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What is a News Narrative? Reversing Journalism's Arrow and the Problem of "Factinion"

Abstract: This article draws on cognitive science to make an important distinction between knowledge and understanding. Doing so shines a light on the nature of the news narrative, and brings a fresh perspective to the often blurred distinction between fact and opinion. It is argued that the arrow of journalism should point in one direction; from the reporting of factual news, to interpretation and the construction of news narratives. However this direction is increasingly reversed, leading journalists to privilege stories which support their pre-existing narratives. The result is that contemporary journalism often produces "factinion", a confusing mixture of fact and opinion. The article develops the idea that Narrative-Led Journalism is "fake journalism"; a genre of realist-factual entertainment, or 'info-therapy'. In an increasingly partisan and tribal public sphere, fake journalism provides comforting reinforcement of existing world views, to the detriment of journalism which promotes independent judgement, and the search for truth. Narrative-Led Journalism therefore has implications for democracy; it leaves us vulnerable to the tyranny of explanation.

Keywords: News Narrative, Narrative Led Journalism, Arrow of Journalism, Fact, Opinion, Belief, Fake News, Socio-drama, Tribalism, Factinion, Confirmation Bias

Philip Ernst omitted a pine
from his painting because it
"spoiled the composition"
until remorseful at
misrepresenting the scene
he attacked the tree with an axe.

(Greenhalgh 2018)

Knowledge and Understanding

To explore the concept of the news narrative it is helpful to distinguish between "knowledge" and "understanding." We will use the word "knowledge" to refer to the gathering of factual information. Factual knowledge is what we seek when we ask the familiar journalistic questions who? what? when? where? and how? Understanding is different. Understanding is about detecting patterns of cause and effect in our factual knowledge. Understanding is about explaining facts. Understanding is what we seek to know when we ask why? Our total comprehension therefore consists of both knowing about events in the real world, and understanding them. Without explanation we would merely be collectors of useless pieces of information. We would not be able to draw conclusions, form opinions or make decisions. Theorists sometimes refer to this total comprehension as "intelligence" or "wisdom." The philosophical issues are complex and ancient. For example Aristotle (Trowbridge and Ferrari

2011) described wisdom (sophia) as a synthesis of knowledge (episteme) and understanding (nous). Distinguishing between factual knowledge and understanding helps us recognize that journalists are involved in two distinct activities; reporting facts and helping audiences understand what the facts mean. It is the latter (and the relationship between the two) that is the subject of the present article.

The Cognitive Approach to Journalism and the News Narrative

There is a rich literature relating to how understanding emerges from the interaction of audiences with media texts; much of it draws on contemporary cognitive studies. This literature emphasizes the role of narrative and provides an expansive landscape for scholars of journalism to explore. As Catalin Brylla (2018, 160) puts it, cognitive studies "points to fruitful areas of research and encourages a pragmatic perspective that is grounded and cross-disciplinary." However, despite the rapid progress of cognitive studies in other domains, the news narrative remains a curiously understudied phenomenon in academic journalism. This is perhaps due to historical factors which deter scholars from looking outside of familiar intellectual traditions, and also from ambiguity about the nature of narrative itself (Majin 2019). What is offered here, then, is a cognitive conceptual framework that scholars, journalists, and audiences can use to build an enriched understanding of how journalism works and the role of the news narrative.

Splitting the Narrative Atom

To deconstruct the news narrative it is fruitful to distinguish between narrative form and narrative content. Content refers to the information communicated by the narrative, whereas the form, structure, or technique of narrative can be referred to as "story-telling." Although it is not story-telling that concerns us here, let us briefly explore this distinction.

The academic study of story-telling, especially in works of fiction, is known as narratology. Following Amerian and Jofi (2015), narratology can be understood as an attempt to explain storytelling's rhetorical power; that is, its ability to persuade by arousing the subconscious mind to a range of emotions such as fear, anger, pity, or empathy. In simple terms, narratology asks why do we enjoy good stories? Narratology tells us that there is something foundational and primitive about story-telling. Human beings are narrative animals; homo sapiens is also homo narrans. Stories have the power to bypass our conscious judgement and engage our irrational side. Stories are affective; like art, music, or poetry, stories trigger visceral reactions. Researchers sometimes refer to this as the "affective power" of story-telling or, alternatively, as "narrative transportation." The media academics Daniel Tamul and Jessica Hotter (2019, 2) explain these things as "the perception that readers have become immersed into the narrative world and left their own behind."

