

Whose Story Is It, Anyway? Storytelling, Ownership, and Collective Collaboration in the News Media¹

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Abstract

Wem gehören Stories in den Nachrichtenmedien? Den Menschen, die sie erleben (Subjekt/Ursprung); denen, die darüber schreiben (Verfasser/Vermittler); oder denen, auf deren Leben der öffentliche Diskurs einwirkt (Kultur/Gesellschaft)? Auf Grundlage der Prüfung von drei Thesen, (1) dass Stories in den Nachrichten Konstrukte sind, (2) dass Stories als Eigentum gehandelt werden, welches Menschen oder Institutionen gehört und (3) dass kollektive Kollaboration im Nachrichtensystem durch neue Medientechnologien bestehende Besitzansprüche in Frage stellen, analysiert der Artikel mögliche Ansätze unterschiedlicher Dimensionen in der Urheberfrage in den Nachrichtenmedien und plädiert für einen ‚open source‘-Ansatz in der Berichterstattung.

Who owns stories in the news media? The person who has experienced them (source/subject), the person who collects/broadcasts them (creator/mediator), or the society whose public discourse is affected by them (culture/society)? On the basis of examining three theses, namely (1) news stories are constructs, (2) news stories are considered property that belongs to people or institutions, and (3) collective collaboration in the news system made possible by new technologies changes the nature of news stories and questions pre-existing views of ownership, this article analyses possible views on various dimensions of story ownership in the news media and pleads for an ‘open source’ approach in news coverage.

Getting the Story

The broadest possible definition of “story” includes terms like history, anecdote, short stories, the plot of narratives, rumors, lies, legends, matter, news articles, and broadcasts (cf. “Story” 2007). Even though this article concentrates on the latter two understandings of story, i.e. stories in the media and more specifically in the news media, connotations of other meanings of ‘story’ also resonate in this field. Therefore, even within the relatively tight context of news media, ‘story’ can mean a great variety of things.

The much overused line in journalism “to get the story” thus raises a wide range of questions: What exactly is the story? What qualifies as a story in the media? Where is the dividing line between information, opinion, fact, and story? In how far do the mentioned other possible

¹ This article resembles parts of a chapter in my dissertation, which addresses the more general question of the ethics of storytelling in the (news) media (cf. Schwarz 2008).

meanings of ‘story’ – like history, anecdotes, rumors, or even lies – relate to stories in the sense of news stories “fit to print”²?

This article concentrates on news stories in the sense of cover or frontline stories in print, broadcast, and online media. Ideally, in this particular setting, to “get the story” means to get hold of the information necessary to distill the facts in order to be able to write an unbiased, fair report. To get the story also means to embroider facts with narrative elements in order to turn them into a story in the journalistic sense of a newsworthy account. To get the story means to get hold of a story that is worth covering, so that getting the story also stresses the activity of obtaining information, facts, or statements from or about others. An editor’s call for a story is basically an order: go and get it, no matter what. On a reporter’s side such expectation and attitude result in the application of a variety of acquisition strategies, which can range from research, to interviews, to interference in other people’s private lives under correct or false pretences.³ From the information obtained, stories in the news media are then composed, created, shaped, produced, and reproduced.

News stories have origins; they have subjects, authors, and audiences. But the main question put forward here is whether they have rightful owners and who, of everyone involved in the genesis of a news story, they might be. Getting the story is one thing; telling the story is something completely different. Situated in between there are issues of creativity and ownership that shall be outlined below.

Elaborating on three theses, namely (1) news stories are constructs, (2) news stories are considered property that belongs to people or institutions, and (3) collective collaboration in the news system made possible by new technologies changes the nature of news stories and questions pre-existing views of ownership, I will outline views on various dimensions of story ownership in the news media. For the benefit of a public discourse in society through media, I will argue that the members of this society have to be provided with more explicit and detailed information about the origins of news stories and be encouraged to reclaim ideological ownership on the essence of published and broadcasted material. Much like in ‘open source’ initiatives in computer programming, this kind of ideology in the news media could finally give rise to a more varied, more profound, and more open storytelling discourse in the news media, and allow members of a society to exercise their right (and duty) to take an active part in the public (storytelling) sphere.

² The slogan “All the News That’s Fit to Print”, motto of *The New York Times* since 1896, is frequently used to refer to quality news in the print media. For a discussion of *The New York Times*’s own choice of stories in connection with limited available space see Calame 2006.

