

# The Use of Narrative Structures in Television News

## An Experiment in Innovative Forms of Journalistic Presentation

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### ABSTRACT

The content of TV news is often not retained or understood by the audience. This article discusses a concept for increasing retention and comprehension levels relating to TV news. Results of an experimental reception analysis with 215 participants show that retention and comprehension can be improved by employing a narrative device to present TV news. Adopting a narrative form for TV news also gives a clearer distance and perspective to the news content, which has advantages for social communication.

**Key Words** comprehension and retention of TV news, dramaturgy, plot and story, experimental studies, narrativity, television news

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*European journal of Communication* Copyright © 2007 SAGE Publications (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore) www.sagepublications.com, Vol 22(2): 185–205. [10.1177/0267323107076769]

## Introduction

Just as the sky is blue and the grass is green, it is difficult to imagine how else it [the television news] could possibly be. (Lewis, 1991: 152)

Television news programmes are popular and receive high ratings. They are considered important for providing information and opinion forming, as well as influencing the actions of the citizens in democratic societies. Since TV news is of key importance for the continuance and development of social communication in modern, media-shaped democracies, its quality is a fundamental aspect of social self-formation (see Zubayr and Geese, 2005; Allensbach, 2001; Gerhards and Klingler, 2004; Krüger, 2005).

However, numerous scientific studies have shown that the content of TV news is quickly forgotten or misunderstood by audiences (e.g. Huth, 1979; Straßner, 1982; Ruhrmann, 1989; Brosius, 1995). This phenomenon has also attracted the attention of a wider public as a result of two representative studies conducted by the Gewis Institute in 2003 and 2004. According to these surveys, 88 percent of Germans either do not understand the news presented on the principal public service channel news programme *Tagesschau* at all or only partially (Gewis Institute, 2003). The retention of TV news topics also appears to be low. The same study found that the topics presented on the programmes *Tagesschau*, *Heute* and *RTL Aktuell* could not be spontaneously recalled by 98 percent of respondents one day after the broadcasts (Gewis Institute, 2004).

This article discusses a concept for improving retention and comprehension performance relating to TV news. Results of an experimental reception analysis with more than 200 participants show that retention and comprehension can be clearly improved by using narrative devices in television news. At the same time, employing a narrative device to present the TV news also gives the audience a clearer perspective on TV news content, which has advantages for social communication.

However, when discussing such a concept, the risks of increasing narrativity should not be ignored. These include:

1. An oversimplification (personalization and emotionalization) at the level of the individual contribution;
2. A thematic imbalance (more 'soft news' with 'a human touch' to the disadvantage of socially relevant topics);
3. A tendency to exaggerate and to be self-referential, and therefore a displacement of other types of journalistic communication (reporting, commentary, advice, etc.) to the disadvantage of the variety necessary in a democracy; here in particular in terms of

topics, forms of presentation and perspectives (see Köhler, 2003, 2004, 2005).

### **The research problem**

Television news is an important source of information for viewers insofar as they use this genre regularly, extensively and in a socially recognized way. In Germany, TV news counts among the most popular broadcasts: 73 percent of viewers watch the news daily (Zubayr and Geese, 2005). Furthermore, 55 percent of Germans report that the news is their favourite programme (Allensbach, 2001: 1), followed by sports programmes and fictional programmes such as crime series. For the broadcasters, on the other hand, the main news programmes are important as they attract large numbers of viewers and have a halo effect on the following programme's viewing levels (Darschin and Gerhard, 2004: 144). In addition, television news has been said to define the identity of a particular channel (Black, 1982: 241).

