

Narrativization of the News: An Introduction

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Traditionally, communication research regarded mass media content as strictly divided between fact and fiction. On the one hand there were the "serious" genres of reality-oriented news and current affairs, and on the other hand, entertainment genres oriented to lighthearted "escape" into fantasy stories (Schramm, 1949). Recently, however, scholars have come to believe that news coverage is also a kind of storytelling (Campbell, 1991; Ettema & Glasser, 1988; Fiske & Hartley, 1978; Liebes & Bar-Nahum, 1994; Manoff, 1986; Roeh, 1989). And in the profession, the by-now classic instructions of former NBC news president Reuven Frank to his staff, stating that "every news story should . . . display the attributes of fiction, of drama," are among the most quoted lines in studies of journalism (from Newcomb, 1974, to Campbell, 1991). Whether scholarship is only following developments in the profession or foreseeing the trend—the product of the increasing commercialism of conglomerate ownership—journalism is increasingly concerned with entertaining—that is, with telling a good story.

At the same time, entertainment is co-opting the reporting of "real life." The boundaries between fact and fiction are substantially lowered when victims and villains of crime news reports sell their stories as instant "docudramas," presidential candidates appear on MTV, Vice President Quayle carries on a political dialogue with a fictional character in a situation comedy, and the Rodney King riots dominate the season in *LA Law*.

Attention to this ongoing interaction of genres underlies the articles in this volume. Most of the articles raise questions about the implications of narrativity for the functions of Western journalism. One article demonstrates that present-day questions about the implications of narrativity for "objective" reporting already were central to the relationship between leaders and public in ancient times. All the articles ask how story forms affect the public's right

to know, and the role of journalism in providing a public forum in which multiple points of view are given voice. They ask whether narrative presentation narrows the opportunity to construct an oppositional view—that is, to provide the type of information that questions the establishment and its story. Most of the articles in this collection are concerned with the dramatic elements in press and television news, although one analyzes the way in which the political is narrated in an entertainment program, and another turns to Biblical “journalists” to consider a historical account of oral reporting.

The articles incorporate different perspectives, and these deserve explication. One perspective (dominant in the articles by Lewis, and by Shandler, 1949) focuses on the receivers: What makes for reader and viewer involvement in press and television texts? What degrees of freedom do they have in interpreting what they see and read? A second perspective is on the formal qualities of texts (e.g., see Gurevitch & Kavoori, Smith, and Sherwood’s articles, this issue): In what sense can news items be regarded as stories, and if so, what form do they take? What context do they provide? Do they teach anything new? Can news genres be arranged in terms of open–closed, universal–particular, and so forth? A third perspective focuses on the relationship between the narratives of public reporting (delivered directly or mediated by press and television) and ideology (see Liebes, Lewis, Shandler, and Nossek’s articles, this issue): Does the coverage serve to reinforce the establishment and protect the status quo, or can it be seen as giving voice to diverse groups?

VIEWER INVOLVEMENT

The assumption that journalism is telling stories makes it easy to take involvement for granted. Most of the articles show how narratives imprint on viewers’ minds, organizing schemes for making sense of reality. Thus, for example, viewers are led to perceive complex events in terms of struggles between good and bad. If this is the case, it follows that viewers are directed to identify with the hero in his or her righteous battle with the villain. In most of the articles there is no effort to problematize the question of involvement, nor to raise doubts by comparing involvement in news and current affairs to involvement in other genres.

Justin Lewis is the odd person out in this respect. His article is the only one in this issue that raises the important question of why the television news is so unpopular, in comparison with television drama. The answer, according to Lewis, is that news does not arouse sustained involvement and therefore is not capable of teaching viewers anything they do not know already. He proposed that news “stories” are actually constructed as antinarratives. Whereas soap operas catch viewers’ attention by posing a mystery and creating tension, television news has adopted the inverted pyramid of the press (originally

intended to enable readers to skim through), which goes against the grain of narrative structure. As an assemblage of fragments and points of view, the news does not add to a coherent whole and therefore cannot offer viewers new understandings. Instead, it pushes them to draw on their own, usually meager and superficial, ideological resources. Most viewers are not capable of "informed reading" and are limited to items that are associated with familiar and easy images or metaphors, leading to simplified, a historical, and instant comprehensions of political reality.

But can melodrama teach history and current affairs? In his case study of the entertainment program *This Is Your Life*, Shandler has no problem with involvement. What can be more involving than the life history of a beautiful young survivor of the Holocaust, seen live on TV, faced with long-lost figures from her past, including her brother, who is flown into the program all the way from Israel? Shandler does remind us of the involving powers of melodrama, in which the intimacy and the small scale of the screen are used to convey human tragedy through personal experiences. One only has to compare how it feels to come to know Anne Frank, or the families of the *Holocaust* miniseries, with listening to the hollow, unevocative sounds of the statistics of victims and the long lists of their oppressors' crimes. Personalization of the Holocaust is no doubt an effective way of creating the motivation for learning the historical lesson. Nevertheless it should not be forgotten that although involvement may be a necessary condition for learning, it is certainly not a sufficient one.

