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Ledes and Story Structure

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A story structure is how the content of a narrative is organized in order to be conveyed to the audience. This organization implies a narrator and relates in large measure to the order, form, and pace in which the facts and events of the plot are reported. These structures adapt to the different media and function as the overall frame or container for the story.

In modern societies, journalists act as narrators. Journalistic practice can be interpreted through news stories' production and journalists understood as storytellers who resort to more or less conventional narrative structures in order to organize in a communicative way the workings of the world. This consideration of news as storytelling historically represented a turning point from journalism as an objective mirror of facts toward more refined sociological and anthropological constructs of journalism as a professional occupation and culture (e.g., Bird & Dardenne, 1988; Tuchman, 1972).

Story structures, as the organizational properties of a coherent narrative, became thus fundamental devices in the social construction of reality, a key theory expressed by Berger and Luckmann (1967) in which meaning is embedded through social interaction. By positioning the news as a socially situated discourse, the study of ideology, cultural myths, and archetypes has been particularly fertile since the 1980s at the intersection of linguistics, critical discourse analysis, and journalism studies (e.g., Van Dijk, 1988).

While all journalism can be broadly perceived as a nonfictional narrative of current events—*what* the story is about—a distinction is necessary regarding the *narrativity* of journalistic productions—*how* the story is told. Elements of narrativity, as text-organizational properties conditioned by social and cultural contexts, work as grammatical rules and include, among others, the concepts of a narrative arc and plot points, narrator's voice, point(s) of view, temporal and spatial settings, scenes and actions, and dialogue.

Narrative journalism, often also referred to as *literary journalism* and *new journalism*, fully embraces these storytelling devices for creative nonfiction. As a structure, the story arc traditionally organizes the narrative across an initial exposition and inciting incident, followed by a rising action, a crisis, a climax, a falling action, and the resolution. This model works as a formula and in audiovisual journalism it translates into episodes (TV) and acts (documentary).

A much more informative model of journalism is deeply rooted in the inverted pyramid technique as the organizing structure of the news story, with the main facts being presented in the lead paragraph following a descending order of importance and

directly answering the five Ws: *What* happened? *Who* is involved? *Where* did it take place? *When*? *Why*?

As a highly structured communication strategy, the inverted pyramid became a professional standard in journalistic routines in the nineteenth century and since then it is used as a normalized form of summarizing information that conveniently fits into the modern demands of news toward immediacy: just-in-time production and quick readability. Conversely, as a rhetorical and dramaturgical device for the “anti-narrative,” the inverted pyramid technique also resonates with the positivist ideal of journalistic objectivity as an epistemological stance made strategic ritual.

The “lede” is journalism jargon for the introductory section of a news piece. The most common in news production is the “summary lead,” often associated to news agencies’ feeds and breaking news—as factual as the five Ws can be. A more narrative approach is that of the “anecdotal lead,” trying to illustrate the overall meaning of a story, the “scene-setting lead,” establishing the location of the story, and the “first-person lead,” in which the journalist assumes a place as a character. Recent studies found that even if leads are a significant device to structure news stories, they do not serve as a rigorous proxy for what is actually covered in the full article.

Following the articulation between the ever-evolving material bases of journalism and specific narrativity elements, journalistic genres and subgenres were created and adapted across print (newspapers, newsmagazines) and broadcast media (radio, television, and film). While making explicit different levels of the narrator’s subjectivity on the surface of the news piece (op-ed VS news), each of these journalistic genres (e.g., the interview, the reportage, the feature, the profile, etc.) also structures the news story as a result of journalistic sociological imagination, bringing to mind the interaction between particular topics, news stories’ structures, specific social and cultural contexts, as well as visions of the media technological possibilities and limits. In other words, journalistic story structures and genres are not individual textual and audiovisual arrangements, but highly regulated and ratified conventions between professional peers that can be used as boundary work, demarcating *what* and *how* journalism is from *what* and *how* it is not.

In part as a response to the psychoanalytic-semiotic theoretical paradigm and literature studies’ tradition (text-based story structures), in the early 1990s a new research venture started to develop toward cognitive media theories and an inquiry into how humans experience and interpret audiovisual and narrative structures in film and on TV. In journalism studies, significant research has been established on how TV news arrange and convey understandable and memorable information to their audiences. The study of pre-organizing structures in journalistic genres and their cognitive effects, particularly information retention and story recall, has usually taken form by comparing distinct media renditions of “the same” story (e.g., a TV version compared to a print version).

Along the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the connection between journalistic narrativity and digital media representational properties and technologies has generated a renewed interest from scholars and practitioners. The field of journalistic narrative has been expanding toward digital storytelling and an exploration of story structures. New narrative subgenres have emerged (e.g., data journalism, interactive

documentary, news games, immersive/virtual reality journalism, augmented reality journalism), with news outlets and independent producers embracing an innovation imperative as a way to answer the audience decline in legacy mass media formats and vehicles.