From the perspective of successful social communication as a necessary condition for modern social self-formation, democracy can be defined as 'government through discussion... The aim is to use public communication to arrive at decisions of well-considered rationality which, to the greatest possible extent, serve the common good' (Schulz, 1997: 88). Successful public communication presupposes broad and diverse knowledge in order to be able to understand and classify social events and respond to them. However, it is not clear what type of content and form are best understood or retained, and whether TV news actually produces the requisite information to ensure the formation of political will, opinion and knowledge (Brosius, 1998: 216). Although in self-evaluation surveys TV viewers frequently report that they are extensively and comprehensibly informed by TV news (Abend, 1975: 181; Huth, 1979: 115), more precise investigations reveal that this merely demonstrates an *impression* of being informed and the desire to be considered informed. Early studies have already indicated that, after watching a TV news programme, a large section of the audience is unable to reconstruct the topics that have just been seen or answer questions on the content (Katz, 1977; Huth, 1979; Brosius, 1995). In order to clarify the question of the ability of TV news to convey information, Meckel and Kamps (1998: 15) added the term 'meaningful orientation' to the classical functions attributed to the media. This raises the question, is TV news just making information available, or does it present information in a sufficiently understandable and memorable way to enable access to knowledge and social action?

There is a discrepancy between quantitative audience ratings success (reach and market shares) and the positive self-evaluation of viewers, on the

one hand, and the measured weak retention and comprehension levels, on the other; and herein lies a problem with regard to the existence of successful social communication. One approach to resolving this problem is discussed in this article via the concept of the TV news narrative, in particular at the narration level of the individual contribution. The narrative TV news item harks back to a type of communication that conveys meaning and orientation in the community, employed throughout human history via storytelling (see Liebes, 1994: 1; Gurevitch and Kavoori, 1994: 10; Scanlan, 2004: 26).

A distinction is to be made here between narrating and other modes of conveying current facts such as, for example, the reporting of news, announcing and justifying opinions or offering practical guidance. The concept of narrative news does not aim to fictionalize news content. Instead, an alternative type of communication is to be suggested, which, while drawing on elements from fictional-narrative film and television subject matter, does not falsify the information but attempts to convey relevant news items in a factual and, at the same time, narrative way.

### **State of research**

Three sets of factors can be distinguished in relation to the communication of news content: first, factors relating to the recipients, second, factors concerning the relationship between the recipient and the content and third, factors relating to the design of the news (Berry, 1988). It is to be assumed that all three groups of factors contribute to the comprehension performance to approximately the same extent (Brosius, 1990: 153). With regard to the recipient, in accordance with the knowledge-gap theory, prior general political knowledge crucially influences the understanding of the news (Berry et al., 1980: 689). Ruhrmann (1989: 104) demonstrated that the degree to which the public is able to reproduce news content is dependent on the extent of their background knowledge. Another important factor in the understanding of the news is the relationship between the content of the report and the particular recipient. As a rule, news stories that affect recipients subjectively or that they find particularly interesting are understood better than those where there is little interest (Brosius, 1989: 466).

There have been several research studies into the design of news formats that are more understandable and permit better recall. Lang (1989) has shown that the order of information presentation in broadcast news stories influences recall and recognition of information. In Germany, Renckstorf (1977, 1980) investigated whether the visual presentation of a topic has positive effects on retention and comprehension. It was found that stories with no visual accompaniment (newsreader in the studio) resulted in the lowest

recall performances. By contrast, filmed stories were superior to the studio-based format in terms of recall effectiveness. However, not every type of visual is able to convey the message fully. One can assume (Brosius and Birk, 1994: 182) that, in particular, sensibly planned and produced images that correspond to the text improve the retention performance whereas so-called stock news images ('image wallpaper') or reports where the image doesn't coincide with the content of the text lead to lower retention.

