Chapter 5
Writing Media Stories – The Socio-Technical Care Work of Storytelling

The previous chapter showed that guiding visitors as a form of storytelling is an embodied achievement. In this respect, this chapter focuses on the tedious work of making stories for newsletters, blogs, and social media. Usually, this work is invisible to media consumers, who only see the output in the form of a finished story. Thus, I depict the 'invisible' circumstance of fragility in the production of media stories and claim that the making of stories is a fragile assemblage that needs socio-material effort to be maintained (see Coban and Wenten 2021). In Nairobi's tech scene, the fragility originates from the lack of content that fits into technoscientific norms, and from the often missing reliable technical infrastructures that are necessary to perform public relations (PR). As such, I argue that the norms of what technoscientific stories from Kenya should be about and how those stories should be distributed globally make the writing of media stories a tedious endeavor, constantly in need of socio-technical care.

These claims are based on insights from my working participant observation when I supported a makerspace's PR staff during two different time periods. I encountered various PR practices, such as the production of newsletters, writing of blog entries, and 'feeding' of social media channels. The public communication work I participated in was marked by very different circumstances: during one of my research stays, the makerspace had only opened its doors a couple of months earlier and, thus, had set its PR focus on writing newsletters that covered the work and possibilities at the venue. Two monthly newsletters were written; one for international funders and one for the makerspace's paying members. A year later, the makerspace moved to a huge building in order to: a) enlarge the makerspace itself, and b) establish a hardware hub in Nairobi

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by offering offices to hardware startups. Hence, during that whole research stay, the makerspace was a construction site, yet the public communication strategy had broadened to also feed the website's blog and various social media channels on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

In the following, I show that the writing of media stories includes the affective and socio-material handling of the lack of 'suitable' content and technical infrastructures. The consequences are that storytelling is a fragile endeavor that requires collaborative socio-technical care and that the reproduction of the technoscientific master narrative's norms seems easier in the face of missing innovation stories.

5.1 Writing Stories along Technoscientific Narrative Norms

An ongoing component of the makerspace's monthly newsletter was a short introduction of a makerspace member and their innovative project. The public relations employees perceived the writing of those short pieces as tiresome. Usually, the process starts with the employee's introduction to a member that the management finds interesting. As such, in 2016 when I was entrusted with writing newsletter stories, I was introduced to a makerspace member called John, who was working on a locally manufactured version of a ram pump, used to pump water from the river to farmers' hilly fields. After the brief introduction, we agreed on an interview date and met two days later. During the interview, I stuck to the questions which had been collectively compiled by the staff of the makerspace beforehand and recorded the conversation. After the interview, I sat down and listened to the recording in order to write down the interesting parts of his story. I decided, rather instinctively, that his background, the challenges he had faced as an engineer, his project idea, and the benefits he gained from working at the makerspace would be of interest to both of the target groups of the newsletters – funders and members. Thus, I wrote a story about John – three-quarters of a Word page was the requirement made by one of the makerspace's heads – and sent it to the staff (Research Diary, June 27, 2016). They edited the story and, to my surprise, shortened it to one-third of a Word page. The edited story was sent to John himself, asking his permission to publish it in the newsletter. Since he made several comments, we needed to edit the story again before finally publishing it in the newsletter under the heading "Getting to know the makerspace's members".

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In the final newsletter, the story was entitled "John Owino – An Environmental Technologist Who Farms Hibiscus"; it was illustrated with a picture of him in front of a computer screen showing a digital model of his ram pump:

> "It is all about water, water, water, living as a farmer". Being a farmer himself, John (43) observed the need to gain better access to river water and its distribution to the farmers' fields. Thus, he sought to develop a hydraulic ram pump which runs on the kinetic energy of the river water to pump water to different farms and homesteads in his area. In the spirit of solving local community problems, John wants to build a locally manufactured version of the ram pump which is adapted to the specific needs of the local environment like the filtering of contaminated water and dropping water levels due to the seasonality of the rivers. … Before being a member at Gearbox, he explains, he only had access to welding machines, which produced inaccurate work, and to material like PVC, which cracks easily due to the pressure inside a ram pump. (Gearbox newsletter, June 17, 2016)

This particular process of writing newsletter stories and the quoted result above fit the technoscientific narrative norms of how to fabricate and tell a technology story. Most importantly, a story should briefly and excitingly cover a heroic entrepreneur and a charismatic technology that has a positive social impact in their local context (see Chapter 3). As exemplified by John's story, the idea of a locally manufactured ram pump constitutes an entrepreneur's success story. The reader is able to anticipate how the pump will solve farmers' water problems in hilly areas. Thus, the social impact of John's technological solution becomes clear. Additionally, the storyline emphasizes the success of the makerspace model, namely to empower people to build their ideas through access to high-quality machines. As such, John's challenges with machines that did not work well were only told in order to show that those challenges were solved by the makerspace.