³ The conduct in the attainment of news stories, i.e. the process of gaining access to, collecting, selecting, and presenting information is a matter of its own. Legal aspects of those practices are covered, e.g. in Goldstein 2004, pp. 360–368. Ethical considerations in regard to the collection of news stories have been extensively discussed by media ethicists (cf. e.g. Sanders 2004; Kieran 1997).

News Stories as Constructs

One of the news media's major aims – and achievements – is to make people believe that they offer a window to a 'world out there', a reality to be grasped "through the media looking glass" (cf. the title of Cohen and Solomon's book, 1995), a world that can be captured in texts and images and delivered to an audience objectively and truthfully. Beneath this approach lies the ontological and epistemological assumption that (a) such a reality exists and (b) it can be perceived by the human mind.⁴ The debate about the veracity of these two theses is as old as human (philosophical) thought and the views held on those issues vary widely, even today.

The question whether reality exists independently of human perception has to be seen against the background of a debate between realist and anti-realist theories that stand for a fundamentally opposing philosophical understanding of reality and obtainable truth. Whereas, generally speaking, realists assume that there is a reality independent of its perception, anti-realists adhere to a more constructivist understanding of reality: Their theories support the view that reality is always to be understood as reality of an individual, i.e. not in correspondence with anything in a world outside an individual's perception.

Even on the grounds that reality exists independently of the observing subjects, the epistemological question whether such an assumed reality can be perceived (let alone communicated) objectively has to remain unanswered. The basic problem is that, in order to prove the thesis that a reality outside of human perception exists, one would have to take on a position outside the system itself, a God-like position, which humans, bound to subjectivity, are incapable of taking.

Nevertheless, I will argue that the outlined basic philosophical problem poses no serious difficulty for the discussion of reality in news stories for a number of reasons: Regardless of the existence of an independent reality, and regardless of whether, theoretically, it could be perceived and even communicated, the media do not provide access to such an objective or objectified world they are claiming to mirror. Traditional news media are restricted to a tight and closed system, which they are incapable of transgressing and largely unwilling even to question. The media and stories in the media are creations that emerge from this closed system; at their best, they are creations inspired by a notion of perceived reality, much in the sense of analogies, which resemble something that was true or real for someone at a certain point in time. What the media describe is not a world outside their sphere, but very much a world within their own system, as shall be briefly explored.

The media mediate; they stand in the middle as agents between a text (in the broadest sense of the word) and a readership/audience. The news media transmit a text that is considered newsworthy to the citizens of a community. News stories do not find their way into existence on their own; the mediation of texts is preceded by human action, which involves collecting,

⁴ There is a third premise the news media base their work on: the assumption that communication works and that it works the way the media intend it to work. It is needless to add that, like the other two premises, this assumption is questionable and highly problematic. However, it tackles a different problem altogether and reaches too far to be addressed here.

shaping, and processing information; a process which is selective and subjective by nature. The media, thus, provide an image of a world much different from any individual perspective. They are the outlet of a collective, schematized effort of the people in the news-producing industry. Through their collaboration, stories find their way into a mediated world that would neither exist nor be accessible without their effort; stories which tell of incidents close by or far away, affecting few or many, stories within and without the reach of an individual's personal range.

However, the text/image the news media provide are squeezed into a pre-fabricated format and limited by the frame of the medium. Those preset formats and frames necessarily influence the nature (and connotations) of the texts/images they hold; even more so, they can distract from the actual content they process, depending on how obtrusive, flashy, and diverting they are. Stories from outside mediated reality, stories that are investigated and 'gotten', are cropped and squeezed to fit the frame of news media. The window, which traditional news media claim to offer, is a window directed inwards into their own constructed world, not pointing outwards to the world inhabited by the people: When we watch a program on television, we look *into* a box and the stories in the newspaper fit *into* the frames defined by the edges of the paper.

Coming back to the initial question of ownership, it would only be reasonable to conclude that everything within the 'media frame' or 'media bubble' belongs to the media, while everything outside does not. The problem is that those lines between 'within' and 'without' are not clear-cut because media constructs are part of the world they replicate and therefore affect it. Still, the constructed stories in the news media belong to the media, but their sources belong to the world outside the bubble. To access those sources could alter the way news stories are constructed, owned, and attached with meaning by a community from which they emerge and into which they are directed.