The presentation of television content came to the fore in research as a result of the discussion surrounding the spread of 'infotainment' programmes in the mid-1990s. Früh and Wirth (1997) examined the effects of varying degrees of infotainment on the retention of television content. They defined a number of visual characteristics typical of infotainment: cut frequency, camera movement, movement of objects, use of music and special effects. Furthermore, Früh and Wirth (1997: 376) make a distinction between positive and negative infotainment. 'Positive infotainment' means that the subjective perception of information quality and objective information transfer, as measured by retention performances, increases as a result of certain elements of infotainment in television content and where use of such features is moderate. 'Negative infotainment' means that the perceived quality of information and retention levels drop, particularly as a result of the use of dynamic infotainment elements, for instance 'a cut about every one and a half seconds and a further sudden or unusual visual effect every three seconds' (Früh and Wirth, 1997: 370, 379).

Ballstaedt (1977) studied image-text ratios in TV news productions and corresponding levels of communication. He doubted whether complex political information could be conveyed by TV news at all, commenting that filmed news contributions concentrate on the visual surface of a topic without explaining connections. In his opinion, therefore, television images always show concrete objects whose respective significance only becomes understandable in relation to mostly abstract, invisible connections. Whereas the perceptible can be seen in the image, the text operates, as it were, at a structural level (Ballstaedt, 1977: 218).

Consequently, according to Ballstaedt, a high information density makes excessive cognitive demands on the viewers. He assumes that this high information density 'promotes the reduction in the understanding of connections between political processes in favour of a collection of isolated and non-conveyed facts' (Ballstaedt, 1977: 214). Wember (1983) endorses this view. According to his study, the visible surface obliterates the background: 'If the connections are missing, not much apart from whipped-up feelings and irrational fears remains from the democratic formation of opinion' (Wember, 1983: 70).

With regard CO the texts in TV news, Straßner (1982) examined, in addition to sentence length, a number of influential factors in the scripts of the news programmes *Tagesschau* and *Heute*. He differentiated sentence dimensionality, nominal structure, tense distributions, the use of nouns and verb/adverb quotas (Straßner, 1982: 187). The officious character of the complex and formulaic language used in these two public service news programmes was also confirmed by Schmitz (1990).

This brief overview of the research outlines how reception scholars attempt to improve the design of information delivery of TV news. For reasons of clarity, our critical and constructive contribution is limited to the design of a single news item on a predetermined topic.

### The concept of narrative TV news

Important approaches to alternative, critical and constructive views of TV news can be found in the literature since the 1980s. Above all, Justin Lewis (1991, 1994, 1996) has criticized the structure of TV news programmes for not exploiting the possibilities inherent in the medium. He points in particular to the tradition of TV news: 'The news owes its structure not to other forms of television, but to print. Television news stories are like newspaper stories with moving pictures' (Lewis, 1994: 29). In his opinion, television news is structured like an inverted pyramid, meaning that the TV news item starts with the most important information (often as early as the introduction), with further details being provided in order of decreasing importance: 'It is like being told the punchline before the joke, or knowing the result before watching the game, or being told "whodunit" at the beginning of the murder mystery' (Lewis, 1994: 30). Rather than building upon the news tradition of the print media, television news should derive its structure from other television forms. When considering the question of how information can be best communicated via the medium, account should be taken of the fact that television appeals, above all, to our two most dominant senses, the ability to see and hear. Consequently, it approximates very closely to present-tense narration, including the pointing at persons and their movements (Heussen, 1997: 265). With regard to its structural strengths, television can be defined as a connected narrative: as an agency of social modernization strategies it has the advantages of the moving image and the ability to impart emotional-entertaining orientations and modes of behaviour traditionally found in the area of fictional presentation (Hickethier, 2003b: 135).