The fact that the content of the makerspace's blog entries has not changed since my research stays in 2016 and 2017 indicates that the same norms of storytelling still exist. The stories still cover Kenya's need to experience a Fourth Industrial Revolution and, thus, the need for policies to support building its own national innovation system and numerous makerspaces that foster innovation and industrialization. In this manner, stories talk about trainings and academies for university students and the informalized sector (jua kali) taking place at the makerspace. The same number of stories feature machines,

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projects, and ideas that promise to have social impact, such as speed governors to prevent vehicles from exceeding the national speed limits, or vein locators and fetal heart monitors for clinical use. Visits by international and local politicians and representatives of international companies such as Tesla are also well documented[1] (Gearbox 2021).

5.2 The Lack of Innovation Stories

Stories about science and technology favor neither the members' daily lives and their setbacks, nor the tedious work of storytelling itself. As it turned out, writing stories for the next newsletter – which was due two weeks after the publication of John's story – was more difficult than expected. The PR employee and I tried to find another member to write about, but as the makerspace was in its setup phase at that time, paying members were scarce and none of the other few existing members wanted to talk to us. I did not understand why until somebody explained this phenomenon to me: the majority of members who work at the makerspace are secretive because the enforcement of intellectual property rights in Kenya's tech scene is low for various reasons (see Chapter 9). Therefore, most of the members do not even interact with staff or other makers in order to hide/protect their ideas and prototypes, fearing a loss of their intellectual property (Research Diary, July 13, 2016). This fact seemed to conflict with everything I thought and had read about open co-working spaces, where knowledge is shared with others to create new technology.

Leaving my astonishment aside, I looked for other stories to write about and found – obviously – the other users of the makerspace who were willing to talk to me. They were mostly interns and, as such, still students enrolled at universities. However, they did not seem to be the right material for newsletter stories, as one of the heads of the makerspace confirmed. According to him, young people strive to build high-tech printed circuit board (PCB) solutions and not innovations that are marketable to the majority of Kenya, which he

1 As mentioned in Chapter 4, visitors to Nairobi's tech scene bring (international) awareness of the local technology development. Thus, it is a high priority for PR staff to write instantly about well-known or high-ranking visitors. For example, numerous members and employees of the makerspace got to know about it through the media coverage of Obama's and Zuckerberg's visits (Interviews, makerspace member, June 2016; mechanical engineer, April 2017). As such, writing about famous visitors advertises technological ideas, startups, and workplaces.

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called the "bottom of the pyramid market". In his opinion, the students' behavior is a problem because they are not ready to think and prototype in business terms (Research Diary, June 20, 2016). Adding his strong opinion to the other constraints of finding the right story to tell, I felt frustrated because I could not identify a suitable subject to write about. The lack of content made my colleague feel the same: "My brain is drained", he told me. The newsletter was to be published the next day and we were still looking for the "big stories that have to be told to the funders" (Research Diary, June 28, 2016).

During my research stay in 2017, the PR requirements were even more ambitious than the previous year, although the makerspace was a construction site with even fewer maker stories to tell. Every second day, new posts and tweets had to be written for the Facebook and Twitter pages, the blog needed stories twice a week, and a newsletter had to be sent out every two weeks (Research Diary, March 30, 2017). These deadlines put the PR staff under such pressure that they began documenting almost everything regarding the makerspace's construction process in order to create any content at all. Interviews were conducted with the makerspace's staff to highlight what everyone liked about the place; the list included anything from furniture, staff, the laser cutter, and the table shaped like the African continent to the soldering station, which, funnily enough, was mentioned by the non-engineering secretary (Research Diary, March 23, 2017). The days were peppered with random walks through the building to photograph people building partitions, sandpapering tables, designing co-working tables, and repairing ceiling lights to use to post progress updates (Research Diary, March 31, 2017; April 26, 2017; April 27, 2017) (Figure 5).

