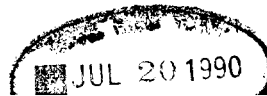


COMMUNICATIONS
FORUM

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HEARD ANY GOOD STORIES LATELY?
NARRATIVES IN COMMUNICATIONS, COGNITION
AND SOCIETY

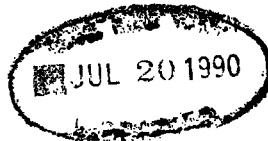
April 26, 1990



MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

HEARD ANY GOOD STORIES LATELY?
NARRATIVES IN COMMUNICATIONS, COGNITION
AND SOCIETY

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W. Russell Neuman, Organizer, M.I.T.

Hayward Alker Jr., M.I.T.

Shawn O'Donnell, Media Lab, M.I.T.

Marion Just, Wellesley College

David Thorburn, M.I.T

Gloriana Davenport, M.I.T.

Antonio Botelho, Rapporteur

This session of the M.I.T. Communications Forum dealt with the nature of narrative forms in modern communications.

W. Russell Neuman opened the session with remarks on classic experimental studies about narrative structure and learning in educational psychology. Do people think in terms of narratives? The reason to think they do relies in part on the oral tradition, which occupies a central place in the evolution of mankind and this may have contributed to development of a "wired-in" narrative cognitive structure in the human brain. From reporters to editors to family and friends the common question is what is the story? What happened today? We are inclined from our daily experience to see narrative as an important organizing principle.

A first set of studies were conducted in the late 1950s. Subjects asked to describe objects in random motion in a film often employed human terms and narrative structures of one object "chasing" another. Another classic study about chess experts revealed that only when chess pieces were in the logical "narrative" structure of an actual game, could masters exhibit better recall of the placement than non-experts. Finally, a third series of studies on "stalking the vividness effect," revealed that concrete narrative forms are not necessarily more persuasive than abstract, non-narrative forms of argument.

Neuman then outlines three questions in relation to the above. First, is it possible that the human mind is hard-wired to perceive information in a narrative form? Second, how do cultures influence people's orientation towards and style of narrative? Third, how does narrative cognition limit or shape public discourse?

The first speaker is Professor Hayward Alker Jr., Department of Political Science, M.I.T. Alker reviews the work of his former teacher at Yale, Bob Abelson, particularly that part of his work dealing with cold war narratives. Appalled by the Cold War, Abelson sought to describe its characteristic forms of political rhetoric in psycho-logical rather than logical terms. Another researcher reviewed modes of resolution of belief dilemmas and mechanisms of how people adjust their belief to become more coherent. He described three primary rationalization mechanisms for resolving dilemmas between positive actors. He also developed ideas about bolstering and differentiation.

The second generation of Abelson studies, the AI modelling of Cold War belief dynamics focused on reproducing the stereotypical right wing discourse of Barry Goldwater. An underlying idea was that there are generalizable quasi-narrative forms of cold war thinking. An example is the Abelson-Reich simulation model. Goldwater's reaction to Harold Wilson's reluctance to support Western counter-intervention in Hungary fits into an interpretation generating no-win policy implication molecule. The third generation of his work is full blown textual analysis or

computational hermeneutics. The objective has been to develop procedures for studying the effective meaning structure of political, ideological and religious texts.

Alker concludes that if you shift to a full blown textual analysis and hermeneutical perspective it is possible to see that narratives are essential to political identities of all ideological persuasions.

The next speaker is Shawn O'Donnell, Media Lab, M.I.T. O'Donnell presents research methods for eliciting narratives from people to study their political implications. The method is unconventional at the psychological and political fields, consisting of in-depth unstructured interview in which the interviewee directs the conversation. The interviewer goes in with just a general topic for the interviewee to speak. The interviewee will slip frequently into narratives to make points. He shows a narrative which is part of his comparative study of Russian and American elites' stories of the Cold War. The narrative is based on a interview with gentleman with a Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering, in his late sixties, working for the "industrial-military complex." When first approached to tell the story of the Cold war, the interviewee thought the term too "TV-like," but went on to describe an episode of seeds for the Cold War. The gentleman's narrative revolves around the concepts of loyalty, anti-communism, and US labor.