Both in terms of species and personal history, messages communicated through 'story schemata' appear to be readily understandable and reproducible by humans at a comparatively early age — early in history (cave paintings, myths, fairytales, ballads, etc.) and early in childhood. Such acts of

communication via 'story schemata' appeal to and develop both emotional and rational (linguistic-cognitive) aspects within us in the reciprocal cross-over of entertainment and information and personalization and instructional generalization that are typical of the story (Heussen, 1997; Kerstan, 2000; Köhler, 2003). With regard to their structural strengths, this is the point of contact between the narrative mode of communication and the medium of television: both have their merits in the combination of emotion and ratio, feeling and knowledge, the entertaining and the informing, with emphasis laid in each case on the former. This explains why storytelling continually experiences 'renaissances' across broad areas of television programming all over the world - even if news programmes like the German *Tagesschau* consequently bucks this trend. Today, many journalistic on-the-job training textbooks emphasize the need to tell a story (e.g. Heussen, 1997, 2000b; Everton, 1999; Raiteri, 2006). However, these approaches are often limited to apodictic statements, and seldom cite exact sources, or simply refer in general terms to 'findings in cognition psychology' (Heussen, 2000b: 3). Even more important is the fact that these texts recommend telling a story without considering the consequences or evaluating the possible effects on the audience.

What exactly does it mean, to tell a story? Even now, a universal theory of narrative texts or even a generally accepted terminology of 'the story' do not exist. So we cannot transfer a narrative theory to journalism. Moreover, most narrative theories were developed to analyse works of literature. Nevertheless, narrative theories do provide aspects we should keep in mind when we speak about narration in TV news. Since Aristoteles, the story has been defined as the copying or presentation of 'persons that act' (Aristoteles, 1994: 7). Over 2000 years later, Hickethier defines journalistic stories (here specifically for war reporting) as follows:

They have a beginning and an end, possess main points and a climax which round off the story and provide it with its shape. From this basis, causalities, contextualizations, explanations and interpretations are offered which are intended to make the otherwise only diffuse events of the war comprehensible and narratable. (Hickethier, 2003a)

To define journalistic storytelling we must look at three issues: the narrator, the narration and the process of narrating.

### *The narrator*

Constitutive of stories is the role of the narrator, the 'text person' (Stanzel, 1982: 15; Heussen, 1997; 2000a: 178; 2000b: 67). This is the role from whose perspective a complex event involving fellow human beings is reduced to a 'newsworthy' event, to an action with particular characteristics.

Perspectives range (Hickethier, 1997b: 8) between the extremes of full participation, on the one hand (the text person equals the main figure, the first-person narrator, taking a personal perspective), and the greatest possible distance, on the other hand (the distant observer perspective, mostly the authorial text person, in a God-like role). This emphasizes that news is also constructed, in fact stage-managed. A naive claim to objectivity can be avoided by revealing the perspective to the viewer in an explicit and transparent manner. Even if current news programmes might suggest otherwise, alternatives to the form of the imparted contents exist. However, this in no way means that the imparted item should be interpreted as random. Instead 'the lack of one-dimensional valency (true/false)' can require or facilitate 'the explicitization of individually or socially set yardsticks' (Kruse and Stadler, 1994: 41). At the same time this aspect of the news should remain clearly differentiated from fictional productions (Hickethier, 1997a: 514). However, as, for example, the presentation of the story of the US soldier Jessica Lynch showed, this criterion does not always appear to be adhered to, particularly in TV coverage of crises or war events (Köhler, 2003, 2004, 2005).

### *The narrative*

In the early days of narrative research, the examination of 'simple forms' (Jolles, 1999) was important. These simple forms are much closer to journalistic products than longer novels. So findings from this type of narrative research can be fruitful for journalistic work. Analysing Russian folk tales, Vladimir Propp identified 31 key functions and seven possible roles within a tale, which occur in a defined order (Propp, 1972). Greimas (1971) recategorizes Propp's functions into a set of oppositions that are useful to model the narrative structure of simple texts. He developed the 'actantial model'. Actants are narrative roles or narrative functions. The action of acting persons is defined according to its meaning for the flow of action. These actants are: the subject (which is looking for the object), the object (looked for by the subject), the sender (of the subject to look for the object), the receiver (of the object), the helper (of the subject) and the opponent (of the subject). Each actant can be represented by different actors and an actor can occur as a synthesis of more than one actant (Greimas, 1971: 161). This simple actant model can be used to analyse fairytales, but journalists can also model their stories on this basis. In Figure 1, Greimas's model is used to show the design of a fairytale and of a news broadcast covering an industrial strike in two different forms depending on the point of view selected.