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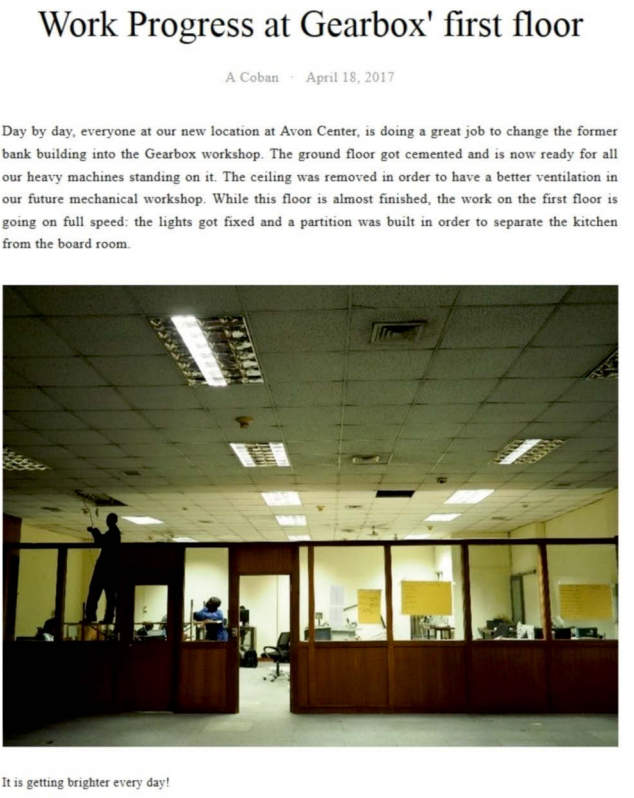
Figure 5: Screenshot of a blog entry on the makerspace's construction progress (Research Diary, April 18, 2017).



Work Progress at Gearbox' first floor

A Coban · April 18, 2017

Day by day, everyone at our new location at Avon Center, is doing a great job to change the former bank building into the Gearbox workshop. The ground floor got cemented and is now ready for all our heavy machines standing on it. The ceiling was removed in order to have a better ventilation in our future mechanical workshop. While this floor is almost finished, the work on the first floor is going on full speed: the lights got fixed and a partition was built in order to separate the kitchen from the board room.

It is getting brighter every day!

Eventually, the progress updates became repetitive because making a new makerspace is a process that takes time and does not regularly deliver exciting news. Thus, an external PR consultant criticized the progress updates as being boring and childishly written. He and the management demanded stories about successful makers, who had already built technology with social impact, even if they were only slightly connected to the makerspace (Research Diary, April 20, 2017). Sticking to the norms about technology from Kenya was the most appreciated strategy to "please some funders" (Research Diary, July 13, 2016). Another attempt to remedy the lack of content was to write about the machines available at the makerspace, because those stories also functioned

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as advertisements for the tools and devices it offered (Research Diary, June 29, 2016).

This tedious procedure of writing stories shows that the norms of what technoscientific stories from Kenya should be about define the existence of 'suitable' content and that this normative storytelling is negotiated affectively. Following Ingmar Lippert (2014: 42), who analyzes what happens if data and facts are missing in the creation of accountability, I asked 'what happens when there is no suitable content to write about?' The empirical data shows that bodily stress is one result, that is, the PR staff handle the lack of content affectively. Exhaustion from thinking about possible new topics for newsletters was a dominant emotion in light of the lack of suitable makers to interview, because they were either secretive or did not fit into the master narrative of technoscience (Research Diary, June 28, 2016). Feelings of boredom met those of anxiety when the construction of the workplace became the only coverable topic, with no exciting innovation to be seen.

However, following the norms of technoscientific narrations is a necessity to 'stabilize' (Czarniawska 2004: 43) the celebratory story about Kenyan technology development that furthers acknowledgment, investment, and the re-scripting of Kenya's positionality in global technocapitalism. As such, the writing of media stories is a tedious negotiation between the required maintenance of particular content and daily life deviations. Further, I claim that the putative lack of content signifies what narrative content is important in a story about innovation and how those stories differ from daily life contexts: processual aspects of scientific daily work life such as fear and boredom are absent from media stories. Thus, certain success stories are continually repeated and context specificities, such as the fear of losing intellectual property or the pressure to develop technology for the poor, are not included (see Chapters 6 and 9). Consequently, the outcomes of the negotiations between narrative norms and daily life reproduce the single story about technology development in Nairobi (see Chapter 3).