The choice for the narrative form to describe the start of the cold war and the particular way the subject tells the story are important for determining how we comprehend this situation. It is very much like when Hayden White describes the various forms of writing history. Employing Vladimir Propp's narrative analysis technique (based on an analysis of Russian folktales), O'Donnell argues that in the narrative in question the American labor movement or the American people as a whole are the hero and the American Communist party is the false hero, that is someone who pretends to represent the interest of the worker but in fact has ulterior motives. In Propp's scheme the theme evolves as follows. First, the hero would break some rule and the false hero would attempt to deceive the hero, then the hero would submit himself to this deception and help the enemy. In the narrative in question the US labor movement cooperates with the Communist party. Then some problem arises: here, the Second World war, that makes a demand on the hero, contribution to the war effort. Then, finally the false hero is exposed (often by failure or inability to perform some task). In this case, the US Communist Party fails to help out in the US war effort, putting the interests of Moscow ahead of the interests of the United States. Then the fairy tale ends with the marriage or the ascending to the throne of the hero, that is the story the marriage between American labor and anti-communist conservatism. So the story is about the transformation of American politics because of the treachery of the American Communist party

during Second World war. The interviewee drives home this point later on in his narrative, when he talks about the elections after World War II, when he describes the political decision not to have in the United States, a European style politics, but to continue with American and "ultimately centrist" politics.

O'Donnell concludes that what you see in this narrative about the beginnings of Cold War is a basic mythic structure in which the actors' actions are situated in a context in which the actions can be understood, motives can be attributed, and moral judgments made. Narratives serve not only as handy mnemonic devices for remembering what happened - they are also the way we communicate and have knowledge about the events.

Following, Marion Just, Wellesley College, talks about the experiment she conducted over the past several years, together with Russell Neuman and Ann Crigler, about how people learn and what they learn from news media. The experiment has been conducted at the Danvers Liberty Tree Mall. The process is to recruit subjects in the mall, offer them a small reward to participate in the study, and bring them to the local facility where they are assigned to one of three conditions: TV, magazine, newspaper. Five separate issues are assessed: South African apartheid, Star Wars, stock market crash, drug abuse, and AIDS. The experiment was preceded by a pre-test in which a number of characteristics of the subjects were measured: media habits, cognitive skills, knowledge of and personal salience of the issue. The basic idea of the experiment is to compare the subject's level of information about an issue before and after he or she is exposed to news about the issue through the experiment.

There are some differences in how much is learned from news under different conditions. In particular, TV was most successful in the South Africa story and the SDI story, whereas magazines and newspapers were particularly successful in the AIDS story. These differences go against the common sense expectation of journalists that TV is most successful in human interest stories. To help explain our findings we examined the narrative structures in the stimulus materials.

We found that the narratives in news are more typically vignettes. These are usually constitutive elements in the news story, rather than the whole story. Among the TV stories, SDI was an example in which the whole story was cast in a conflict narrative (good guys/bad guys). More typically narratives were used to typify an experience or provide a personal account; for example, in a magazine story on AIDS, the account was whether a homosexual college student should or should not have an HIV test; the reader follows the student's worrying about his decision not to have the test. These examples would lead to the conclusion that narrative is very helpful in learning from news. The most successful stories had several narrative elements in them. In

contrast, a story on AIDS that did particularly badly, focused too much of the subjects' interest on the narrative, not allowing them to retain the other pieces of information pertaining to the news itself.

As part of this research, a number of people were interviewed in depth to see how they describe the issues studied in the experiments. Here many people use narratives to recall, to typify, to symbolize experiences, and to convey a moral, which is also done in the news.

The moral of the experiment, according to Just, is that in a newstory if the narrative resonates in a very important way with the audience, it functions as a lens through which issues can be seen and can focus the attention of the audience on an issue; but sometimes, the story can get in the way of the message and block the information that may be embedded in the news.

The following speaker is David Thorburn, professor of literature and media studies, M.I.T. Thorburn suggests that one problem that someone coming from literary studies would have with this kind of discourse is an uncertainty about the way the term narrative is being used. A vast territory of literary studies today would suggest that there is no category beyond narrative. This view is based on the premise that culture itself is a kind of narrative, a continuing evolving, shifting almost endless contention among traditional and emerging voices, institutions and ideologies that constitute themselves in the form of an interpretation or a construction or a fiction or a narrative.