This model could help journalists construct a story and story-typical dramatic action out of news information. The dramatic action often takes

Greimas	Fairytale	Strike I	Strike II
Subject	Little Red Riding Hood	Worker	Manager
Object	Help the ill grandmother	Get higher wages	Reduction of wages to prevent bankruptcy
Sender	Mother	Labour union	Shareholder
Receiver	Grandmother	Worker	Shareholder, management and worker
Opponent	Wolf	Management	Worker
Helper	Huntsman	People affected by the strike	Employers' union

Figure 1 Design of a news broadcast depending on the point of view selected and based on Greimas's actant model

the form of a conflict faced by the main figure of the story, the protagonist (this could also be, for example, the world population) (Liebes, 1994: 4). This conflict will be resolved in the course of the story. In contrast, it is constitutive of descriptive reporting that a result is determined and described (see Püschel, 1992: 70).

For the next transformation - transforming the selected story into a plot - the use of dramaturgy is necessary. Aristoteles' dramaturgy (exposition, conflict and resolution) is the most simple and best known form. Analysing everyday oral narrations, Labov and Waletzky (1973) isolated similar invariant structural units. After introducing acting persons, place and situation, the conflict has to be established and - after complications — resolved.

### *The process of narrating*

When we consider narrative theory, in both its critical and its constructive potential, three types of audiovisual narration in TV news items can be outlined. These three types are based on the fact that the messages of TV news contributions, with their emphasis on information, can be organized between two ideal-typical poles: between the descriptive and the narrative. Consequently, narrativity becomes scaleable, i.e. in addition to pure narrative

and pure descriptive contributions there are also mixed types with both narrative and descriptive elements. For the purposes of this study, three narrative levels in TV news contributions, in decreasing degree of narrativity, can be differentiated: standalone stories, contributions involving serial narration and explanatory stories with descriptive digressions (see Figure 2).

Consequently, narrative news contributions may be defined as audio-visual stories of a non-fictional type conveyed by journalists. They are narrated, above all, using images and language based on protagonists and actions in a dramatization. Since narrativity is scaleable, various specific forms of narrative news items are conceivable.

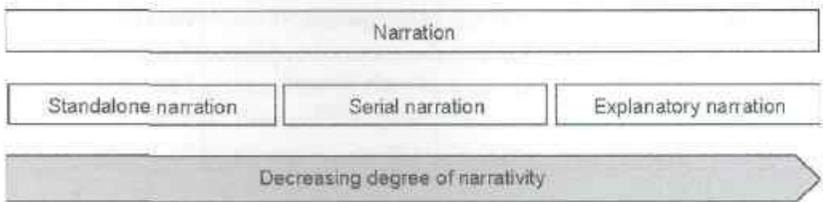


Figure 2 Types of journalistic narration according to the degree of narrativity

## Experimental reception analysis

### *Retention and comprehension*

The conceptual approach to narrative TV news described earlier is examined experimentally in this section. To this end, the terms 'retention' and 'comprehension' are defined first. Inter alia, according to schemata theory,<sup>1</sup> 'retention' is understood as the storage and recall of informational elements from the episodic memory (Woodall et al., 1983: 9). Accordingly, in this experiment detailed questions were asked regarding the content of the media stimulus, in this case a broadcast news programme. Particular attention was paid to the retention of the programme's topics and of the content of an item. By contrast, 'comprehension' is defined as the grasping of connections, either at the time of the act or by recalling knowledge resulting from an earlier act. According to schemata theory, comprehension is 'an interaction between incoming information and knowledge stored in memory so that stored information is utilized in going beyond input information to make some set of inferences' (Woodall et al., 1983: 4). Comprehension therefore takes place when present knowledge structures (schemes) interact with newly absorbed informational elements. This can occur when conclusions are drawn or assessments are derived over and above the received information (Brosius, 1995: 73). In this

study, the measure of comprehension is considered to be the ability to name causes and consequences (i.e. connections) and to draw consequences from the received media stimulus.