For the communication scholars Helena Bilandzic and Rick Busselle, storytelling activates modes of cognition that are different from those we use when we think critically. According to Bilandzic and Busselle (2013, 208), when we listen to stories, we vividly relive them in our minds, and process the numerous subtle psychological and emotional clues they contain. Stories seduce us with an almost magical power to switch off the part of our brain which reasons logically, "involvement in the form of narrative engagement or transportation is a mechanism that prevents counter-arguing: When audiences focus their mental capacity on processing the narrative, they…have neither the ability nor the motivation to counter-argue." It is the same suspension of disbelief to which Shakespeare referred in the prologue to Henry V when he called on his audience to suppress their critical faculties, and give free reign to their imagination, "let us, ciphers to this great accompt, on your imaginary forces work... For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings." We should acknowledge that, in practice, it is difficult

—perhaps impossible—to separate story-telling form from narrative content. In the real world they are two sides of the same coin. Indeed it is precisely the combination of good story-telling technique and strong informational content that creates the most powerful narratives. Having briefly considered the rhetorical force of story-telling, we will now put narratology to one side, for it is not narrative form that concerns us here, but narrative content.

In Search of the News Narrative

Human curiosity is not satisfied by facts alone. We crave not only to know, but also to understand. We are constantly attempting to join the dots, find patterns in the noise, and, above all, identify chains of cause and effect. We seek to satisfy our puzzlement by asking why things happen. As the media scholar Per Persson explains (2003, 1), "things not only exist: things happen… Most of us do not treat these events as random and whimsical, but rather we construct causal relations between them and other events. Causality is one of the most fundamental parameters of the phenomenal world." Understanding causality is important because it enables us to make inferences about the future. Being able to explain the mechanisms of cause and effect allows us to predict what will happen next. The difference between explaining the present and predicting the future is merely technical. As Peter Spirtes and his colleagues summarize (2000, 2), "the baby and the scientist occupy two ends of the same question: how can observations be turned into causal knowledge, and how can causal knowledge, even if incomplete, be used to influence and control our environment?" In other words, human beings are constantly observing reality and, consciously or unconsciously, trying to understand it. The process involves the creation of mental structures we refer to variously as models, theories, hypotheses, or common-sense schemas. These schemas fit together to create a web of understanding, with one schema becoming the assumption on which the next is built. Persson (2003, 8) describes this tower of understanding as "systematic conglomerates of beliefs (not necessarily conscious) that are causally, temporally, or otherwise linked with one another. These mental structures form the basis for the ways in which everyday reasoning is performed in everyday life. Some of them may be more foundational, whereas others are quite domain specific." When these mental structures with explanatory power relate to the domain of journalism, we will refer to them as news narratives.

A news narrative has the power to explain why things happen, or why people behave the way they do. News narratives are the hypotheses or theories we devise to explain and bring order to news stories to prevent them from being meaningless, random noise. News narratives bind to, and reinforce, our pre-existing web of understanding about how the world works. The total sum of all our assumptions, theories, expectations, narratives, and prejudices fit together into a cohesive cluster to form our overall worldview, our weltanschauung. When everything fits together neatly, everything feels as if it makes sense.

News narratives can be visualized as forming part of a tree-like structure. The tree roots are an individual's foundational spiritual and psychological beliefs. The trunk represents deeply held ethical and ideological values, while the higher branches are practical political opinions and moral judgements. The outer canopy of twigs and leaves is where we find news narratives. This is where inner foundational beliefs are exposed to new information from the outside world. As with a real tree, it is difficult to point to exactly where one part of the structure ends and another begins. As Yeats put it (2000, 185), "O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer, Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?"

Newspaper editorials and leader comments are designed to promote individual news narratives. However it is the political cartoon that arguably best reveals the wider, journalistic narrative tree. An effective editorial cartoon has the power to reference different narrative

branches and connect them to the larger totality of a shared world view. As the media scholar Colin Seymour-Ure points out (2001, 333), cartoons resonate and offer "a type of comment - assertive, emotional and often with several layers of meaning - alongside editorial articles that use the conventions of evidence and reasoned argument."