News Stories as Property

The media are, at their core, a business that trades stories, both fictional and factual; and they are extremely successful at that. As Ben Bagdikian (2004) puts it, the five largest media conglomerates have "more communications power than [...] exercised by any despot or dictatorship in history" (Bagdikian 2004, p. 3). The "Big Five", as Bagdikian calls the five leading media companies (Time Warner, Viacom, Disney, Bertelsmann, and News Corp., closely followed by General Electric's NBC on place six), cooperate in many fields and engage in cartel-like relations. On a perceiving end, such cooperation results in the fact that "thousands of media outlets carry highly duplicative contents" (Bagdikian 2004, p. 6).

What we see in the media is to a large degree standardized products, particularly in the United States. Programs are basically the same on either coast, in any state, and in any major town. This is also true for the news media: Big news suppliers broadcast nationwide and leave little or no space (or money) for minor, local stories. Though attached with the social responsibility

to inform the public about issues of great concern,⁵ media and news companies are primarily run on a profit basis; with astonishing success. The mentioned companies are all among the largest and most successful companies in the world (cf. Bagdikian 2004, p. 10; cf. “Fortune 500” 2008). Apart from very few and mostly very short-lived private initiatives, today’s media are dominated by those conglomerates as well as their dictation of stories.

Traditional news-producing media can easily be distinguished from other media formats by their shared characteristic features. These include headlines, introductory notes, columns, pictures, captions, etc. in print, and news anchors, news desks, correspondents, interviewers, in-frame news screens, etc. on television.⁶ All of these features constitute the pre-given formats of news stories. The boxes into which news stories are shoveled before they reach the public eye are constructs which shape the stories they bear. Incidents do not usually start with a headline, however the stories about them do.

News formats are copied widely among media institutions; interfaces have always looked alike; set-ups are similar and only vary according to the person who fills the anchor spot.⁷ Also the basic content of news outlets has become more and more similar as news producers either cooperate with each other or critically examine (and copy) each other’s stories.

According to the idea that money determines ownership, the selling and buying of stories and news contents in general seem to clearly identify who owns a story and who can sell the rights to (re-)produce it. This is also the point where news agencies get their (major) share in the market. In this field, too, there are only a few major global players (Associated Press – AP, United Press International – UPI, and Reuters). News agencies either run their independent news services with their own staff and only sell their stories (e.g. Reuters) or work in the form of a collaboration of various contributing news media (e.g. AP) and make their stories available for their members or subscribers only. Either way, they contribute greatly to the

⁵ The social responsibility theory of the press was expressed by the U.S. Commission on Freedom of the Press in 1947 and replaced the previously promoted libertarian theory. According to libertarian theory, truth will emerge from a great variety of information. For the Founding Fathers of the United States, this notion was so important that they protected the freedom of the media (the press) in the First Amendment of the Constitution. However, this protection also gave rise to an increasingly successful and legally more or less untouchable media industry, which – in strong contrast to the initial idea – became more sensationalistic, shallow, and unified. Therefore, in the mid-1950s, the government sought for possibilities how to ensure diversity and quality in the media while leaving the Constitution untouched. The efforts culminated in the formulation of the social responsibility theory (cf. Siebert et al. 1963, pp. 73–104). Further developments, including the Telecommunications Act of 1996, have meanwhile once again undermined most of the ideals held in this theory.

⁶ Traditional media formats have become more difficult to distinguish in online media, as genres tend to merge in the online world.

⁷ Jeremy Tunstall has argued that the major form of U.S. media imperialism shows in the fact that U.S. media have established and dictated such media formats: “In most of the world’s countries the media are only there at all, on the present scale, as the result of imports in which the American media (with some British support) predominate. One major influence of American imported media lies in the styles and patterns that most other countries in the world have adopted and copied. This influence includes the very definition of what a *newspaper*, or a *feature film*, or a *television set* is” (Tunstall 1977, p. 17).

homogenization of news contents and the notion that news consists of items which are produced, sold, and owned.

Even if, by and large, the 'Big Five' global companies and a select number of news agencies own and rule the U.S. media (and a very large share of the global media, too), they do not own all or even any of the contents, facts, and sources they use:

Extraordinary events, like natural catastrophes, huge accidents, important elections, large business merges, or weather forecasts are usually covered by all major newspapers and news stations. The basic information, the event itself, obtainable facts – those sources or stories (in the sense of 'stories out there' to be 'gotten' and 'captured') – cannot be owned; they are publicly available to everyone and every institution simultaneously, provided the necessary tools to access, measure, and investigate them are at hand. Therefore, this kind of content is in itself hardly a means of distinguishing or claiming ownership within news media products; those sources do not belong to anyone before they are collected, shaped, and claimed.

