

NEWSPAPERS: BRIDGING PAGES TO PEOPLE THROUGH THE ART OF STORYTELLING IN *NEWS OF THE WORLD*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between newspaper readership and storytelling, from the tradition of oral storytelling to modern print media, through the 2020 American-made film *News of the World* on Netflix platform. Since the movie's main character Jefferson Kyle Kidd's practice of telling stories through newspapers, is a symbol of the transition of the tradition from oral culture to written culture, this study aims to explore the changes in cultural narrative and social dynamics that occurred as a result of the widespread use of the printing press, newspapers in particular, and is embedded in this vision of storytelling as an outgrowth of oral culture. Thus, the study endeavors to enrich the literature by offering new insights into how media elements, particularly during the transition from oral culture to written culture, are embraced within the social sphere. Additionally, it explores how the film exhibits this transformative effect on society in Texas, where the movie is set. Through an interdisciplinary lens informed by folklore, literature, and cultural studies, the study traces the historical shift from orality to print as dramatized in *News of the World* and aims to examine the parameters of storytelling in the transition from oral culture to written culture. For this purpose, following the character of Kidd, it will utilize close reading and content analysis techniques through a film example to understand and examine in detail the role of newspapers in cultural change. The study will essentially begin with a research question framed around the position of media elements in this transition. It will consider the central role

of the newspaper in storytelling in the film and also explore the role of the newspaper in facilitating the transition from storytelling in oral culture to written storytelling through media usage.

Keywords: *News of the World, Narrative, Newspaper, Traditional Storytelling, Oral Culture.*

GAZETELER: DÜNYADAN HABERLER FİLMİ ÜZERİNDEN HİKÂYE ANLATMA SANATIYLA SAYFALARI İNSANLARLA BULUŞTURMAK

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, gazete okurluğu ve hikâye anlatıcılığı arasındaki ilişkiyi, sözlü anlatı geleneğinden modern basılı medyaya kadar incelemektedir. Bu ilişki, Netflix platformunda yayınlanan 2020 Amerikan yapımı *Dünyadan Haberler* filmi üzerinden ele alınmaktadır. Filmin ana karakteri Jefferson Kyle Kidd'in gazeteler aracılığıyla hikâye anlatma pratiği, geleneğin sözlü kültürden yazılı kültüre geçişinin bir sembolüdür. Bu bağlamda, çalışma, matbaanın yaygın kullanımı ve özellikle gazetelerin kültürel anlatı ve sosyal dinamiklerde meydana getirdiği değişiklikleri keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu vizyonla hikâye anlatıcılığı, sözlü kültürün bir uzantısı olarak ele alınmıştır. Dolayısıyla, çalışma, özellikle sözlü kültürden yazılı kültüre geçiş sürecinde medya unsurlarının sosyal alanda nasıl benimsendiğine dair yeni iç görüler sunarak literatürü zenginleştirmeyi hedeflemektedir. Ayrıca, filmin Teksas'ta geçen olaylar aracılığıyla bu dönüşümün toplum üzerindeki etkisini sergilemesi, çalışma açısından önemlidir. Folklor, edebiyat ve kültürel çalışmalarla bilgilendirilmiş disiplinler arası bir bakış açısıyla, çalışma *Dünyadan Haberler* filminde dramatize edilen sözlü kültürden basılı döneme geçişin tarihsel izini sürmektedir. Bu bağlamda, söz konusu çalışma sözlü kültürden yazılı kültüre geçişte hikâye anlatıcılığının parametrelerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, Kidd karakterini takip edilip film üzerinden yakın okuma ve içerik analizi teknikleri kullanılarak gazetelerin kültürel değişimdeki rolü ayrıntılı bir şekilde anlaşılmalı ve incelenmeye çalışılacaktır. Böylece bu çalışma, gazete okurluğu ve hikâye anlatıcılığı arasındaki etkileşimi, tarihi ve kültürel bağlarıyla birlikte inceleyerek derin bir anlayış geliştirmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Dünyadan Haberler, Anlatı, Gazete, Geleneksel Hikâye Anlatıcılığı, Sözlü Kültür.*