Witchcraft and Factinion

Psychologists refer to our mental schemas as "heuristics." This is to say they are simplified models of reality, mental shortcuts, or rules of thumb. They are useful because they save cognitive energy. When confronted by an unfamiliar situation, we can draw on our pre-existing heuristic knowledge and make a rough and ready assessment. This is particularly useful when time is short. Thus heuristics are organized bundles of information that are stored in our long-term memory, and which we can access quickly. We frequently allow our store of news narratives to guide our opinions, decisions, and behavior. As Persson explains (2003, 14) the heuristic narrative, "liberates the mind from the impossible task of making sense of and recalling every nitty-gritty detail." Therefore news narratives are not how the world really is. They are maps. We possess a library of narratives and use them when we are lost or uncertain. However, in epistemological terms, the reliability of a narrative depends on how closely it corresponds to reality, just as a good map must correspond to the features of the landscape. It is important to recognize that reality is indifferent to our narratives, just as the landscape is indifferent to our maps. Thus the world of the news narrative is also a world of make-believe, fairy tales and fables. Like maps, not all narratives will be equally reliable. Indeed some may be dangerously misleading.

For example, in 1691 a series of strange, disturbing events occurred in the village of Salem, Massachusetts. Eight girls suffered violent, painful fits, while other residents reported visions in which hideous monsters appeared. The news was explained by a narrative, according to which the victims were being tortured by demons conjured by witches. The narrative was plausible. It explained the known facts, and brought meaning to events by revealing patterns of cause and effect. The narrative fitted the community's pre-existing store of religious knowledge and tapped into the deeper roots of their foundational beliefs about good and evil. The narrative was treated as certain fact, and twenty men and women were executed for witchcraft. But the narrative was a collective fantasy. Even the jurymen later admitted (Caporael, 1976, 26) that, on reflection, they had been, "sadly deluded and mistaken." John Hale, a minister involved in the trials from the beginning, wrote, "such was the darkness of the day... that we walked in the clouds and could not see our way."

The same challenges confront us today and affect the way we interpret factual evidence. Many of our most strongly-held beliefs are shaped by what we already know, or believe we know. For example, CNN (Griffiths 2019) published dramatic photos of dogs pulling a sled through a lake of melted water in the arctic, and explained that the images showed the "reality of Greenland's melting ice sheet." The article continued, "with winters becoming warmer and warmer as the global climate catastrophe continues, the risk is that one day the cycle doesn't stop or even slow, and instead of huskies in Greenland ankle deep in water, it'll be people in Manhattan. And that will only be the start of their problems." In other words, CNN's factually accurate report can be used as evidence to support the belief that the earth's climate is changing catastrophically due to human emissions of carbon dioxide. However the same piece of evidence can also be used to support an entirely different hypothesis. For example, the blogger Pierre Gosselin (2019), who is skeptical about catastrophic climate change, believes the, "photos are being taken out of context and wild climate alarm stories are being fabricated from them." Gosselin (2019) argues that the picture shows melted snow, not melted ice, and that it is "quite normal" for the summer.

Thus for CNN the photo is evidence of the climate emergency, whereas for Gosselin it is not. The problem is epistemic and no amount of fact checking can help. It is not the authenticity of the photo that is disputed, it is what it means. This, in turn, is determined by our wider scaffolding of assumptions. Our beliefs may therefore be far less rational than we care to admit. The American philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine (1951) used the word "underdetermination" to refer to situations in which different theories are able to explain the facts equally well. Quine (1951, 42) described human understanding as a web of belief that, once established, is stubborn and resistant to change; "the totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges."

News narratives therefore lie in the twilight zone between fact and opinion. They are simultaneously neither and both. News narratives are complex and ambiguous bundles of fact, belief, inference and opinion—frequently uncertain and contested, perhaps unknowable. Despite this, news narratives are often disingenuously and confusingly presented as a simple, knowable fact. Because news narratives combine fact and opinion, for convenience we will refer to this paradoxical epistemic hybrid as "factinion." For those who believe a narrative to be true, it takes on the characteristics of cast-iron certainty. For those who are unconvinced, it is merely a possibility—an unproven hypothesis awaiting additional evidence. For the former, the verdict is in and the case is closed. For the latter, the jury is still out. Thus factinion is produced when opinion is treated as if it were fact, or when fact is treated as if it were opinion. Whenever people are careless about the distinction between fact and opinion, factinions will proliferate. So too will meta news narratives, which organize and weave factinions into wider, coherent structures.

