Narrative news: how the factuality and the narrative format of news and fiction writing affect readers' emotional and cognitive responses,

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0155

The Asian Conference on Media and Mass Communication 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

This study examines how the factuality and the narrative format of news and fiction writing affect readers' emotional and cognitive responses. Participants read one of three versions of a story describing dramatic and tragic accidents involving an Indian couple in which a man was attacked and a woman was brutally raped by a group of passengers in the bus. Each version of the story was manipulated so that readers would receive a different degree of factuality and a different format. The first version was a narrative format news article indicated that it was a news article based on an actual event, and the second version revealed that the story was wholly imagined and invented by the writer, and the content of the story was irrelevant to any actual environment or location. The final version was a non-narrative news article. After reading the stories, each participants completed a questionnaire, recording their answers on a seven point-Likert scale items designed to measure engagement and empathy. It was hypothesized that the readers would report more engagement in the reading activity and more empathy toward the protagonists of the story in a narrative version than a non-narrative version and the research question was formed to investigate the effect of factuality. The results showed that narrative version generated more engagement and more empathy that the non-narrative version, and that there were no differences in the level of engagement, whereas the empathy felt by the readers between the factual version and the fictional version varied.

Keywords: Narrative format, Factuality, Emotional responses, Cognitive processing, Empathy, Narrative engagement

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Introduction

A 23 year-old woman was attacked and raped by passengers on a private bus on 16 December 2012. Around at the end of 2012, the tragic news was announced that the woman had died of serious injuries from the gang rape and attack. This case led to public protests for better treatment of females in India. Numerous news and media channels reported this case, including the background of the accident, the victims and the assailants, and the relevant legal procedures. Among the news articles, an article written by an Indian journalist in the Wall Street Journal published on 30 January 2013 was distinct in that it adapted a narrative form and structure (Pokharel, 2013). The article was based on interviews with the male friend of the victim and their acquaintances, depicting chronological events with dialogues and with narrative delineation. The author wrote this article in the narrative format to aim for a dramatic effect. While reading this tragic news, readers are assumed to feel different emotions including sympathy and grief toward the victims, and anger against the perpetrators. Their emotional responses and cognitive processing can be influenced by the narrative format and by the factuality of the article. In this study, we aim to investigate readers' emotional and cognitive responses focusing on the narrative characteristic of the article and the relationship between the narrative and the degree of factuality. The news article was manipulated to generate different levels of factuality and a different format. There were three versions: a narrative factual version, a narrative fictional version, and a non-narrative factual version. Participants were assigned to read one of each version and their emotional and cognitive responses were measured by self-report items and were analyzed.

Narrative-format news, factuality of the narrative, and reader response

News articles are written in different formats and styles. Among various formats, narrative style news articles were studied in their preference, readability, and psychological effects. Fry and Clark (1993) revealed in their research that the newspaper readers preferred a narrative version to other three different formats such as the traditional inverted pyramid, the point of view, and the radical clarity style. Zerba (2008) discovered in her empirical research that narrative storytelling of news article had a positive influence on young adult readers' perceived comprehension, learning, interest, and enjoyment. Researchers in previous studies about the narrative news format generally claimed that it increased readers' readability and appreciation. The effect of narrative format can result from the role of imagery and affect in a story. Sadoski and Quast (1990) found that imagery and affect played a key role in long-term recall for popular magazines articles. They explained that imagery and affect might tend to reflect readers' construction of personal meanings. Tankard and Hendrickson (1996) emphasized the narrative strategies of writing newspaper articles by the same token. They insisted that sentences that show are usually perceived by readers as more interesting, engaging and informative than sentences that merely tell.

The narrative news deals with real events and information, whereas the fictional narrative covers imaginable and invented stories. However, the way they depict events or characters is not quite different; fictions tell a story like a narrative news. Therefore, the significant difference between narrative news and story lies in readers' perceived factuality. Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) discussed that fictionality of narrative does not affect narrative processing, but violations of external and narrative realism provoke inconsistencies in audience's mental models thus disrupt narrative engagement and lessen a narrative's persuasive power. Their concept of realism is

related to the logical reality that the story forms. If readers perceive that the story is plausible and logical compared to real environment and situation, they accept the story as real regardless of whether the story is fictional or factual.