INTRODUCTION

Oral Narratives: A Journey Through Storytelling Traditions

In his work “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” Roland Barthes states, “There are countless forms of narrative in the world... In this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed, narrative starts with the history of mankind. There is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative.” (1975: 237). By saying this, he emphasizes that although the forms of narrative have changed over time, “narrative” itself has always persisted. Perhaps people have always had the need to explain *things*, the desire to be listened to while explaining things, and the desire to meet others on a common ground through these things. Similar themes have been presented to communities in different geographies, under different names, in different languages, by different people, together with the common knowledge of that geography. This situation has created an oral culture tradition, which carries something from every society and is a product of common humanity. Also, Benjamin, while discussing the role of the storyteller and the functions of storytelling in society, notes that this art is not specific to any particular culture or community, but rather holds universal value (Benjamin, 2019).

However, the main oral culture according to Ong’s thesis is a transient, record-free society. All communication, including the first forms of communication technology, has originated from the oral process. Therefore, oral cultures are characterized by a legacy of collective memory or experience, which is passed down through oral storytellers to subsequent generations. In some respects, primary orality promotes personality patterns that are less introspective and more communal and externalized than those typical of literate people. In groups, oral communication brings individuals together (Ong, 1982, p. 68). This is where the oral tradition’s frameworks start; the need to preserve historical events gives rise to storytelling’s orality. This naturally gives rise to oral narratives.

But it can be also argued that when Ong (2013, p. 165) asserts, “an oral narrative does not come into existence only from experiences and historical events,” (2013) he implies that the creation of a narrative depends not only on the experiences being narrated but also on the medium through which it is conveyed and the manner in which the narrator articulates the story. Each form of content, whether verbal or written, is mediated by a narrator who employs their own language and style. Consequently, the language used in

narratives significantly influences both the comprehension of the content and the extent to which listeners can empathize or relate to the story. This situation have created a tradition practice of storytelling. This tradition is about continuing oral storytelling as a social and communal act in front of a particular community. In traditional storytelling, a narrator tells a predetermined story to a group of people while utilizing a variety of vocal tones, body language, and facial expressions to elicit responses and audience engagement. Here, not only the narrator but also the audience participates in the process of storytelling, and this act is done communally.

Thus, narration in old times is much more ritualistic and personal than the narration accomplished by postmodern tools of communication today. According to Jenkins (2006), where postmodern tools of communication spread stories quickly and across geographies by means of the digital medium and social networking, traditional narration takes place locally, in a setting where the narrator and the listener confront each other within the same physical space. This is made possible by an environment that results in a stronger emotional experience for the teller and the audience. Therefore, from this difference emanates a tradition that permits an academic discipline to emerge within the folds of tradition: that of the tradition of oral storytelling.

At that point, Sanders describes traditional storytelling in the oral culture period as follows;

“On endless winter nights, dozens of people, young and old, would gather around the brazier’s fire under the lamp light, listening eagerly to the storyteller’s tales and stories brought from the deserts. In an era without electricity, internet, and television, every story they heard was a binding connection to their past and culture. In this oral culture environment, people not only listened but also learned, gaining wisdom that they could not obtain through work, by listening to the storyteller, repeating what they heard, and absorbing the knowledge into their lives.” (Sanders, 2013, p. 30).

As may be inferred from Sanders’ words, oral tradition definitely fosters a place of socialization of humans. Such a ritual environment and community makes it possible to share culture, behavioral norms, and social memory. Being altogether near a bonfire promotes a feeling of togetherness – common pleasure, a feature that gets lost in current technologies of digital media storytelling.