The Pain of Not Understanding

When things do not add up, we feel uneasy. We feel that something is wrong. The psychologist Crystal Park (2010) notes that we are driven to seek explanation by the palpable distress which this incongruence triggers. The stranger, the more inexplicable the event, the more our discomfort, and the greater our need for understanding. As Park (2010, 259) puts it, "perceptions of discrepancy (e.g. with one's sense of the controllability or comprehensibility of the world) are thought to create the distress that drives meaning making efforts... Further, the extent of discrepancy between the appraised meaning of the event and the individual's global meaning is thought to determine the level of distress experienced."

Evolutionary psychologists argue that this cognitive distress is an evolved trait that alerts us to possible threats. Our sense of unease is a warning light on the cognitive dashboard. Park (2010, 259) points out that distress generates "intense motivation to reduce the discrepancy," and that consequently "meaning-making refers to the processes in which people engage to reduce this discrepancy." According to this model, journalism's role is to provide us with accurate information about the world. This in turn helps us make good decisions and form good, evidence-based opinions. In this model, journalism plays an important role in reducing cognitive distress by allowing us to fine tune our understanding so that it dovetails with reality. In short, journalism exists to help us build narratives that are accurate.

However, there is another possibility. If our goal is to reduce the level of distress we feel when we encounter unexplained, worrying news, then an alternative strategy might be for us to alter our perception of reality to bring it into line with our store of pre-existing narratives. This would be the equivalent of disabling the warning light to make it go out. As Park (2010, 261) observes, "individuals often transform the appraised meaning of an event, rendering it less

noxious and more consistent with their pre-existing global beliefs and desires." Park, whose research focuses on how people cope with trauma, found that individuals who actively built fantasy worlds in their minds benefited from "increased post-traumatic growth" (2010, 288). This suggests an intriguing alternative role for journalism; that of supplying audiences with soothing fantasies to protect their worldview, and thereby reducing their cognitive distress. In this model, journalism becomes a form of therapy by playing down, or even suppressing, incongruent information, while giving prominence to congruent information. It is here that the present discussion intersects with the literature on confirmation bias, for example Mothes (2017) or Knobloch-Westerwick (2017). This literature explores to what extent journalism exists to meet the demand for news that confirms our pre-existing prejudices.

The idea that humans fight to preserve their web of narratives receives support from the work of psychologist Shelley Taylor. Taylor sees the search for meaning as intertwined with two other human traits; mastery – the need to feel one has some control over one's life, and self-esteem—the need to feel one is not dysfunctional, i.e. morally worse, than other people. Taylor argues that narratives are always practical, or political. Narratives implicitly urge us to do something. As Taylor puts it (1983, 1161), they ask, "How can I keep this or a similar event from happening again? And what can I do to manage it now?" Taylor adds that, in order to reduce our cognitive distress, and regain mastery over events, we often adopt strategies of self-delusion. This is because it is easier to construct and maintain a set of illusions, rather than embark on the arduous, and time-consuming, search for truth. Believing that we understand the world is, at least in cognitive terms, almost as good as really understanding it. As Taylor (1983, 1168) explains, "the so-called "warm glow" produced by these illusion based perceptions, then, may have implications for a wide variety of adaptive self-regulatory mechanisms." There is however a problem with wrapping ourselves in warm duvets of reassuring self-deception.

Protecting the Warm Glow: The Problem of Anomalous Data

How do people react when confronted with anomalous data which disturb their narratives? Psychologists refer to "disconfirmation" as the process which occurs when our narratives collide with factual reality; when we discover that our mental maps do not correspond to the terrain. As Taylor (1983, 1168) asks, "what happens when these illusions are challenged or destroyed?" The cognitive psychologist Josh Hemmerich and his colleagues (2016, 1535) point out that most people instinctively dismiss the anomalous data in order to protect their precious store of narratives; "when people encounter empirical evidence that contradicts what their accepted theory about a causal relationship would predict, this discrepancy must be resolved… In such instances, it is possible that people will make a lateral move to another more coherent theory, but this does not always happen... Sometimes people instead maintain belief in their theory in the face of evidence that contradicts its predictions."