Previous research has shown that the narrative format of news can influence readers' responses and beliefs. Graaf et al. (2011) argued that narratives affect readers' real-world beliefs and attitudes, with effect referred to as "narrative persuasion" in established research. Oliver et al. (2012) claimed that narrative-format stories produced more empathic responses than non-narrative formats for participants who read an article about stigmatized groups. They elaborated readers' cognitive and emotional empathic model that the narrative story format provoked compassionate reactions and this led to reader's empathic attitudes. In addition to emotional responses including empathy, narrative engagement was regarded as readers' primary cognitive processing while they decode a narrative. Narrative engagement refers to the sense of immersion that readers or viewers experience while appreciating textual or visual narratives. Several notions such as transportation, identification, presence, and flow have been invented and explored (Busselle and Bilandzic, 2009). Researchers predicted that the narrative engagement played a role in changing beliefs and attitudes that were consistent with and were relevant to the narrative (Oliver et al., 2012).

Research Questions and Hypothesis
Among various emotional responses that readers can experience, we focused on empathy as readers' primary affective reaction after reading the article would be an empathic feeling. As Smith and Frieze (2003) noted, empathy is an important emotional response in the rape context since it might have an impact on perceptions and judgments of rape victims or perpetrators. Preceding research proved that a narrative format generated more empathy than a non-narrative format. With this empirical background it was hypothesized that a narrative format news would generate more empathy in readers than a non-narrative format. Additionally, we examined readers' emotional valence which can be divided into two categories: readers' positive or negative feeling reported after reading narrative. Since the imagery and affect of narrative are assumed to enhance readers' emotional reactions, we hypothesized that a narrative version might increase the degree of valence that readers experience. Along with readers' empathy and emotional valence, and narrative engagement with the components of narrative involvement and narrative transportation was investigated. Due to the internal characteristic of the narrative format, we expected that readers who read a narrative version would report more narrative engagement with it as compared to a non-narrative version.

H1. Narrative-format news will generate more empathy than a non-narrative format.
H2. Narrative-format news will generate more narrative engagement than a non-narrative format.
H3. Narrative-format news will increase the degree of emotional valence as compared to a non-narrative format.

According to Busselle and Bilandzic (2008)'s theoretical framework, fictionality has no influence on narrative processing but violation of logical reality of narrative will reduce narrative engagement. In this experiment, however, what has been modified is readers' perceived factuality, not the logical reality of story. We assumed that readers'

perceived factuality will increase their empathy as the readers are expected to pay more attention to the reality of the narrative. It is uncertain how the factuality of the narrative news will affect readers' narrative engagement. We pose a research question regarding the effect of factuality on readers' narrative engagement.

H4. Factual narrative news will generate more empathy than fictional narrative.
Research Question 1. How will the factuality of the narrative news affect readers' narrative engagement?

Experiment

The article about Delhi rape case was modified to produce different versions. The first version was identical to the original article, indicating that this article was the news published in the Wall Street Journal on the 30th of January, 2013. The second version was modified to note that the story is fiction wholly invented by a novel writer. The sentences or words implying that the story is part of a news article were eliminated or replaced with alternative expressions so that readers should consider the version as fiction. At the beginning of the story, it was also explicitly noted that the story was written by an Indian novel writer. The third version was re-written by combining existing news articles about the Delhi rape case. The articles were extracted from various online newspapers but only non-narrative format articles were used. The lengths of the experiment materials were 1,321, 1,310, and 1,290 words, respectively.

We recruited participants through online advertisements. Online ads were posted in an online community of e-book users and were mailed to graduate students. All participants were paid to increase the reliability of the experiment. 78 participants replied to the survey and they were divided into three groups: 27 for group 1, 26 for group 2, 25 for group3. Each group read one of three versions during the experiment. The experiment was conducted using the online survey website Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). The script was given to the participants and they were instructed to answer items which measured emotional and cognitive responses and their degree of narrative engagement after reading the scripts.

Self-report items were designed to measure readers' levels of emotional valence, empathy, and narrative engagement. Emotional valence items included negative valence items consisting of 'While reading the article (the story), I felt (angry), (worried), (irritated) (Cronbach α=.56).' and positive valence items consisting of 'While reading the article or (the story), I felt (happy), (contented), (pleasant) (Cronbach α=.72).'. Empathy items consisted of 'While reading the article (the story), (I could understand how helpless rape victims may feel during such an accident), (I felt sympathetic toward the victims), (I felt compassionate toward the victims) (Cronbach α=.83).'. Empathy items were adapted from the empathy study by Batson et al. (1997) and from research by Smith and Frieze (2003) which examined empathy in relation to rape.