The complementary points made by Lewis and Shandler—that news does not involve viewers and that melodrama does—raise the problem of involvement in relation to the distinction made by Gurevitch and Kavoori between news items with a universal, "open," structure and a particularistic, "closed" structure. "Global Texts" elaborates on the characteristics of the two types: the first is informative, neutral, "writerly," and allows for different types of interpretation; the second is ritualistic or "mythic," ideological, "readerly," and constrains viewers to a single interpretation. The first type of discourse is used for issues that have no cultural proximity; the second type is activated when culturally proximate issues are reported. But from Lewis' point of view, the question is why viewers should pay attention to the first, more instructive, type of item. Take the example of the Korean student demonstration, shown on Israel television, reported within a universalistic frame. Viewers probably are not familiar with the Korean situation, have no knowledge about the general issue from other sources, and are not given any particular incentive to get involved in this form of (good) journalism. Paradoxically, it is the more open and therefore more informative text that is bound to pass unnoticed.

Unlike Gurevitch and Kavoori, Smith, Sherwood, Nossek, and Liebes have no problem with viewer involvement although all three also study the news. The reason is that they choose to focus on the quintessentially melodramatic in news. Rather than dealing (as do Gurevitch and Kavoori and Lewis) with

"routine" workings of news genres, their subject is media narratives in times of crisis, when people are hooked on the news almost by definition. The first two studies analyze American press coverage in times of national turmoil. Smith presents a case study of the American press coverage of Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War (in contrast with the press image of Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser in the 1956 Suez War). In his discussion of press coverage of two events that "redefined the world we live in," Sherwood shows the metamorphosis of Gorbachev from Soviet "beast" to American "beauty" as well as the ambivalence over the "selling" of Judge Clarence Thomas as an "individualist" rather than as servile collaborator of the establishment. Nossek's article focuses on Israeli media coverage of terrorist events in progress, when an entire nation, holding its breath, gathers to hear the latest word on radio. In an analysis of the famous Biblical account of a "fact-finding" mission sent to the Holy Land in anticipation of its conquest, Liebes has all the Israelites hanging around Moses, anxiously awaiting the report that would determine their fate.

The choice of events that "draw rapt attention" (Sherwood, this issue) arises from the theoretical position that sees media and viewers as collaborating in the articulation of a national narrative through which people of the same culture understand one another (Alexander, 1988). One may argue that in times of possible threat or historical change, the public rallies round the media. However, this may not be indicative of ordinary viewing during normal life.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

In spite of their differences over viewer involvement and media hegemony, it is surprising how the authors share a common view of the formal elements of the stories (or "nonstories"). All seven articles regard narrative structure in terms of (a) conflict between characters—in Gorbachev's case (in Sherwood's "Narrating the Social") the conflict occurs within the same character over time—and (b) the struggle between good and bad. As such, they fall into the pattern that Ettema and Glasser (1988) labeled as stories of "moral outrage." For Ettema and Glasser, this is the form taken by investigative journalism as a way of reconciling "moral judgment" with the idea of objective or neutral reporting. That we find moral tales so common in this collection means either that the moral tale is a broader pattern of news coverage or that the major political stories (e.g., Judge Thomas, the Gulf War, terrorism, Gorbachev) are told as moral tales or, perhaps, that this is a frame that researchers prefer.

In terms of plot lines and narrative roles, the stories divide into three subcategories, according to the relative power of the actors: (a) fight between weak victim (or victim-cum-hero) and strong villain; (b) fight between hero

and villain, equal in strength or status; and (c) internal fight of villain who transforms into a hero.

The underlying theme of the victim–villain stories is the struggle for freedom. A few are short, relatively decontextualized news episodes that show mass clashes: Korean students struggle with police or Palestinians throw stones at an Israeli jeep. In most stories, though, at least one of the sides is personalized: for example, the young survivor who has defeated the Nazis by escaping to freedom and democracy (in the United States!) in Shandler's analysis of *This Is Your Life*; Egypt's Abdul Nasser, who has nationalized the Suez Canal and freed his country from colonial domination, in Sherwood's "Narrating the Social"; Sakharov and Begun, who have fought against Soviet dictatorship, which is personified in the television report by the character of Gorbachev, in Smith's "The Semiotic Foundations of Media Narratives."

The struggle among equals story means war, be it hot or cold. Heroes fight not only (or not even mainly) to save themselves or their people but also to make villains change their ways, for the sake of their people and perhaps the rest of the world. Thus in European television coverage (Sherwood, this issue), Gorbachev is the good guy, representing progress and calling for disarmament, whereas Reagan is the conservative villain, who won't let go of his destructive toys. In the Gulf War (see Smith, this issue), however, the American president fights the Iraqi leader in the name of democratic values and in opposition to dictatorial ones. In Liebes' article, the members of the Biblical mission of intelligence are divided among themselves into heroes and villains. The minority who continue to believe in the success of an onslaught on the Promised Land are rewarded at the end of the story by settling there; the majority lose their lives as punishment for expressing the wrong opinions in addition to "objective" reporting.