Similar findings have been made by educational psychologists Clark Chinn and William Brewer (1993), who argue that there are seven distinct ways in which people react when faced with information which disturbs their warm glow. These range from ignoring the evidence, or rejecting it, to reinterpreting it while making minor "peripheral" adjustments to rescue the pre-existing narrative. Only in the most extreme cases do people face up to the possibility that their narratives may be fantasies. As Chinn and Brewer (1993, 1–2) put it, "instead of abandoning or modifying their pre-instructional beliefs in the face of new, conflicting data and ideas, students often staunchly maintain the old ideas and reject or distort the new."

People use a range of different justifications to reject anomalous information, the accusation of fraud being the most extreme in which, "the individual dismisses the anomalous data as joke or as outright fraud" (Chinn and Brewer 1993, 7). Chinn's typology helps explain the process of

editorial selection which has fascinated scholars of journalism for many years. For example the tactics of ignoring anomalous data and reinterpreting it both find ready parallels in situations where news outlets select different news stories, or bury uncomfortable stories, or spin them to suit their editorial positions. Indeed one of the most fascinating phenomena in journalism is how different readers would react if they were compelled to swap their favorite newspaper, or TV news channel, for one with a different ideological or political agenda. For example, how would a regular viewer of Fox News feel if he was obliged to watch only CNN for a month? How would a Guardian reader feel if he was forced to read the Daily Mail, and vice versa? In summary, the insight from these cognitive studies is not the post-modern conclusion that there is no such thing as truth, but rather that truth is frequently not the goal that audiences are pursuing. In many cases audiences are, consciously or unconsciously, trying to maintain the warm glow of certainty by protecting and maintaining their library of narratives and, ultimately, their world view. Narrative maintenance is often the goal, not truth-seeking.

Institutional Narratives: Narratives of the Tribe

Narratives do not only satisfy the individual's psychological and emotional needs. They also operate at the social and institutional level. Institutions construct their own fairy tales—group narratives to which loyal members are expected to subscribe. The political anthropologist Steve Rayner refers to these tribal narratives as "organisational filters." He describes an editorial process during which uncomfortable facts are conveniently "forgotten" in order to build official, corporate myths. Rayner (2012, 108) outlines a process of "institutionalized forgetfulness," which promotes conformity and gives team members a sense of shared purpose. During this "social construction of ignorance," uncomfortable knowledge is suppressed "to make sense of the complexity of the world so that they can act, individuals and institutions need to develop simplified, self-consistent versions of that world. The process of doing so means that much of what is known about the world needs to be excluded from those versions, and in particular that knowledge which is in tension or outright contradiction with those versions must be expunged. This is 'uncomfortable knowledge'."

Journalists are not immune to this process and, in many cases, will adopt the institutional values and narratives of their employer. According to this model, institutional narratives will determine which stories are covered, how much prominence they are given, and which facts are put in or left out. This institutional self-censorship is not the same as deliberate propaganda for a cause, although it may, in practice, appear very similar. Thus news narratives can also be understood as the manifestation of groupthink in the domain of journalism. This process arguably goes some way toward explaining the accusations of political bias and fake news that are not infrequently directed at news organizations. What audiences may be detecting is loyalty and conformity to shared, institutional narratives.

Controlling the Narrative

Down through the ages, control of the group narrative, i.e., controlling how facts are interpreted and given meaning, has always been closely tied to issues of power and group cohesion. For example in 1546, at the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church forbade unauthorized interpretations of the Holy Scripture. This step was a response to the rise of "heretical" Protestant narratives which challenged Catholic authority. Hence Catholics were instructed (Finocchiaro 1991, 12) that they must not interpret sacred texts, "contrary to that sense which holy mother Church, to whom it belongs to judge of their true sense and interpretation, has held and holds... Those who act contrary to this shall be made known to ordinaries and punished." Thus public display of faith in the "correct" narrative is also often a badge of tribal membership. During the religious wars which ravaged Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,

millions of people were killed attempting to free themselves from other people's narratives, or while trying to impose their own narratives on others. Narratives then, are rarely innocent.