Narrative engagement was divided into two categories: narrative involvement and narrative transportation. Narrative involvement items consisted of 'I was mentally involved in the story (the article) while reading.', ' I was never really pulled into the story (the article). (reverse coding)', and 'While reading I was completely immersed in the story (the article) (Cronbach α=.82).'. Narrative transportation items included 'While I was reading the story (article), I could easily picture the events in it taking

place.', 'I could picture myself in the scene of the events shown in the story (the article).', and 'After reading the story (the article), I found it easy to put it out of my mind. (Cronbach α=.70)'. Narrative engagement items were adapted from the study by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) which measured narrative engagement. To measure the dependent variable of factuality, three items were devised: 'This article (the story) was factual.', 'This article (the story) seemed to depict the real event.', 'This article (the story) seemed to be invented.' (Cronbach α=.76). All of the items were measured using seven-point Likert scales (1=not at all, 7=very much).

Table 1. The features of the materials used in the experiment

Group	Format	Factuality Manipulation	Length	Survey Respondents
1	Narrative	Factual (News)	1,321 words	27
2	Narrative	Fictional (Novel)	1,310 words	26
3	Non-Narrative	Factual (News)	1,290 words	25

Result

Values for each factor were created to average the scores of the items. To verify the effect of the narrative format, group 1 and group 3 were compared while group 1 and group 2 were compared to examine the hypothesis related to factuality by an independent t-test using the software SPSS, version 17.0. The analysis showed that the narrative-format news generated more empathy than the non-narrative-format news (t(50)=2.63, p=.011 < .05) indicating that the first hypothesis was supported. The second hypothesis that narrative-format news generated more narrative engagement than non-narrative-format news was marginally verified by a significant difference in narrative involvement (t(50)=2.53, p=.014 < .05) and a marginal difference in narrative transportation (t(50)=1.84, p=.071 > .05). The third hypothesis that narrative format news will increase the degree of emotional valence than non-narrative format was not supported since there were differences neither in negative valence nor positive valence.

Table 1. Mean values of the measured factors

Group	Negative Valence	Positive Valence	Empathy	Interest	Narrative Involvement	Narrative Transportation	Factuality
1	5.2	1.4	6.2	5.8	5.3	4.7	5.1
2	5.0	1.7	5.6	5.4	4.8	4.4	4.3
3	5.6	1.9	5.6	5.6	4.5	4.2	4.5

Between group 1 and group 2, there was a significant difference in factuality (t(51)=2.57, p=.013 < .05) indicating that the independent variable was suitably manipulated. The comparison between group 1 and group 2 revealed that the factual version generated more empathy than the fictional version (t(51)=2.26, p=.028 < .05). Factors other than empathy did not show any differences; thus, the factuality of the narrative affected only the empathy that the readers felt toward the victims. This meant fictionality and perceived factuality did not affect narrative processing.

Discussion

We identified the effect of a narrative format and the result confirmed previous research outcomes. As was proved from previous empirical studies, the narrative format induced more empathy and more narrative engagement. Narrative-format news seemed to elicit empathy from readers by increasing the level of narrative engagement and by using imagery and affective devices such as dialogues and descriptions. These narrative devices were employed to arouse readers' emotional responses. However, readers' emotional valence did not vary depending on the narrative or non-narrative style. Therefore, narrative engagement might influence readers' empathic process, not boosting emotional reactions. Specifically, narrative immersion seemed to play an important role in generating empathy comparing to narrative transportation. Narrative immersion might led to enhancement of memory and attention, whereas narrative transportation is related to the sense of being there in the story.

The comparison between the fictional version and the factual version showed that the degree of factuality affected the level of reader empathy. Given that factuality was manipulated as noted earlier in the paper, we assumed that factuality would have a minimal effect on readers' responses. Other factors such as valence, narrative engagement, and interest in the content and format of each version were nearly identical. Whether readers consider the narrative as factual or fictional did not affect emotional feeling or narrative engagement. Therefore, what determined readers' primary cognitive and emotional responses is the content of the narrative. How factuality increased readers' level of empathy was not clearly identified in this research. A narrative format can generally be regarded as appropriate for a fictional genre such that readers' responses to narrative-format news are distinct from the experience of reading novels. It can be argued that readers may experience different emotional processing once they are aware that a novel-like narrative is based on an actual event. Such emotional processing may get involved in empathic process. This can explain the phenomenon that many films based on actual events reveal their origin as they mark "this film is based on - or inspired by - a true story" at the beginning.

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