand prize in the Tokyo Video Festival. This was against 1500 entries from around the world, including slick, professionally produced pieces by U.S. network producers. Again, why? Like the interactive hospital programming (and like real storytelling) this allowed for personal, two-way exchanges, and it also provided for a great deal of activity from the audience on each end (London and St. Paul) who actually made the show. I don't believe we really *want* to passively sit in front of the TV set, watching someone else's activity. We really want to be "out there" doing it ourselves, but the TV as we know it is so visually active and entertaining, it tricks us into thinking we're exercising when we're not.

So what do we do about the television industry beginning to approach storytellers? I repeat, it is my belief that storytelling on video is not storytelling; it is something else altogether, but it has some real values for storytelling, especially if we don't allow it to go the usual route of making a few "lucky"

individuals media stars while everyone else struggles to make a living at this vital art. In other words, it seems important that, as a storytelling community, we control and create the media opportunities that come up so they showcase the diversity of storytelling and expand it as an intimate, personal art which creates connections between live people.

Storytelling Shows

Storytelling shows on broadcast or cable are already being aired, and can be excellent promotion for storytellers and storytelling. After all (and often unfortunately) "If it's on TV, then it's worth something!"

I personally think that radio is better for storytelling than TV, but whichever it is, these "mass-audience" shows should showcase many different kinds of stories told by many different storytellers, both "professional" and people who just have a good story to tell. They should be produced by people who understand both media production and the two-way, human interaction of storytelling; and if these shows are on TV, the tellers should function in a variety of real, natural environments—camps, schools, home at bedtime, festivals, college concerts, churches, and business meetings—to demonstrate visually the variety of applications for storytelling and to suggest that people who don't consider themselves professionals can accomplish great things with their own version of the art in the place where they happen to be.

Videoconferencing

This is my personal choice if storytelling is to be on television, mainly because it is not slick, edited video. It is simply live television intended to let groups meet in person when they can't physically be in the same location. I haven't had a lot of experience with this, and because of the expense, none of it's been with storytelling. However, I did coordinate a couple of videoconferences where high school students in Minneapolis were allowed to meet live with national leaders in Washington or Texas and ask questions on arms control

and the environment. I'd love to see the kind of excitement engendered there be transferred to a storytelling meeting where we could see and talk with someone like Dr. Wolfdietrich Siegmund, who started the rapidly growing European Storytelling Organization, or with storytellers in London, Australia, or Japan.

One way to ease into this less expensively (videoconferences generally cost multiple thousands of dollars and are justified by not having to fly everyone to the same site) is to have an audio (telephone) hookup preceded by viewing a video of the person we'd be talking and telling stories with. At our Northlands "Politics and Media" Conference in 1984, we had a half hour session with Ruthmarie Sheehan in California this way. She sent a videotape so everyone had a sense of what she looked like, and then we spoke with her live about her organization, asked and answered questions, and got her to tell a California trickster tale to kick off our evening of trickster stories from the midwest. The cost of the hookup was \$10 and a small honorarium for Ms. Sheehan.

Videocassettes

I have found some of the tapes that have just come out (e.g. Kartes, Wilson) useful for teaching—they show to my classes of elementary kids and/or college students learning to tell stories a style other than my own. Unfortunately, I suspect that is not the prime motivation for putting out cassettes. We've been approached by at least three producers who've heard storytelling is hot and want to produce home video for parents to give their kids bedtime stories. That is moderately appalling at best.

First of all, if kids are going to watch video at bedtime, they're likely to prefer the animated or fully dramatized variety. Secondly, if mechanical "storytelling" is going to be substituted for the personal variety, it seems audiocassettes are much better for children developmentally. Such cassettes may not be a "person" anymore, but at least they still allow for imaginative picture-making.

My personal preference is that if

storytelling videocassettes are to be made for the home market, each one should include several styles and that all should be designed to teach parents to tell themselves. Because bedtime storytelling tends to be for young children, videos could take advantage of the visual capacity of TV to demonstrate close-up, small group storytelling that utilizes simple visuals like string stories, paper folding, finger puppets, and the like (in other words, techniques or styles that can't be shown on audiocassette). Another totally different alternative is the project we've begun here in Minneapolis—that of creating storytelling videocassettes for the hearing-impaired, with an oral storyteller in a small circle in the corner and a sign language interpreter occupying the full screen. Again, we're using the visual capacity of TV to do something that can't be done another way mechanically.

Telling TV Stories

I know there are many other ideas and approaches that could be used for all of the above. What I've done here is to briefly set down some of the things I've experienced and thought about in hopes that we can start discussion and thinking which allow us as storytellers to drive the media rather than the other way around. I still believe that more than working to put storytellers on television, we need to focus on storytellers teaching parents to tell stories again to children, and teaching children to tell stories in the hope that they'll continue to do so as adults. I think we also need to start thinking seriously about telling stories *about* television so that, as in some of the old stories, "If you can name it and tell stories about it, it's in your control." More than ever, we as storytellers need to talk back to our television sets as well as talk behind their backs.



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