While public belief is a mark of group conformity and loyalty, public disbelief marks one as the tribal "other," potentially a traitor to the cause. According to this view, news narratives can be seen as morality plays with casts of good and bad actors. Journalism reinforces these narratives by selectively publicizing the bad deeds of bad actors, and the good deeds of good actors. Facts which do not fit the narrative are suppressed, ignored, institutionally forgotten, or reinterpreted. The communications academic Ethan Hartsell (2016) argues that tribalism plays a crucial role in understanding the supply and demand for news. He argues that it is necessary to perceive the out group as morally bad, in order to see one's own group as morally good. Thus news narratives pander to a powerful and primitive tribal instinct. This model predicts that audiences will demand stories in which members of the out-group do bad things, and then receive their just desserts. Crime and punishment seems to be one of the most compelling tribal narratives; "audience members are attracted to narratives that depict violations of heavily-weighted moral domains and enjoy narratives that depict appropriate repercussions for moral violations" (2016, 2). Hartsell adds that we often judge an action to be good or bad, purely on the basis of the identity of the actor. In other words, we infer good intentions when an action is carried out by a friend, while we infer evil intent when the same action is carried out by a foe. Thus news stories nourish both tribal prejudice, and our sense of moral righteousness; "individuals filter their moral judgements through their group identities. While it's likely that people are predisposed to care more about certain types of moral violations than others, group identity plays such a powerful role in assessing morality that people's innate moral weights can be reversed" (Hartsell 2016, 79).

The power of news narratives to cast people in morally good or bad roles creates opportunities for deception and manipulation. Controlling the narrative becomes a way of manipulating the collective behavior of in-group members by exploiting their tribal identity, prejudices and loyalties. Thus those seeking political or economic power will often look to control news narratives in self-serving ways.

Reversing the Arrow of Journalism

We began by distinguishing between factual knowledge and understanding. However we have now reached a point where it will be fruitful to remind ourselves that the distinction is largely academic. In the real world, the totality of our comprehension is a complex, dynamic interplay of both cognitive processes. Indeed we can go further and assert that understanding is not possible, unless one first has something to understand. In journalistic terms, we cannot understand what a news story means, until it has been reported in the first place. Thus the understanding and interpretation of news must defer to the primacy of factual reporting. Facts come first. Or, as the psychologist Peter Hills reminds us (2009, 32), "perception of the world is the starting point of all cognitive processes." Therefore journalism has a direction. It runs from knowledge of the factual world to understanding. Journalism runs from evidence to conclusion, from fact to explanation. Meaning emerges from the patterns we detect in what would otherwise be random events and behaviors. Journalism, to borrow from the Nobel prize-winning physicist Erwin Shrödinger (1944), is "continually sucking orderliness from its environment." Journalism is asymmetric, like the arrow of time in theoretical physics, it is a one-way street. This asymmetry is an essential and necessary feature of journalism. We will refer to it as the arrow of journalism.

What would happen if the arrow of journalism were reversed? In this case we would start with an explanation and then cherry-pick facts to justify it. We would begin with narrative and then

select news stories to support it. Like the jury in the Salem witch trials, we would assume the verdict and then look for evidence to corroborate it. From knowledge we would build ignorance. From meaning we would create unmeaning. From wisdom we would construct unwisdom. I will refer to this journalism in reverse as "Narrative-Led Journalism." Because it is not journalism, but looks like journalism, we could also refer to it as "fake journalism."

Fake journalism differs from familiar definitions of fake news, such as Katherine Clayton's (2019, 1074), "factually dubious content that imitates the format of journalism but is produced with no regard for accuracy." Narrative-Led Journalism is not the reporting of inaccurate facts. All the facts may well be checked and accurate. Narrative-led journalists are like lawyers representing their clients. They seek out some facts and present them strikingly and prominently, while incongruent facts are omitted. Thus we arrive at a situation where an account can be factually accurate yet misleading. We have arrived in the land of factinion. News narratives, like factinions, are not intrinsically true or false; rather, they are reasonable or unreasonable, plausible or implausible, credible or incredible, comforting or discomforting. When two mutually incompatible narratives compete for our belief, we should logically discard the one least supported by fact. But when journalism's arrow is reversed, we discard the facts that least support our narrative. Instead of constructing narratives to help us make sense of the world, we find ourselves constructing worlds to help us make sense of our narratives. The economist John Maynard Keynes is quoted as saying "when the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?" (Zweig 2011). In Narrative-Led Journalism the reply is, "When my mind changes, I change my facts."