*One programme and two contribution variants*

In this experiment, one control group and one experimental group were each exposed to an experimental stimulus (see Figure 3). Each group viewed an edition of the German news programme *Tagesschau*, which consisted of nine items. One of the nine items (on the topic of air pollution) had been experimentally manipulated according to our concept of narrative news.  $X'$  denotes the manipulated news programme. The control group viewed the same programme with no alterations, presented instead in the typical *Tagesschau* news format.  $X$  denotes the unaltered news programme.  $X$  and  $X'$  are independent variables. The dependent variables are the cognitive effects on the recipient side:  $O_C$  and  $O_R$  (observation) or  $O'_C$  and  $O'_R$ .

The narrative news item devised for the experimental group was as follows. The protagonist, an owner of a bakery (subject and sender), begins to protest for clean air in his neighbourhood (object and receiver) because he has become ill as a result of traffic pollutants in the atmosphere. He is supported in this by environmentalists (helper). Car drivers, as a group of people, and the head of the Office of Environmental Protection, as an individual representing the authority, are acting as opponents. The plot begins with the exposition (people: owner of a bakery; place: bakery and neighbourhood; situation: protagonist describes his health problems due to the air pollution). The conflict is established by a struggle beginning between the protagonist and the antagonists. The owner of the bakery is demanding traffic restrictions when air pollution is particularly high. The struggle is presented as an unfair struggle between a single person and a group of commuters. Even the



Figure 3 Design of the experiment

CG — control group; EG — experimental group; A & S & E — personal characteristics that are to be controlled: age, sex, education;  $X$  and  $X'$  = film stimuli as independent variables;  $O_C$  and  $O_R$  as well as  $O'_C$  and  $O'_R$  = observed comprehension performance and observed retention performance as dependent variables.

Authors' own diagram following Woelke (2004: 62).

head of the Office of Environmental Protection does not support the protagonist. The plot ends with the working day of the protagonist — without a resolution. A terminated dramatization occurs here since the exposition and conflict are not followed by an account of a resolution. Instead, in the way of a serial narration, a linkage point is established. In the case of renewed topicality of the issue due to a development of the events, a further partial narration could follow on from this point.

In contrast to this modified, narrative piece, the unmodified and traditional news-oriented piece lacks a protagonist. The place of action is described generally as 'Düsseldorf'. No dramaturgy is developed. Instead, leading on from a news headline, the details are merely listed through to the end of the item. In order to be able to clearly infer the independent variable from the dependent variables, the information conveyed and further intervening variables in the stimulus material (such as length of the contribution, number and length of original soundtracks, the cut frequency, camera movement, newsreader, etc.) were kept largely constant for both the experimental and the control group. There was only a marginal difference of three seconds between the overall length of the two films. In both films the narrator's text was interrupted three times by soundbites. Also, the sentence structures in both films were identical. Foreign words were avoided. The texts in the two different items were spoken by the same person.

The study was conducted in April 2005 and comprised 215 participants drawn from groups of visitors to the West German Public Broadcasting Station (WDR) in Cologne. They were divided into two groups by random selection. Randomization ensured that all person-related variables and, therefore, all artificial variables were similarly distributed — allowing for random error - between the experimental group and the control group (Zimmermann, 1972: 72). Consequently, a non-stratified, consciously selected sample was taken. When taking the sample no attempt was made to achieve representativeness because whereas representative population studies aim to make generalizable statements about the total population, our 'experiment wishes to make relative statements: how has one variable altered on the basis of one experimental stimulus?' (Brosius and Koschel, 2003: 220). The results are not generalizable to other groups therefore. The prime aim was instead to open up a field that has largely been ignored in empirical TV news research. It would be sensible to only perform representative studies once more reliable statements on the effects of narrative news are available and once these effects have proven to be stable in replicated studies.