It can be argued that the act of storytelling is one of the basic requirements of human nature. However, it also has a nature that rearranges and changes itself according to the spirit of the time. Undoubtedly, while the narrative forms of every civilization and tradition contribute to the social memory of the society in which they are produced, they also carry significant traces of the culture in which they are produced, as they are a common practice. Besides this, as shown in V. Propp's research on fairy tales, folk storytelling may also have rituals common to all oral cultures. V. Propp analyzes fairy tales according to their structural features and reveals that there are both "fixed" and "variable" elements in fairy tales. The movements or actions performed by individuals are fixed elements, which Propp calls *functions*. According to him, while these functions are similar in all tales, the environment and characters are variable elements (Propp, 2001). And these common functions can be regarded as the carriers of collective memory during the telling of fairy tales. Based on this work of Propp, it can be claimed that storytellers and their stories have been the main carriers that will ensure the functionality of cultural memory and the connection between the past and the present. Long before the development of written media, similar kinds of mechanisms for the preservation and transmission of collective memories and cultural values were developed in oral cultures around the world, through stories. Even though they have different names, every civilization and every society has its own stories and storytellers; and they are both guardians and carriers of social, historical and cultural codes. Hence, they transmit the past and the information recorded in the cultural memory to the society within the framework of the determined structure and rules. Through re-recording, remembering and transmitting activities, they also ensure that the memory-related codings continue their mental flow, and on the other hand, they transform into temporal and spatial ones and are remembered and experienced by the participating group. (Assmann, 2001, p. 57).

NARRATIVE NEXUS: INSIGHTS FROM *NEWS OF THE WORLD*

"I read the news to anyone with 10 cents and the time to hear it..."

Captain Jefferson Kyle Kidd/ *News of the World*

After discussing the distinctive features of traditional storytelling, it is pertinent to examine the film *News of the World* (2020). This film, which

tells the dangerous but also adventurous journey of an American Civil War veteran who travels from town to town reading the news in Texas to find a new home for an orphan girl, adeptly illustrates the transition from traditional oral storytelling to print media, exemplified through Jefferson Kyle Kidd's practice of reading newspapers. In the movie, main character Kidd's use of newspapers to share stories symbolizes the shift from oral to written culture, and the movie vividly can depict the effects of this transition on society and its characters. By striking a balance between the intimacy of oral storytelling, which brings people together on a personal level, and the broader reach of print media, capable of reaching mass audiences, the film highlights the nature and consequences of this cultural shift. This nuanced portrayal allows researchers to examine the film through various academic lenses, including folklore, literature, and cultural studies. This is a practice that deconstructs the act of thinking from the perspective of only one discipline in academic studies; and is important in this respect. Exciting prospects for multidisciplinary research arise when scholars examine the concepts of storytelling and the relationship between storytellers and audiences in *News of the World* since the story of the movie can be related to more general cultural changes in media studies especially through *newspapers*. That is why *News of the World* is not only a great subject for film and media studies, but also for exploring broader cultural and historical phenomena in the field of social studies in terms of oral and written culture. Hence, this aspect contributes significantly to the prominence of the film within this scholarly discourse.

The film's narrative begins with an opening scene of the main character, Kidd, in 1870 North Texas, which I will associate with traditional storytelling in the article. In this first scene, a mixed village population consisting of men, women and children are all sitting on chairs in a gathering place, and Kidd, after introducing himself, greets the people by saying "I am here tonight to bring you all the news from across this great world of ours" and "no time for reading newspaper, am I right?" After receiving approval from the audience with his words, he starts reading the news with the words "and maybe just for tonight we can escape our troubles (02:53)." ¹ At that point, after greeting the people, which is a common element in traditional storytelling, the practice of "trying to distract them from the chaos of daily

¹ Quotations from the film will be provided with the timestamp of the scene in parentheses.

life for a moment by involving them in other experiences with different narratives” is demonstrated to the audiences of Kidd in this scene.

While the movie *News of the World*, adapted from Paulette Jiles’ novel of the same name, already hints at the relationship between media elements and the newspaper, as it bears the name of a famous newspaper ², it also provides a clue to the audience early in the film. Additionally, in an early scene where the film’s other significant character, Johanna, is introduced, the body of the slain man is covered with a newspaper featuring the headline “Texas says no! This is a white man’s country (05:42).” creates significant connotations for the audience, inviting them to examine the film’s media elements.

In the movie, as Kidd travels from town to town, reading various news to the local people, the audience becomes actively engaged in this act rather than passively listening. As the news is read, they react to Kidd in various ways; sometimes they express surprise at the stories told, offer commentary on the news being read, engage in conversations among themselves, even argue, applaud stories they appreciate, laugh at those they find amusing, and overall enjoy themselves. In essence, the act of reading news from newspapers turns into a sort of traditional storytelling practice, and during this storytelling activity, those gathered in the same space socialize in a manner reminiscent of traditional storytelling, thereby transforming storytelling practice into a social event. However, in this context, unlike traditional narratives, oral culture is presented to the reader through a distractwritten cultural element, namely the newspaper. Thus, within the narrative framework of the film itself, the tradition of storytelling began to change during the storytelling era of the 1800s, which marks the narrative period of the film. Consequently, the main character, Kidd, as a storyteller, receives the story from written media and conveys it as an oral media product. Thus, written and oral cultures have begun to engage.