Guardian editor C.P. Scott famously stated that the arrow of journalism must run from reporting fact to comment, not the other way round. Scott uses the word "comment" in the sense that, while everyone is free to believe their own narratives, the narrative (comment) must not determine which facts are reported. Reversing the arrow was, for Scott, the ultimate journalistic sin which would lead a news organization into the abyss of propaganda; "its primary office is the gathering of news. At the peril of its soul it must see that the supply is not tainted... Comment is free, but facts are sacred. "Propaganda", so called, by this means is hateful. The voice of opponents no less than that of friends has a right to be heard" (Scott [1921] 2017). Despite Scott's warning, there is some agreement among scholars that comment—i.e., Narrative-Led Journalism—has slowly become the dominant force. For example Brian McNair (2000, 61) notes the, "remarkable expansion in recent years of the commentary form, what I will call the interpretative moment in the news cycle." McNair traces the blurring of the distinction between fact and opinion to the second half of the twentieth century. McNair's phrase is "punditocracy," which he warns is undermining genuine journalism and cheapening public discourse "in the latter half of the twentieth century particularly, the interpretative moment in journalism (and especially in political journalism) has occupied an ever greater proportion of output as a whole, in both the print and broadcast sectors, to the point that the sheer size of the 'punditocracy' is argued to be undermining the quality of the public sphere" (McNair 2000, 62).

The cultural studies scholar Aaron Barlow (2012) notes the same phenomenon, and describes a growing community of "pseudo-journalists" who practice "post objective" journalism. These are not real journalists as defined by the standards of earlier ages. Although Barlow aims his criticism primarily at online journalists, traditional media organizations are neither immune nor innocent. On the contrary it is arguable that the practice has become the new normal across a wide spectrum of news outlets where narrative-led journalists "use the trappings of objectivity while manipulating information to produce proof of the point or belief that had brought them to the story in the first place" (2012, 30). Barlow describes a world in which news is dominated by

tribal narratives in which the arrow of journalism is reversed, "the public is vulnerable to those who present "objectivity" with a wink to the audience, who are supposed to be in on the deception," before concluding that, narrative-maintenance and factinion is what audiences want, not truth; "many people want that answer to conform to pre-existing conceptions of the world; they want news that validates their world views. Post-objective journalism exists to provide just this sort of affirmation" (Barlow 2012, 31). According to this model, much contemporary journalism can be seen as activity dedicated to bending facts to fit pre-existing narratives. News organizations, in the words of Bethany Usher (2020, 5), "highlight and reframe news and act as central points for audiences to share experiences, which through them become mediated and mutual."

Narrative-Led Journalism has important implications for democracy because it inhibits citizens reaching their own conclusions based on factual evidence. Instead, Narrative-Led Journalism provides the conclusion and serves it up as the starting assumption. The news narrative becomes the ultimate fact. When narrative maintenance becomes the goal, beliefs become entrenched and inflexible. It is a process that renders rational debate almost impossible, and effectively transforms politics into a form of religion. News narratives based on faith and tribal loyalty point towards intolerance and away from freedom of expression, democratic dialogue, and compromise.

Living Newspapers: Journalism as Sociodrama

The psychiatrist Jacob Levy Moreno (1987) developed the idea of psychodrama as a form of creative therapy in which subjects act-out traumatic events from their lives as if they were performing a play. The technique is a fusion of reality and wishful thinking, a reconstruction of life in which the subject improvises narratives to make sense of events and take control of them. Moreno expanded the concept into sociodrama, a similar approach which focuses on wider social problems. He explained the therapeutic benefits of giving a participant the power to understand his position in the universe, "what matters is the expansion of man in relation to the needs and fantasies he has about himself. He becomes the master... instead of the servant... he is free from the fetters of facts and actuality" (Moreno 1987, 11). The process was described as "closely related to the subjectivity and imagining of the protagonist" which permitted her to correct, "the injustices of the universe as she perceives them" (Moreno 1987, 11). Thus participants were able to play the role of God and replace the world as it is, with the world as it ought to be. Moreno referred to this process as the creation of "surplus reality."