Following the news programme, participants of both groups filled in a questionnaire. The cognitive effects were differentiated and analysed under the dimensions 'retention' (short-term recollection of details of previously

seen television news) and 'comprehension' (explanation of connections and the citing of conclusions from the media stimulus). In a debriefing session after completing the questionnaire, the participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research project. The study leader asked whether the experimental film had been perceived as such. This was answered in the negative in the vast majority of respondents. Consequently, it is possible to exclude the interpretation that the test participants had paid particular attention to the news film due to its artificiality.

### *Evaluation*

First it was tested whether the randomization was successful. The following dimensions were compared between the experimental group and the control group: sex, age, German as mother-tongue, education, current occupation, use of media (television, radio, newspaper, internet), personal involvement in the topic of the news item ('Do you live near a road with heavy traffic?'), interest in environmental topics, professional training or job experience in health or environmental fields, prior knowledge about the topic ('How many news items on this topic have you seen before?'). The evaluation showed that in almost every aspect of the questionnaire (except use of the Internet) there were only extremely small variations between the two groups.

*Retention of topics* In both groups, the retention of the topics in the programme was first polled by free recall. Free recall was selected because this retention scale measures the ease with which stored impressions are retrieved. It does not, however, measure the absolute amount of information conveyed (Brosius, 1995: 68). In order to check whether there was a connection between the presentation of a news topic in narrative form and the retention of the topic, analysis of how many topics the study participants could name was performed. On average, the participants in the control group remembered 1.86, the participants in the narrative group remembered 2.36 of the nine topics included in the programme.

Table 1 shows that more study participants from the experimental group (82) had retained the focus topic than participants from the control group (71). Conversely, fewer study participants from the experimental group (26) than participants from the control group (36) failed to retain the topic.

The Mann-Whitney U-test determined a mean ranking of 113.17 (rank sum = 12,109;  $N = 107$ ) for the control group. The mean ranking for the experimental group was 103.88 (rank sum = 11,111;  $N = 108$ ). A significant result could not be obtained ( $p = .122$ ) (see Table 2).

Table 1 Retention of the experimental topic

<i>Recall of air pollution topic</i>	<i>Control group</i>	<i>Experimental group</i>
<i>No</i>		
Frequency	36	26
% Who answered 'No'	58.1%	41.9%
% of the group	33.6%	24.1%
<i>Yes</i>		
Frequency	71	82
% who answered 'Yes'	46.4%	53.6%
% of the group	66.4%	75.9%

Table 2 Retention values with regard to the experimental topic (Mann-Whitney U-test)

<i>Group membership</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean rank</i>	<i>Rank sum</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
Control group	107	113.17	12,109.00	-1.545	.122
Experimental group	108	102.88	11,111.00		

*N* = number of study participants; *z* = test statistic; *p* = error probability.

On the basis of the differences measured it is not possible to talk of a significant connection between the narrative presentation and retention of the topic. This can mean one of two things: either the narrative presentation does not have any non-random effect on the retention of the topic or uncontrolled effects on retention occurred due to the position of the experimental news item.

*Retention of contribution contents* In order to measure whether the narrative form had an effect on the retention of detailed information in the news item, retention was tested by means of cued recall. In order to measure retention performance, five units of information in both variants of the news item were first identified. Detailed questions were asked about each of the five units of information in the questionnaire (e.g. 'The news item talked about a city with an excessive level of air pollution. Which city was it?' Answer: 'Düsseldorf'). Correct answers were awarded two points. Answers that partly corresponded to the main statement of the answer from the list of predetermined answers, or answers that were so general that important aspects were missing were awarded one point. An answer that did not correspond to the statements of the answers in the list of possible answers was

assigned zero points. In this way it was possible to determine a point value between 0 and 10 for each study participant.