The theoretical underpinnings of such writings is very diverse, but Thorburn identifies two important sources. One is the English scholar Raymond Williams, author of Culture and Society, The Long Revolution and Marxism and Literature. In these books and others, Williams articulated a notion of culture as a process, an endless negotiation amongst three main formations of thought or attitude: 1- residual forms that are already fading away; 2- dominant formations, which are central to the belief structure of a society; and 3- emergent formations that articulate new perspectives at the frontiers of the present. For Williams there is no world of reason and truth separate from the narrative constructions of culture.

The second major source is the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, author of the influential The Interpretation of Cultures. Geertz defines culture as a semiotic concept; he embraces Max Weber's idea that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. Geertz continues: "I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."

Thorburn suggests that one way of approaching the problem of

cultural understanding, of interpreting news stories and all other forms of media functions is to recognize the essentially constructed character of all forms of discourse. In his own work, Thorburn employs these perspectives to look at narrative formations in contemporary culture, whose character embodies some of these principles. One example: TV fiction, which decisively embodies Williams' conception of culture as an evolving contentious negotiation among residual, dominant and emergent cognitive formations. Taking the situation comedy in a historical perspective, from "I Love Lucy" to "The Dick Van Dike Show" to the "Mary Tyler Moore Show", one can see profoundly altering conceptions of the nature of women and family. TV is a rich terrain for studying such cultural transformation.

Such historical perspectives imply, Thorburn said, that there is a distinction between the structure of narrative and its content. It may well be that some structures and principles of narrative are universal, but the content alters. The rigid conventions and structure of situation comedy remain relatively stable, but the patriarchal norms of I Love Lucy (where the protagonist is infantilized and punished for non-domestic yearnings) yield to the ambivalent liberal values of the Dick Van Dike Show and, later, to the gentle feminist ideals of the Mary Tyler Moore Show. This process of change and transformation is fundamentally a story-telling process. The "cultural work" of narrative forms, then involves nothing less than the construction of human meanings and value.

The last speaker is Gloriana Davenport, Media Lab, M.I.T., on new potential of electronic media by visual communication. Her interest lies in the link that Geertz' thick description can have in interpretation. Video has allowed us to be observe in nature, leading to several ideas. First, there are several kinds of narrative stories. She suggests that there is dramatic feature and commercial, and that one might think about their differences. Second, along this same line of thinking, what is a trailer versus the feature film? Third, what is the place of home movies in the culture and what are there emerging formats? Fourth, we need to consider documentary and in all its different styles -- from observational to narrated documentary, to news. Then there is the interview: letting the subjects tell their own story.

Her own work in interactive video emerged out of her experience as a documentary editor. The problems with interactive video are several. The linear nature of the audiovisual medium has allowed us to enter reverie; the interactive structures are much more like the printed world and introduce a lot of viewer anxiety into experiencing the media. There is also the issue of frameworks. Typically, in any kind of linear media there is the notion of a framework, and the reader becomes the interpreter of that. All of a sudden if you can make choices as you go through the narrative, the viewer is expanding/contracting the framework.

A further issue relates to the fact that temporal media takes a long time to view, but interactive media allows for interruptions and the viewing time can be made longer or shorter.

One issue pursued by Davenport in her own research is how the viewers structure their own information. This is exemplified by the exhibit of a short video which shows that the viewer becomes the maker, editing or selecting a set of segments. The product tells a short story of conflict resolution:

people crossing a street by new development, people sitting on 100 ft top overlooking water; Mrs. Morison at a public forum asking "are you going to throw our riverfront away or are you going to make them [the developers] confirm?" This shot is followed by a short shot of a dog, straining on his leash and barking.

The editor uses a metaphor to tell the story, raising the complex issue of the relationship between metaphor and narrative. Davenport suggests that metaphor may play a significant role in narrative.

When we look at how we can describe to the computer the different elements we have available to us. Video is very good at describing people, place, process, and events; a typical problem in interactive video is limited look ahead: how do you tell the story once you introduce one element? What kind of user model should we use? And how do we incorporate at the machine level a sensitivity to context. With every element introduced the viewer is creating a context, and the question is whether these are known contexts or unknown contexts relative to the machine's knowledge.

Davenport concludes by looking at the problem of how people make context. It may be very possible in the near future to call into an ABC or CNN new archive and request further information on any given news story. A terrorist attack could result in a request for information about what is happening in the Middle East. Two things will happen. There will be a need for a selection of material by a computer program at the archive end in order to delimit the amount of retrieved information; the machine will have to make assumptions about the viewer's interests relative to available description of segments in the machine. Second, the viewer will have to be given cues so that he/she can browse through the selected material. The issue is understanding how to get into the viewer's mind.