Explaining the effects of oral and written communication on the relationships between people in his study, Ong considers that oral communication unites people, while writing and reading are actions that a person does alone and returns to his inner world. Ong sees the spatial

² <https://www.newsoftheworld.co.uk/> From 1843 to 2011, *The News of the World* was a weekly national “red top” tabloid newspaper that was released in the United Kingdom every Sunday.

dimension of writing as well as the printing press as entities that confine words to a certain space. He emphasizes that every text contains both visual and auditory elements, and underscores that the printing press, unlike anything before it, relentlessly locks words into space (2013). The shift from oral culture to written culture has definitely posed some challenges, especially for local communities. It is a complex process that involves both oral and written traditions, and they each have an impact on and enhance one another within society.

In *News of the World*, the protagonist, much like traditional storytellers, shares news from newspapers with the local folks in Texas and gets paid for it, almost as if he is telling a story. Therefore, he takes on the role of a storyteller. However, what makes him different from traditional storytellers is that he reads stories directly from newspapers while also adding his own comments and adjusting the stories based on how his audience reacts. This blending of oral and written storytelling traditions highlights the evolving nature of cultural expression and communication in local society as depicted in the movie.

In the film, the audience's reaction to Kidd reading the federal news is addressed prominently. The public makes serious criticisms about government developments during the presentation of federal news. In particular, news such as the abolition of slavery and granting slaves the right to vote lead to significant debate and emotional reactions among the audience. These reactions are expressed with harsh phrases such as "nonsense" and "to hell with the president". Those who support such reactions reveal their emotional responses with applause. However, in the midst of this tense atmosphere, the situation escalates further when northern soldiers enter the community venue and a fight ensues. The discussions turn into a fierce conflict between the audience and the northern soldiers. However, Kidd, the newspaper reader, appears unexpectedly and takes a step to calm society. "We are all hurting. All of us. But I am thinking we got a part to play in all of this as well. There is more than rain and Indians and northern blues troubling our roads. I have seen it myself, coming in from Wichita falls, yeah, we are all hurting. These are difficult times...(18:44)" he says, acting as a kind of opinion leader. This leads to Kidd being perceived as a respected and wise figure in society. This attitude of his is reminiscent of folk storytellers who rely on oral tradition. Folk storytellers play an important role in keeping society together and ensuring solidarity. Kidd's assumption of this role makes him a figure similar to folk storytellers

in oral culture. Hence, he navigates the reactions of his audience to the federal news he reads, Kidd not only informs but also influences their perceptions and reactions, embodying the evolving nature of cultural expression and communication. Therefore, Kidd's efforts to keep society together and his listenable qualities remind the audience of folk storytellers and enable them to understand this character at a deeper level. This situation reminds the audience of the film about the function of traditional folk storytelling to ensure the unity of society and convey wisdom. As he navigates the reactions of his audience to the federal news he reads, Kidd not only informs but also influences their perceptions and reactions, embodying the evolving nature of cultural expression and communication.

Any storyteller, by drawing the ideal savior figure, actually glorifies the names of those who act on behalf of society, fighting its battles (Boratav, 2003, p. 50). The idealization of the person who assumes the responsibilities of the society he leads stems from the enormous burden of this responsibility. It is no coincidence that the first examples of the genre in ancient epics used the perspective of the mythical period. According to G. Nikolayevič Pospelov, the narrators of these epics, possessing unshakable tranquility and omniscience, seem like beings who have transcended this world (Pospelov, 1985). Furthermore, traditional folk storytellers often serve as wise and respected opinion leaders within their communities, a role that is crucial for maintaining social cohesion and solidarity (Boratav, 2002).