Moreno developed sociodrama into the concept of the "Living Newspaper" in 1924. This mixture of reality and make-believe blended the day's news with spontaneous, improvised performances by actors who interpreted events and constructed narratives in real time (Sawyer 18). In the US, Moreno's living newspaper was developed into a more sophisticated form by the Federal Theatre Project under the directorship of Hallie Flanagan in the 1930s. As Sarah Guthu (2009) points out, it was hard to know where journalism ended and fantasy took over, "Flanagan created a Living Newspaper staff along the lines of an actual printed daily paper, with an editor-in-chief, managing editors, reporters, copyreaders, etc. and paired this staff of reporters and journalists with dramatists. Together, the Living Newspaper staff would… distill a "dramatic" piece from the facts."

Sociodrama also led to the emergence of techniques such as expressive writing therapy in which patients document their real-life traumas. The process of expressive writing therapy, which resembles the journalistic process, involves selection and editing, filtering raw experience, giving it structure, and reorganizing it into a coherent narrative. The therapeutic benefit comes from the process of sense-making which is necessary for cognitive wellness. For example

psychologists Karen Baikie and Kay Wilhelm (2005) observe that expressive writing works best when writers use large numbers of sense-making words to explain causal mechanisms. Baikie and Wilhelm (2005, 342) note that effective therapy features, "an increased number of 'cognitive mechanism' words… The subsequent suggestion that the beneficial effect of expressive writing is the development of a coherent narrative over time, reflecting increasing cognitive processing of the experience, is consistent with the literature on traumatic memory and trauma treatment." This suggests the intriguing possibility that news organizations that practice Narrative-Led Journalism may be unconsciously engaging in a form of sociodrama, in which news becomes, at least in part, a form of shared "realist-factual therapy." In this narrative-led world, journalists feel freed from the task of objectively reporting facts, and instead selectively seek out evidence and rearrange it to form webs of narrative meaning for the mutual benefit of journalists, their news organization, and their audience. In fact, the description of sociodrama by one practitioner might serve equally well for a newsroom staffed by narrative-led journalists: "a group of people come together and through consensus decide to explore a particular problem, issue or view... each group determines their own goals, sets their own agenda, structures their own development, creates a dynamic spontaneous method of working, benefits all those involved" (Shackerley-Bennett 2019, 4). According to this model, contemporary Narrative-Led Journalism is not really journalism at all, at least not in the traditional sense of being an honest, impartial attempt at truth-seeking. Rather it should be understood as a form of realist-factual entertainment. In the words of Brylla (2018, 161), part of the, "array of popular and democratic audiovisual non-fiction genres consumed, but also to a large degree produced, by a mass society."

Summary

The news narrative is an elusive and multi-faceted concept. News narratives are the stories that explain the stories. News narratives are not simple facts which can be easily verified. Their epistemic status lies in the fuzzy, twilight zone between fact and opinion. News narratives are factinions and hence resistant to fact-checking. A news narrative is an explanation, often involving complex, nuanced judgements about intent and morality. It resembles a theory; a candidate for belief. It is a paradoxical feature of the news narrative that those who believe it, regard it as a proven, incontrovertible fact; whereas those who do not, see it merely as a speculative, unproven hypothesis.

News narratives are often tribal. Public belief is a badge of group membership. Those who do not publicly believe, are the tribal "other"—disloyal, dangerous heretics. Those who believe often do so for complex psychological, social or ethical reasons. News narratives are seductive because they mesh seamlessly with our pre-existing store of knowledge, assumptions, and prejudices. Their power to explain leaves us vulnerable to the tyranny of explanation. News narratives are susceptible to willful manipulation. Those who influence news narratives also influence public opinion, and place their hands on the levers of political and economic power. Narrative-Led Journalism is problematic for democracy because it reverses the arrow of journalism. Instead of reporting facts impartially to create an informed citizenry, it assumes an opinion and then selects facts to support it. Narrative-Led Journalism encourages the division of society into rival tribes who reject each other's news as fake. Thus it sows division and inhibits reasoned debate.

Discussion

This article draws on cognitive psychology in an attempt to enrich our theoretical understanding of contemporary journalism. It argues that a feature of modern journalism is that it is increasingly narrative-led. As a result, a number of additional research questions suggest

themselves: How are narratives created and by whom? How do they spread and establish themselves? What is the role played by social media and digital technology? By what methodology can news narratives be read and decoded? If contemporary news is largely designed to satisfy our psychological and social, rather than our epistemic needs, then what are the consequences for democracy and for the public sphere? At a time of change, uncertainty and increased social polarization, it is hoped this article provides some additional tools for scholars to explore the journalism of the age.

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