

Notes Towards a Definition of Generative Journalism



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Wednesday, November 11, 2020 -- Peter Pula

During the last eight months, a small group of Appreciative Inquiry practitioners has been exploring Generative Journalism.

In Appreciative Inquiry mode, [Mara Spruyt](#), [Derk van der Pol](#), and [Marijke Boessenkool](#) interviewed people from around the world.

Their inquiry was represented in media they made as they went. Podcasts were

produced and a large portion of the September edition of the [Appreciative Inquiry Practitioner](#), a professional journal, was dedicated to their subject.

By journeying with them, some things were confirmed and reinforced for me, some clarified, and some new notions came to life.

I offer these reflections here as notes towards a definition of Generative Journalism.

Defining Generative Journalism

Generative can be defined as: *able to produce or create new life.*

Journalism has been defined as: *the collection and editing of news for presentation through media characterized by a direct representation of facts or description of events without an attempt at interpretation.*

That last bit, the '*direct representation of facts or description of events without an attempt at interpretation*' is tricky.

What too often results from conventional journalistic practice is the representation of the reporter's narrative in which their subjects are stand-in characters. In this way it becomes a fiction.

When the stories
we tell ourselves
do not align with
our experience
we suffer
cognitive
dissonance.

This easily becomes colonizing and a subtle form of violence.

Events and facts are most often 'objects out there' and become abstractions, ideas, loosed from any useful connection to lived experience.

That's why so many people, when consuming news about events in which they were involved find themselves responding with thoughts like, 'that's not what happened.'

When the stories we tell ourselves do not align with our experience we suffer cognitive dissonance, our mental health is challenged, and damaging dissociation is right around the corner.

With all that in mind, I'd like to suggest we alter the definition a little.

Rather than *events and facts*, let's go with; *a direct representation of experiences and intentions*.

That's more honest. And, it takes a bit more work than smashing together a few people's quotes and calling it an objective and true representation of facts and events.

So, we wind up with a definition of **Generative Journalism** as: *The act of publishing media that:*

- *Directly represents people's experiences and intentions*
- *Is without interpretation*
- *Generates new life.*

Are We Really Journalists?

During this recent exploration of Generative Journalism, there was some doubt as to whether we would call ourselves journalists. Do we practice what those who call themselves journalists practice?

Maybe not, but what we do certainly does deliver on the first two points in the definition above, and quite possibly more stringently than most.

We get to choose what kind of journalist we want to be. So, with those first two fundamentals landed, the journalist who now transcends them by concerning themselves with *producing or creating new life*, becomes a Generative Journalist.

Generative Journalists focus on applying deep listening and the media-making crafts, to honour and reflect people's experiences, perspectives, intentions, and actions.

Honour Human Dignity

Another theme that arose in the recent exploration of Generative Journalism was a deep intention toward human dignity.

We realized we were each very much focussed on honouring each person with whom we come in contact.

Doing so has a humanizing effect on organizations, networks, and communities, in which our stories are published.

The focus on human dignity makes these stories grounded in reality and what is actually possible. We break from abstraction and get serious about real life, real experience. That deserves a place of honour.

People are the authors of their own stories. We offer our craft as a bridge to bring them into community. Their stories, not ours. We are midwives.

And, it is *generative*. There is life in it.

Respect Authorship

We all realized we shared stance toward ownership and authorship. We did not see the stories we were telling as ours. We did not take ownership of them. We each saw the stories we were bringing into the light to be the stories of those we were 'being present to.'

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Resist Interpretation

When I, as a generative journalist, try to make meaning of others' stories, I often find myself at odds with myself. I know that my perspective has no place in the interpretation of others' lives. Trying to get diversity to conform to one idea about what it all means has the effect of diminishing liveliness both in myself and in others.

There is a reason the effort to do so can cause writer's block, over-reach, and even burnout. It's disingenuous. Inauthentic. Unnatural. Dissociative.

During my travels with Mara, Marijke, and Derk we spoke of how we can feel the energy leave us when we analyze, interpret other people's stories.

What we've discovered is that it is more generative to share one story at a time and leave the meaning making to those who would bear witness to those stories on their own.

People will enter relationship with another's story from wherever it is they stand. This dynamic interaction, a collision of universes, sparks new life. That's where meaning is found.

This is how a shared narrative takes shape, in the dynamic interaction of deeply personal stories ... and the space between them.

Generative Journalism: A Healing Art

Our goal is to invite people into life-giving explorations of their circumstances, perspective, agency, and intentions. Then, we apply our craft to representing their story as well as we can, without interpretation.

There are marks of having done that well.

We know we've done our jobs as generative journalists well, when the person whose story we are honouring tells us they feel seen and understood through the media we've created together.