There is a complex theme uncovered in the film of the audience in the scene with Kidd reading the federal news. Audiences' response to the signing of serious criticisms of the government regarding federal news becomes the cue for the rise of heated arguments and emotionalistic responses. At the same time, Kidd's emergence in this tension scene to assure people of a significant mishap or to calm them down brings forward the respected, wise integrator role. His functions and actions here reiterate the role of folk storytellers in restoring solidarity and social cohesion, which helps the audiences grasp the reminder about the function of storytelling in keeping unity and transferring wisdom. In this way, Kidd becomes a great example of such an archetype as a savior-storyteller who, by integrating the image of an ideal savior, passes the valued figures of authorities and their actions forward, just as the narrators in Pospelov's work did.

On the one hand, despite Mr. Farley's attempt to have him read his own newspaper, the Erath Journal, Kidd rejects this offer, stating that Farley's

newspaper is for propaganda purposes and declaring, “I see it, no of that is not news” (1:06:15). Instead, Kidd engages the public, tells a story of what the oppressed people achieved, and moves the audience into enthusiasm and excitement. The story Kidd tells strengthens the spirit of solidarity and unity in society and raises the morale of the people. This event highlights the critical role storytellers play in society and the unifying power of stories. Mr. Farley perceives this situation as a threat and tries to kill Kidd and Johanna. When Kidd and Mr. Farley come face to face during Mr. Farley’s attack, and Mr. Farley persistently asks why Kidd does not read his newspaper to the public, Kidd, adopting the role of a peacemaker and a sage personality, says, “The war is over, Mr. Farley. we have to stop fighting sometime (1:10:56). And at that moment, one of the young people listening to Kidd’s stories shoots Mr. Farley and says “I love your stories, (1:12:06)” to Kidd, emphasizing how influential and important Kidd’s narratives are to society. This scene eloquently demonstrates the power of stories and the ability of storytellers to hold society together.

Besides that, Kidd’s purpose when reading a newspaper is not only to provide information to the audience but also to entertain them and distract them from their troubles. This is clearly expressed in Kidd’s opening statement, “I am looking for suitable readings, something to take us away from our troubles (38:50).” A listener said to Kidd, “I enjoyed your reading, cap. You take us away from our hard thoughts (39:30).” These statements show that Kidd aims not only to convey information but also to delight and lift the morale of the audience. This approach is similar to the aim of traditional storytellers; because storytellers aim to provide not only information but also entertainment and moral support to their listeners. Therefore, Kidd’s practice of reading newspapers is not limited to just conveying news but also aims to strengthen the spirit and morale of the community.

Furthermore, the presentation of oral storytelling through a written media element in the film is intriguing. In the film, an experience expressed by a curious young man during Kidd and Johanna’s journey on a horse carriage reflects a reality that the media, and especially print media, have difficulties facing major events. The young man tells Kidd, “I ain’t never heard of reading news as a business before, (1:12:29)” implying that this type of information transfer, namely storytelling, is no longer as common as in previous periods. Kidd, on the other hand, accepts this perception and states that he used to be a printer and printed newspapers, while emphasizing that

the war came and everything was gone. With the expression “when it was over, it was all gone (1:13:03)” of Kidd, it may indicate that the media and print media are facing difficulties and may even disappear due to the impact of the war. This may reinforce the idea that major events and challenging times can impact or even weaken print media. This situation also strengthens the idea that oral expression has played a fundamental role in human communication throughout history and has continued to survive major events. In this context, this observation made through the media can highlight the fragility of print media and the durability of oral expression including act of oral storytelling.

In the closing scene of the film, a theatrical performance is presented and Kidd performs as if he were telling a story with his cane. The crowd watches enthusiastically, laughing and applauding. Then, Kidd greets the public, acting almost like an entertainer. Johanna stands beside him, holding his hand as they greet the audience together (1:53:38). In this scene, it is clearly seen that the storytelling conveyed through the newspaper is intertwined with traditional performing arts. This storytelling practice, combined with performing arts, continues to change and develop under the influence of print media and reach the masses. This highlights how storytelling can be presented in different forms through media and how it interacts with cultural backgrounds.