What can be claimed by a news company is therefore not the story but the way it is told. This is where the mentioned frames and additions come in, which can vary widely and often reflect a certain attitude or approach towards a story. These attitudes, communicated alongside the contents of a story in the form of additions, comments, and explanations of various kinds, are recurrent within a medium and thus create and manifest identity. This type of *created* identity clearly belongs with the producer of the respective story.

Apart from communicating attitudes, the function of such additions and explanations is to introduce narrative elements to an otherwise dry world of information and facts. Information is embroidered with narrative: On television, these narrative elements appear in the form of (mostly computer-animated) introductions, sound signatures, repetitions, hangovers, archive footage, announcements, expert opinions, journalists' commentary, etc. They signalize to the audience where they find themselves in the genesis of a narrative, what they are to expect, and which narrative incentives are there to keep them tuned in.

For these reasons, the great difference in news stories that trigger ownership issues is to be found in stylistic features and additions. This involves matters of taste, aesthetic reasoning, and creative potential.⁸ In terms of ownership it is therefore coherent to conclude that, ethically speaking, the content within a certain news 'frame' cannot be claimed by anyone in particular, whereas the appearance of that contents, the style it takes, and the extras that are added, i.e. the way the story is told and the attitudes that are communicated, are clearly in the ownership of the manufacturer. The stories are marked by corporate policy, the taste of an editor, and the style of journalists or commentators.

In this context, authors and mainly editors have to be seen in the light of authority in the sense that they obtain the rights to author and tell stories. Ownership, when manifested by money, distorts the news. This means that private individuals as well as celebrities are offered great sums of money in order to sell their stories after having experienced something outstanding or

⁸ This aesthetic approach actually contains an ethical question in the media: In how far does the frame intervene with the picture it holds? In other words, how much commentary and explanation distorts or destroys the original?

simply something that news people think will sell. As alert critics point out, checkbook journalism runs the danger that witnesses “promised or hoping for payment may exaggerate or distort evidence to make their stories more newsworthy, or omit to give part of their evidence in court to ensure that an exclusive angle remains marketable” (Epworth & Hanna qtd. in Sanders, p. 115). The mere fact that money is involved in obtaining news stories already influences how it is told. Audiences only get to hear about (oftentimes sensational) stories of individuals who are part of the public sphere (like officials and celebrities), or have agreed to take money for their accounts, a morally second-rate decision and motivation. With money in the game, it can be assumed that all of those involved in the process of obtaining and telling the story will try to make it sound worth the money: those who provide the stories, those who write about it, and those who position it. It is almost ironical how stories of public concern are often given away free of charge by those who have the feeling that people should know about them, while personal stories are traded for incredible amounts of money. Journalists themselves are paid (or blackmailed) for both covering and not covering stories but that is, again, a different matter. Money, it can be concluded, is a means of gathering, producing, and selling news items, but it is not a reliable instrument to determine in whose ownership stories and storytelling in the news media ought to be.

Towards an Ethical Ownership of (News) Stories

In an article by William Smythe and Maureen Murray (2000) entitled “Owning the Story: Ethical Considerations in Narrative Research”, the two authors promote an epistemological approach to the issue of narrative ownership in their profession: narrative research. Their conclusions, I will argue, are essential also for the news business, a field that – like narrative research – is mostly concerned with stories outside one’s own scope of experience. Apart from the regulative principles of research ethics (e.g. in publications by the American Psychological Association), the authors introduce further considerations when working with other people’s stories and quote psychologist Ruthellen Josselson, who argues that “[t]o renarrate a life unasked, therefore, robs the Other of a piece of his or her freedom no matter how exhilarating an experience it may be” (Josselson qtd. in Smythe & Murray, 2000, p. 332). As outlined in the “Briefing on Media Law”, issued by the Associated Press (Goldstein 2004, pp. 337–369), for people who stand in the public eye (like politicians or celebrities), this seemingly very common-sense statement by Josselson is ruled out from the very beginning. People in the public eye are robbed of their freedoms the minute they enter the public sphere – in America even by law.⁹

Smythe and Murray argue that the “conflict that narrative researchers face is between serving as their participant’s confidant, on the one hand, and then going public with their stories, on