This is like storytelling without an ending, or like a child who keeps asking questions about a story without allowing the storyteller to reach the moralistic end. The experience is closer to browsing through a narrative, and the problem faced for researchers is how to make this interruptable narrative more engaging to the viewer.

Question & Answer

A first question picks up on the suggestion that the structure of narrative is changing due to the technology, which creates new ways of telling a story, to ask whether there is a transcendence in narrative. Thorburn responds that he has a problem defining the various uses of the term narrative, there is no true definition. One way to approach the analysis of storytelling is to see stories as fictions, thereby distinguishing them from what goes on in a news broadcast. But this is a dangerous fiction in itself. We must recognize that those cultural experiences our whole society agrees by convention to designate as make belief are not only kind of narrative. We have to recognize that narrative is a much wider category, permeating everything. An answer to the second part of the problem, whether technological change would not enable radical modifications in the structure of narrative itself, is a difficult one. One can only say that historically new technologies tend to imitate old technologies, at least in their first phase. What that implies that once the new technology has been embedded as a social practice, then it perhaps becomes possible for authentic, innovative possibilities to emerge.

Davenport adds that there is a typical way that story as narrative can be described, which we learn in second grade - stories have a beginning, middle and end. Can we use that as a definition equating story to narrative? She also states that new technologies do introduce new things, as for example, movies allowed for an expansion of thought which was quite different from literature.

The next question posed is whether interactive media will offer a new and revolutionary new form of narrative. Thorburn suggests that the study of the rhetoric surrounding the introduction of new technologies in the past reveals that there is always a rhetoric of revolutionary change and innovation surrounding such events. His feeling is that revolutionary changes in human consciousness or human practice never follow from the introduction of new machines. New technologies are part of a continuity: they serve the social needs that give rise to them. Davenport replies that the TV model is a very narrow model of how media stories can be distributed.

The next question is whether the mall experiment used feature stories of breaking news stories. Just answer is that the experiment tried hard to get parallel stories in the media. Some were breaking stories (stock market crash) but other could be prepared with background info (South Africa apartheid).

Another comment addresses the issue of the panel organization, distinguishing it into two radically different sets of stories, empirical science and art, referring to Henry James' reference to the figures in the carpet and the rise of modern art as an opposition to narrative. Up to this day advanced writers have

sought to destroy narrative. Alker replies that among social scientists there are contrasting differences between positivistic dialectical-hermeneutic and epistemologists. The more interesting synthesis in this direction seek to define a new genre, the anti-story story. Even in the historiography debates you see in Braudel's search for non-narrative ways for telling history, a new way of making historical sense based on ecological and socio-economic rhythms. Just adds a little story about stories or non-stories, to conclude that the old fashioned stories with a sequential narrative are easier for people to recall.

The next question suggested that most panelists addressed narrative as a closed packet of meaning, outside habits of reading. The question is: in 20th century literature one can argue that the process by which narratives occur did not allow for the open ended narrative that new technologies make possible; could the panelist specify better the ways one talks about potential virtual narrative a reader has moving through a text versus the closed narratives we talk about after having encountered the text. Thorburn agrees that a central characteristic of modern art is a textuality, a kind of self-consciousness that requires not only active participation but also involvement in the process of interpretation by the reader.

The next question is: Can we see post-modernism as the debunking of modernism? Davenport's answer is that there is not enough proof to conclude anything in relation to movies. In the interactive media, we can raise the questions: are there still authors? Do viewers interpret with a single framework or not? Do we still experience a story?

A related question suggests that the effectiveness of the story depends on the perception of the competence of the storyteller. Advanced media appears to do away with the role of the storyteller. What is the role of the storyteller in the advanced media becoming? Davenport answer is that in interaction there are a lot of storytelling innovations going on, particularly the notion of guides, making possible to tell the story from multiple perspectives. Alker added interactiveness may appear to do away with stories, but someone still employs story grammars, there is a storyteller behind it.

A final question says that narrative seems to be an improvement over schemes, but is it the same thing? We end up saying that stories matter but if everything is organized that way, have we said anything? Alker answer is that each community, as in the political science scholarly community, will undergo a historical process in search of its most appropriate interpretive structures.