FINAL MUSINGS: PARTING THOUGHTS

Stories can be conveyed in any form through which people can communicate. Of course, there is no obligation to write them down, stage them, or display them to be considered as stories. Moreover, it can be said that the oldest and most commonly used form of all narrative types is the oral telling of stories by a narrator. Print media, such as newspapers, serves as a powerful tool for communication in the movie of *News of the World*, which is the main source of this study, illustrating how characters and society undergo significant transformations. Kidd’s method of sharing knowledge and narratives through newspapers reflects a profound shift in how information is disseminated within society. This evolution is intertwined with the development of mass media and contemporary communication technologies. While the movie primarily discusses the impact of printed media on society, it also subtly touches upon the transition to today’s digital communication tools. Within this context, *News of the*

World offers an insightful analysis of how communication methods have evolved over time and the consequential effects on societal relations. Through its portrayal of the changing landscape of information dissemination, the film prompts viewers to consider the broader implications of these shifts, both historically and in the present day. Thus, *News of the World* serves as a compelling exploration of the dynamic relationship between communication technologies and societal change.

In many ways, Kidd's reading of newspapers bears resemblance to traditional storytelling. Firstly, Kidd's oral recounting of the stories in the film mirrors the conventions of traditional storytelling, where stories are often shared audibly within the community. This auditory mode of storytelling allows for direct communication and engagement with the audience, fostering a sense of connection and involvement. Moreover, during the time period depicted in the film, Kidd's newspaper reading practice serves as a communal activity, bringing the community together to share news and stories. This communal aspect is central to traditional storytelling, as the storyteller often participates in and strengthens community bonds through their narratives. One of the contributions of oral narratives is that they prevent the alienation between individuals, establish some values in the listeners, continue the social relations between them, and enable them to know the outside world by allowing them to understand the past, present and future (Tingöy, 2006, p. 1). There is a similar situation in the movie. If we focus on the places where Kidd read various news, we can observe that people of different age groups, men and women, come together and sit on chairs, waiting with curious eyes for Kidd to read the news, trying to learn "something" from the news written about the past, present and possible future.

Additionally, I can add that Kidd has the ability to interact directly with the articles and news he reads, particularly during live performances. This interactive element allows him to engage with the audience and adapt his reading based on their reactions. Like traditional storytellers who adjust their performance based on audience feedback, Kidd shapes his reading according to the interaction he has with the listeners, enhancing the immersive experience for all involved.

However, Kidd's newspaper reading practice differs from traditional storytelling in some respects. In this context, the most important distinguishing feature is the use of written text during storytelling.

Throughout the film, Kidd reads from newspapers, which contain written texts. In traditional storytelling, narratives are typically based on oral tradition, not written texts. Therefore, the texts Kidd reads diverge from the tradition of traditional storytelling in this aspect. These distinctions illustrate that while Kidd's narrative practice is rooted in the storytelling tradition of oral culture, it represents an adaptation to the "modern world" of the era depicted in the film. For all these reasons, the movie of *News of The World* offers researchers a rich content to understand and interpret the place of the media in social relations and the transformative effect of newspapers on social ties in the transition period between oral culture and written culture. In other words, in this film, the role of the newspaper becomes evident as an important tool in the transition process from oral culture to written culture. Through Kidd's newspaper reading, he presents stories to the public in written form, emerging as a form of communication distinct from the traditional tradition of oral narrative. The use of the newspaper shows that storytelling is not only based on an oral tradition, but can also be transmitted through a written medium. This reflects the evolution of storytelling at a time when forms of communication and cultural practices in society were changing and evolving. The newspaper allows stories to reach a wider audience and at the same time preserves the oral tradition by ensuring its continuation. The role of the newspaper thus reflects the changing nature of storytelling and the evolution of cultural communication in the transition from oral to written culture.

In this film, the journey of two characters who do not understand each other's language and whose ages are quite different, as well as their search for maybe "themselves," the theme of bonding is created through the story. Just as Kidd and Johanna's story is presented as a narrative to us, the film's audience, words—whether written or spoken—create a story. As Kidd tells Johanna, "See all those words printed in a line one after the other? Put them all together and you have a story (28.40)." These simple yet profound words encapsulate the essence of Kidd's role; they bridge the gap between oral and written traditions, reminding us that stories, in all their forms, have the power to connect, heal, and inspire.

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