⁹ According to U.S. law, it is next to impossible for people of public interest, like officials and celebrities, to win libel cases against newspapers or broadcasters. Due to the protection by the First Amendment, they would have to be able to prove that a journalist, reporter, or editor had malicious intentions when publishing a piece, which is, of course, next to impossible (cf. Goldstein 2004, p. 339).

the other” (2000, p. 323). Journalists may counter that this is exactly what ‘good’ journalism is all about. The central question the two researchers bring up, however, is this: “Who owns the research participant’s narrative? That is, who wields the final control and authority over its presentation and interpretation?” (Smythe & Murray 2000, p. 324). While the authors argue that the authority of the publication of a personal narrative remains with the source, asking back before publication is generally scorned by news professionals. The community’s right to know always outweighs an individual’s wish to remain silent about an instance. This is based on the dictum that news media act in the public interest and it is among them to decide what this interest consists in; the freedom of the press has become a synonym for democracy and the people’s right and duty to social and political participation. To question these rights means to question democracy; but rights come with responsibilities, and my argument is that these need re-evaluation.

Along this line, the suggestion to narrative researchers given by Smythe and Murray could and should be found as a piece of ethical advice for journalists:

The researcher’s analysis should be presented, not as a privileged account, but as conditioned by a certain perspective that should be made as explicit as possible. This leaves room for participants and readers to interpret the narrative in their own terms subsequent to publication (Smythe & Murray 2000, p. 333).

However, exactly this mentioned “room for participants and readers to interpret the narrative” has been lost in the traditional news media. News channels provide an everlasting, forever ongoing flow of impressions. There is no space for the reader or audience to form their own thoughts or interpretation of an issue. Every second is filled with reports, commentary, and interpretation; screens are filled with pictures, texts, advertisements, are divided into multiple screens, or run news-tickers at the bottom. The conclusion is simple: There is no space for an active let alone reflective audience in the traditional news system anymore; or so it seemed until the emergence of Web 2.0.

News Stories as Collective Collaboration in the Newly-Found Public Sphere

In *Our Media, Not Theirs*, Robert McChesney and John Nichols (2002) elaborate on the idea of a new media reform that involves the citizens and thereby distance themselves from media capitalism and the predominant business idea: “the problem is that the system of business in America is designed for profit making, not public interest, and thus we have a media system set up to enrich investors, not serve democracy” (McChesney & Nichols 2002, p. 53). How that system is changing presently causes investors, publishers, and editors a headache; at least those who insist on their share of authority that has earned them much money in recent years.

It is fascinating to find that, at the very early roots of American media history, the first multi-page newspaper ever published in the Americas was more participatory than might be imag-

ined. The title of the first paper ever published in the New World was *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*. It was printed for the first and only time in Boston, on September 25, 1690 by Benjamin Harris and Richard Pierce. The account that it was forbidden by authorities right after its first publication has been widely discussed in connection with censorship issues. However, what is particularly interesting to note about this paper is what Emery et al. (2000) noted by the way in their book *The Press and America*: “the printing shop of R. Pierce issued a four-page newspaper. It was printed on only three sides. The fourth page was blank so the reader could add his or her own news items before passing it on” (Emery et al. 2000, p. 22). It seemed to be very common at the time that people read papers, commented on stories, included their own items and passed the papers on to their family, friends, or colleagues. It took people more than 300 years to establish the technology that would allow us to do the same thing again, only this time electronically (cf. Burns 2006, p. 29).

“Grassroots journalism”, in Dan Gillmor’s terms, is re-establishing and regaining ground in a media scene that ought to serve democracy by providing a place to utter and discuss issues of public concern. Blogs, collaborative local online news forums, online news broadcasts, and other recent developments, made possible by the growing possibilities in news technology, have changed the world of news coverage and they will continue to do so. The virtual realm has enabled the idea that a certain brand of news content can be brought back to life, which had previously been ‘killed’ or marginalized by the imposed media frames. Blogs, wikis, and systems like *YouTube* offer the technology and space for digital stories to be shared online. Those services are used to such an extent that they can no longer be ignored by traditional media. The voices of bloggers and other active members of the virtual realm are starting to become sources of information for traditional news. What is more, news services are trying to integrate this type of participatory news systems into their own structures, so that news stories can be commented on news providers’ websites, and people can provide or upload their own footage.