The transformation hero—of which Gorbachev is the only example in our corpus—is a villain (or victim) who is not pushed to change by external forces but achieves an inner awareness and thereby becomes an agent for social and political change. Thus transformed, Gorbachev crosses the lines and changes the array of "us" and "them" to become an American hero.

The constructedness of the stories is further emphasized in a number of articles by their juxtaposition with other stories that serve as analogies or counteranalogies to the case studies under examination. Comparisons are made between similar characters, such as Saddam and Nasser—the two dictatorial leaders of the Arabs—who are portrayed as villain and hero, respectively (Smith, this issue), or between the same incident narrated in two cultures, such as the Israeli jeep incident, shown alternatively as brutalization of civilians by army soldiers or as law enforcement (Gurevitch & Kavoori, this issue), or between contradictory versions of the same story preserved by the Biblical editor.

HEGEMONY

Although the narrative structures are similar, the articles vary in their views of the relation between journalistic stories and the establishment. In other words, there is disagreement over whether journalism is primarily an expression of the hegemonic version of what goes on. On this issue, the articles divide into three groups: The hegemonists include Lewis, Shandler, and Nossek. Lewis believes that only stories that fit into existing ideological frames register. Shandler sees the construction of history in melodrama as an effective way to pass on ideological messages, as does Nossek, who sees "real" melodramas as occasions for transmitting the central values of the society. The ideological nature of the Biblical narrative is apparent in the way in which it justifies the victory of the minority voices who side with the leader over the majority, who die, as it were, for the crime of editorializing. At the other end, Smith and Sherwood believe that journalistic stories are an expression of voices within the culture, independent of the political establishment. Gurevitch and Kavoori occupy a middle ground, in which news stories may be subdivided into "ideological" and "neutral" types. The stories more relevant for viewers, however, tend to be more ideological.

The ideologists of hegemony regard the context of the story as a clue to its ideological content. Lewis claims that historical context is nonexistent in television news and that the viewer is therefore reduced to catching a few simple stereotypes that draw on consensual ideology. Thus, for example, viewers had no knowledge about the encouragement Saddam had received from the United States prior to the invasion of Kuwait because this information did not fit the stereotyped image of the Gulf War.

From his perspective, Shandler shows how history is constructed to reinforce prevailing ideology. Thus, for example, in the life story of the carefully selected survivor, the United States features as the land of freedom and refuge from evil. That the young Jewish girl was refused a visa to the United States, in the 1930s so she could join her fiancée (and, as we now know, escape years in the Nazi concentration camps) is a detail that is swept under the carpet. Instead we are fed the Hollywood romantic formula of "boy loses girl, boy meets girl, happy ending."

Similarly, the Holocaust is mobilized to provide an ideological context in the coverage of terrorist attacks in Israel, as shown by Nossek. Painful as they are, these attacks do not constitute an existential danger to the state but nevertheless evoke, visually and rhetorically, lessons learned from the Holocaust. Victims are quoted as saying that they were reminded of the Holocaust, that they were determined not to succumb passively, and so forth. Implicit in the stories is the message that although God failed us then, the Israeli army comes to the rescue now.

Sherwood and Smith, however, show not only that press stories sometimes

adopt antiestablishment contexts but that various newspapers tell different stories. Thus Clarence Thomas appeared in the more conservative press as the individualist achiever that President Bush chose to promote and in the liberal press as a weak, dependent person.

How would critical theorists, such as Hall (1985), Gitlin (1980), or Edelman (1988), who argue that all mass media narratives are hegemonic constructions of social reality that serve the interests of the establishment, respond to the case studies presented by Smith and Sherwood? First, they might note that the two articles focus on press rather than television stories, and that newspapers may have more space and time to adopt more complex, less stereotyped, and less hegemonic positions (Liebes & Bar-Nahum, 1994). Second, it might be argued that "the elites" or "the establishment" is also not a unified and homogeneous whole, and that the press may be participating in the debate within the elites. And, with respect to the particular story of the Judge Thomas's nomination, cultural theorists would argue that the model of individualist achievement is in itself a central element of hegemonic, universalistic culture. According to this view, Thomas was coopted by mainstream culture and joined a patriarchal, universalistic system, abandoning his own particularistic culture (Baba, 1992).

The unsolved question that emerges from the (accumulated) metanarrative of this collection is how viewers can get involved in news stories that can make them understand something they did not understand before. The two options that are offered here, and in other recent writings about news (see Gamson, 1992; Iyengar, 1993), are either involvement in a closed, mythic, and ideological story or boredom toward an open, informative, neutral, and universalistic story.

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