Another mark of a job well done is that our 'source' reports having given voice to things they didn't know were 'in them' and that those 'in' - sights resonate and enliven them.

Sometimes that will come with some strain and even some pain, growing pain.

Our sources even report feelings of being propelled *forward*.

It's Only Journalism If You Publish

So, now the next step beckons. We could be present to a person, inquire into what is alive for them, shape a media artifact, and gift it to them for their own enjoyment. That could be the end of it and some good would be done.

But, that's not journalism. To stop here leaves a lot on the table. By taking the next important step, more adventure awaits.

The definition of journalism includes the word '*publish*' which is: the act of issuing media for *public* distribution.

How Change Happens

Each published
story is
declaration of
self, efficacy,
and intention.
This is
courageous and
exciting.

Things happen when a person's story publicly presents their generative image of the future, steps they are taking in that direction, and what they would like, want, or need from the community to make those steps successful.

Each published story is declaration of self, efficacy, and intention. This is courageous and exciting.

Every story published cultivates space for others to recognize their own agency. The diversity in these stories **is so vast** that in time it breaks the bonds of homogenizing narrative. Every gift, every intention, every perspective, every act of creativity counts.

The more diversity the better. To cultivate it is an act social re-wilding and radical democracy.

Another thing that often happens is that people will come alongside people whose stories they've read, seen, or heard encourage them, and in early and new friendship, concern themselves with their aims.

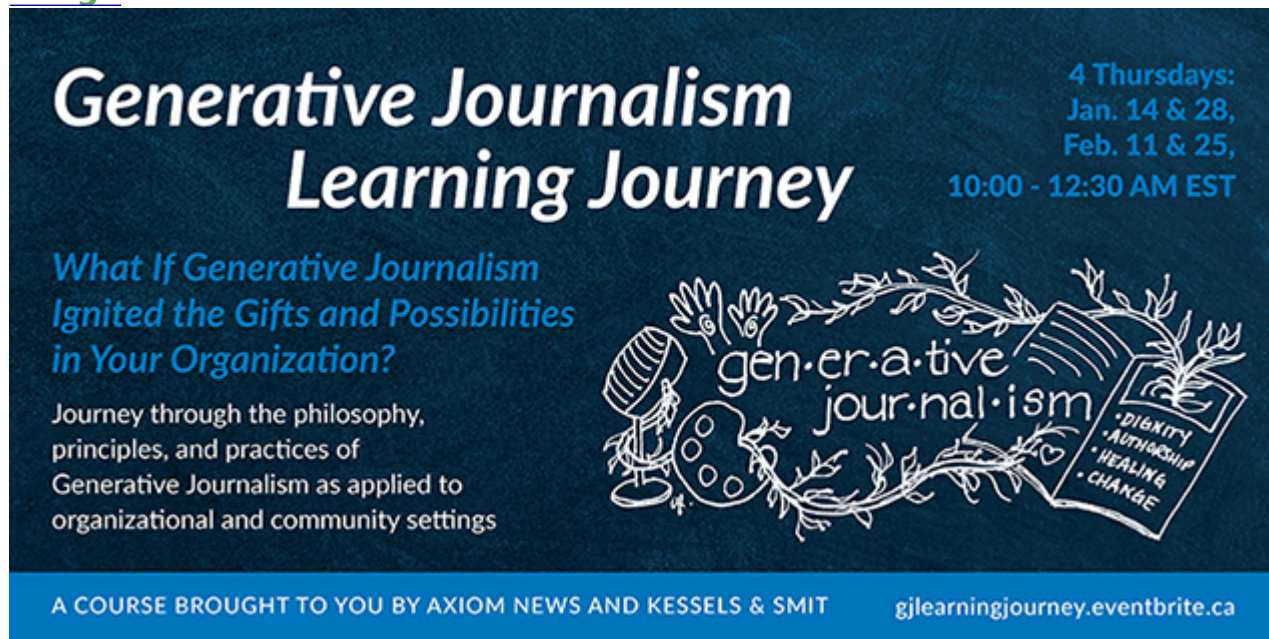
By these means Generative Journalism catalyzes change, not by propping up abstractions, but by honouring people, nurturing real life intentions and experiences, and bringing them into relationship with one another.

“Story by story we thicken the rope upon which we walk into our preferred and emerging future.”

Lead illustration by Yvonne Hollandy.

Upcoming Event

Image



**Generative Journalism
Learning Journey**

4 Thursdays:
Jan. 14 & 28,
Feb. 11 & 25,
10:00 - 12:30 AM EST

*What If Generative Journalism
Ignited the Gifts and Possibilities
in Your Organization?*

Journey through the philosophy,
principles, and practices of
Generative Journalism as applied to
organizational and community settings

gen·er·a·tive
jour·nal·ism

DIGNITY
AUTHENTICITY
HEALING
CHANGE

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