Fairly recent developments in this ongoing repositioning process in the news are features where an online community is invited to submit their stories and video footage. The tagline is that everyone can become a reporter for a well-known news network. While networks used to ignore or even block private initiatives, they are only starting to realize and make use of the potential in those emerging fields. Most prominently, CNN’s “I-Report” service that encourages citizen journalists to participate in CNN’s newsgathering, was launched on 2 August, 2006. Users can upload contents they think of as newsworthy. Editors at CNN review the material and select news items that are posted on CNN’s webpage or even aired as full stories on television in scheduled “I-Report” programs. The system offers two major advantages for CNN: they get a picture of what people consider newsworthy, i.e. what they want to be informed about, and they turn former passive viewers into active news-providers, which gives them additional perspectives on a range of stories they cannot cover with their own personnel.

Ironically, such services run by news media organizations are in conflict with the idea and hope of establishing the online world as a sphere for multi-dimensional, unattached grassroots journalism that would gain the power to affect and challenge the traditional media industry. It seems like too many interest groups have started to fish in the muddy waters of cyberspace.

Therefore, users, if willing to regain their voice as active and contributing citizens, need to be careful in whose waters they swim.

Individuals have gained the means to describe, shape, and participate in the 'media bubble'. People have ceased to be the passive receivers of news contents because they can become both actors and authors in the ever-improving collaborative news technologies. A service like *Wikipedia* works as a collaborative whole, while structurally speaking, it is the nightmare of every publisher from the 'old' hierarchical media world. Since every user can add and contribute to online contents, texts have ceased to be final versions when published. They are no longer a finished entity but the source and starting point for an ongoing, ever-changing negotiation. Participatory media culture has taken its stand and it seems to be doing just fine.

In terms of ownership, those news technologies change everything. When a text is no longer authored by one person, but by thousands, it ceases to belong to anyone but the public (or the providing service, which, of course, is a problem). Simultaneously, it gains authority through the democratic principle of approval over time. A text, e.g. on *Wikipedia*, is re-authored and enhanced at random, based on the background and engagement of those who work on an entry. Once hooked up to the Internet, access is unlimited. This also means that both laymen and experts have equal access to those services and inspire each other in a world that does not classify its inhabitants in terms of social class, age, gender, or ethnicity.

News Stories as 'Open Source'

'Open source' is a term frequently used in computer programming, which refers to the accessibility of program codes. If a program is 'open source', it means that programmers can access its program code and examine how a program was written. Thus, computer experts can work on superior or more elegant solutions to technical problems and enhance the program for everyone's use. Open source programs have the chance to grow, i.e. to be improved, through common collaboration. It is high time similar thoughts entered not only education¹⁰ but also the news media.

"Never trust the teller, trust the tale" (Lawrence qtd. in Sontag, 1990, p. 9), is a statement that comes to mind in connection with the demand to be granted unburdened access to the essence of those tales. In traditional news media, the source of a story makes all the difference: was it a press release, a White-House official's statement, an e-mail by a befriended colleague, an assignment by an important advertiser, or an anonymous clue? Journalists and editors seek to protect their sources together with their modes of working. However, this kind of protection reminds one more of a cover-up. It is essential for the freedom of the press also to have the freedom to protect sources; however, it is not necessary to make it the rule.

¹⁰ The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for example, runs a system called "OpenCourseWare", where they provide free and open access to online posted course material by MIT faculty, such as data files and video streams of lectures.

With an open source spirit in the news media, people would finally have a chance to ‘tune in’ again (cf. Mindich 2005); a chance for a mutual public discourse, which could foster a more varied, more profound, and more open storytelling discourse in the new media. By reclaiming ownership on the very essence and origin of such sources, the interested public (comparable to the programmer in open source software) would be granted the means to exercise their right and duty of participation in the public sphere more profoundly. There is responsibility in ownership, and in a democracy where people should have the means to make informed decisions, this responsibility should also be with the people.

Conclusion

The starting point for this topic was a simple question: Who owns a story in the news media; the person who has experienced it (source/subject), the person who collects/broadcasts it (creator/mediator), or the society whose public discourse is affected by it (culture/society)? Like many supposedly simple questions, this one tends to become utterly complicated once one starts to think about it systematically from various angles. I hope I have been able to outline various perspectives on the matter and to show that each one of those three groups can rightfully claim story ownership depending on the viewpoint, position, and underlying objectives. However, online media provide a possibility and tendency for those three groups that can claim ownership to merge into just one. An open-source approach in the news media could help to bring the stories back to the people and the worlds they inhabit.

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