5.3 The Absence of Technical Infrastructures

In addition to the continuous search for content, other challenges of writing stories include the technical requirements, such as electricity, internet, and other connective devices that are necessary to conduct public relations work. Technical infrastructures are usually taken for granted as long as they are

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working smoothly (Star 1999: 380); however, power cuts, slow internet, and missing devices make them tangible as complicating factors of (digital) PR work. It is precisely these complications that show that the making of stories is a socio-technical effort in which humans and non-humans mutually care for distributing stories globally.

In this vein, I draw on Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's (2012: 198) socio-material understanding of care as being "concomitant to life" and thus a "vital necessity". According to her, care practices signify who or what is vulnerable and precarious (ibid.). Until now, only a few scholars have studied care in technology work. Regardless of what they study empirically – be it IT security (Kocksch et al. 2018), water infrastructure maintenance (Buser and Boyer 2021), scientific data production (Pinel et al. 2020), or agile technology development (Coban and Wenten 2021) – they all draw on Puig de la Bellacasa's understanding of care. Thus, they claim that care practices are not only found in (feminized) reproductive work, but are also present between humans and non-humans in the sense of "taking care" of sociotechnical assemblages (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011: 93).

The socio-material interdependency in the process of writing stories was most evident when the makerspace moved to a new building located in the industrial area in Nairobi, an area which suffers heavily from daily power cuts. As far as the work of writing and publishing media stories goes, no electricity means no internet and, thus, no chance to upload the written stories. However, even with electricity, the wi-fi at the makerspace was still too weak to work smoothly, as this research diary excerpt illustrates:

> It's super annoying. Neither of us have an account to access the website's blog. Thus, we tried to publish our blog post via the secretary's account. To do that, the relevant pictures had to be on her computer so we were asking around for a flash drive to transfer the pictures to her computer. But then, the pictures couldn't be uploaded because they were too big. Also annoying… After I converted the pictures into smaller files in Paint, we met again at the secretary's computer to upload them. The four pictures for the blog post took half a day to finally be uploaded. The slowness of the internet is really cumbersome and makes every step tedious! (Research Diary, April 11, 2017)

Research diary entries bemoaning the slowness of the internet and the resulting constraints on fulfilling the PR tasks were a daily feature during the con-

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struction of the new makerspace. Be it four pictures to illustrate the blog post or posting a Tweet or a single Instagram photo – uploading and publishing each of these took at least half a day (Research Diary, March 31, 2017). It was not only the slow internet that hampered the PR work, but also the misplaced cable that connects the makerspace's camera to a computer, the missing administrator password to install software on the makerspace's computers, and the nonexistent work smartphone on which to install Instagram: all of these complicated the accomplishment of the various outstanding PR tasks (Research Diary, April 11; 18, 2017).

After we had finally managed to upload the four pictures for the blogpost mentioned above, the secretary was very careful with every subsequent step of the publishing process, such as pasting the text, headline, author, etc. into the content management system of the makerspace's website (Research Diary, April 11, 2017) illustrating that, once storytellers achieve the creation of content, they handle the story with tremendous care lest it be lost in disrupted infrastructures.

5.4 Conclusion: The Careful Making of Media Stories

The dependence on technical infrastructures reveals that the PR staff are not the only actors who are responsible for making PR work. Technical devices also support the staff in bridging the absence of infrastructures. As such, socio-material 'hacks' such as using the software 'Gramblr' on a private laptop to upload photos to Instagram, using Paint to minimize photo files, or using the secretary's computer to upload the PR work were in constant demand.

According to Alev Coban and Klara-Aylin Wenten (2021: 60), the emotional (and bodily) exhaustion of technology workers points to the things they care about and the things that care for them. The above depicted ethnographic insights into the creation of newsletters, blogs, and social media posts about science, technology, and innovation show that storytelling is laborious and emotionally strenuous work. It requires storytellers who care about writing stories according to technoscientific norms even when it is almost impossible to find such stories. In addition, storytelling requires technical devices that support the global distribution of stories. Overall, the lack of innovation stories and the absence of technical infrastructures make the creation of stories a time-consuming and exhaustive task; a fragile endeavor that is in need of affective and collaborative socio-technical care.

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