The quick proliferation of multimedia and transmedia stories soon signaled the growing need to codify and classify the expanding field on nonfiction narrative throughout a systematic recognition of the evolving grammar structures and shared characteristics of journalism produced *in* different formats *for* a plethora of digital media supports and devices. The ongoing efforts toward a taxonomy of digital news packages translate the permanent centrality of structural descriptions of news stories (Hernandez & Rue, 2016).

An increased emphasis on around-the-clock online cycles and continuous deadlines question the previous analogue stability and fixed character of news stories' structures. Permanently open for updates and corrections, online journalism suggests much more fluid story (re)assemblies across platforms and devices, which signals a shift in digital journalism routines, progressively moving from a waterfall production model, with clear and linear phases, toward a more spiral production model, executed in a continuous and iterative mode. In this context and mirroring reconfigured news production routines, the dominant inverted pyramid story structure standard has itself been reexamined and a "news diamond" model has been proposed as a way to express the apparent continuum of online iterative journalism.

Supported by the interconnection of online social media and mobile devices—notoriously, the smartphone—participatory practices and user-generated content in news stories also present new possibilities and challenges for the conventional visual journalism story structures. In April 2004, pictures taken by soldiers themselves and not by photojournalists at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq demonstrated the evolving conditions and conventions in news pictures' production in the era of digital networks. Likewise, with image production and distribution literally in the palm of the hand, professional and nonprofessional videography and still photography initiatives are now developed within the organizing structures of social media platforms and apps, like Instagram, Hipstamatic, and Flickr, as major framing and performative devices for the contemporary living experience.

A firm practice and research path has also been developing on narrative visualization, that is, how to tell stories with data. This emerging narrative class is already structured around distinct genres and is now often integrated in multimedia news packages as a complement or substitute of the written story. A seminal attention goes to the balance between author-driven elements (message and structure elements) and reader-driven elements (story exploration and social sharing). One common device and instance of observation is what has been now termed as "scrollytelling," the online narrative mechanism through which as the user scrolls down the webpage the story elements unfold (Segel & Heer, 2010).

Also, the algorithmic turn in news production, distribution, and reception opens new alleys for the investigation and recreation of story structures. On the production side, automated journalism (also known as *algorithmic journalism* and *robot journalism*) is

based on computer programs that interpret, organize, and present texts from structured data. Research and development in this field has been carried away by companies like Automated Insights, Narrative Science, and Yseop, encountering an early adoption in news media outlets like Associated Press, Forbes, ProPublica, and the *Los Angeles Times*, among others. An open debate exists on how to recognize and attribute authorship (byline) in automated news stories, particularly since existing studies suggest that readers fail to discern a robot-written news article from a human-structured journalist's article.

Furthermore, the articulation between artificial intelligence and machine learning in journalism has been gravitating around the story structures that best fit audience's preferences, with news stories getting more and more personalized. Advances in natural language generation already translate into exploratory nonlinear story structures for messaging bots and artificial intelligence speakers (e.g., Amazon's Alexa, Google's Home, Microsoft's Cortana, Apple's HomePod). Users may now interact in a conversational way with these devices, making clear that the Internet of Things (IoT) is paving its way into journalism.

Considering the contemporary reception of news stories, algorithmic curation is also becoming a crucial line of research for communication and journalism studies. Due to their high relevance in personal information consumption, online search engines recommendation policies (e.g., Google News) and social media platforms' feeds (e.g., Facebook, YouTube) put in place story selection mechanisms that parallel traditional editorial newsrooms. However, very little is known about which values translate into the mechanisms that define how the news feed is structured—friend relationships, user engagement and preferences, sociodemographic data, media affordances, among other factors—stressing the importance of algorithmic fairness, transparency, and accountability by nonjournalistic companies.

For the contemporary in-flux state of grammatical rules in digital narratives, journalism studies need now to theoretically, conceptually, and empirically domesticate previously unrelated media representational attributes (textual, aural, visual, kinetic, and haptic) across distinct 2-D and 3-D environments. This recognition underlines the seminal work yet to be accomplished by articulating digital narrativity and media cognition.

From a theoretical perspective, although vastly disseminated in the field of social sciences and humanities and indeed a fundamental sociological heritage of the twentieth century, the social constructivism of Berger and Luckmann has been expanded by the embodied mind paradigm (e.g., Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). In the light of advances in cognitive science, this theoretical framework proposes a more transdisciplinary approach for the study of human phenomenon, encouraging previously disconnected disciplines to collaborate (e.g., neuroscience, cognitive psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and communication studies). An emerging science of narrative can now address stories and its structures as the result of a dynamic interplay between brain structures, the mind and body at work, the social and the cultural as lived experiences, and the technological basis of communication.

SEE ALSO: Literary, Long-Form, or Narrative Journalism; Multimedia Journalism; Style and Style Guides

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