A *t*-test was conducted to determine mean values for content retention performance. The results show a mean for the experimental group of 6.52 (SD = 1.954; N = 107) in comparison with the control group with a mean of 5.20 (SD = 2.408; N = 107). The connection was highly significant ( $p < .000$ ) (see Table 3).

Consequently, the connection between a narrative presentation of political news topics and the retention of important content-related details can be regarded as highly significant.

Since the significance indicated does not make any statement about whether the observed effect is strong or weak, the effect size was calculated in order to clarify the significance of the effect. To determine the retention performance the standardized mean difference  $d$  and the extent to which the variance is explained by the independent variable  $\eta^2$  were calculated (see Hussy and Jain, 2002: 155);  $d = -0.6$  for the retention measurement calculated here;  $\eta^2 = 0.0846$ . It is possible to speak here of a medium-sized effect and a medium explained variance. Consequently, the use of a narrative concept has a clearly positive influence on the retention performance of news content.

*Comprehension of content* Comprehension performance was measured by means of questions about causes and consequences (connections) as well as about conclusions (these are distinct from the detailed questions relating to individual items of information employed in the measurement of the retention performance). As in the case of the measurement of retention, cued recall was the method selected. This study followed the methodology of Berry (1983: 362). The answers from this section of the questionnaire (e.g. with regard to the question: 'What in your opinion are the possible consequences of air pollution on one's health?') were classified as follows: the naming of causes, consequences and conclusions that demonstrate a direct relationship to references from the news item were awarded one point.

Table 3 Mean retention values with regard to the content of the experimental news item

Group membership	N	Mean value	SD	t	p
Control group	107	5.20	2.408	-4.426	0.000
Experimental group	107	6.52	1.954		

N = number of study participants; t = test statistic; p = error probability.

Cited causes, consequences and conclusions that did not appear in the news item but which are attributable to schematic processing taking into consideration prior knowledge were also awarded one point. Zero points were awarded in cases where the cited causes, consequences and conclusions did not relate to the topic or where no answer was given. Consequently, a point value between 0 and 4 could be assigned to each recipient.

A  $t$ -test was employed to assess mean values of comprehension performance. It was likewise possible to determine clear differences between the control group (mean = 2.57; SD = 1.190;  $N = 107$ ) and the experimental group (mean = 3.33; SD = 0.927;  $N = 105$ ). The significance was  $p = .000$  (see Table 4).

Here, too, it was possible to detect a significant relationship, this time between narrative presentation and comprehension of the content. The strength of the effect was calculated as  $d = -0.71$  and the explained variance as  $\eta^2 = 0.11$ . Consequently, it is possible to talk of a large effect and a large explained variance in the study of comprehension performance. The strength of effect for comprehension is clearly higher than the strength of effect for retention.

### *Summary of the findings*

The results show that the application of the narrative news concept in a laboratory situation can significantly and clearly increase the retention and comprehension of news content. In particular, our study gives initial indications that a narrative presentation has particularly strong effects in the segment of viewers up to 30 years old who have less prior information at their disposal, are less interested in the topic and overall rarely take notice of the news on the television or in newspapers.

### **Outlook**

Our results support the assumption that a sensible degree of narrativity can help make television news easier to remember and understand. This

Table 4 Mean comprehension values with regard to the content of the experimental news item

<i>Group membership</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean value</i>	<i>Standard dev.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Control group	107	2.57	1.190	-5.214	0.000
Experimental group	105	3.33	0.927		

*N* = Number of study participants; *t* = test statistic; *p* = error probability.

does not mean we are arguing for a 'narrativistic' approach to story-telling at any cost, one which becomes independent and excessively one-sided. 'Narrativistic' should rather entail a tendency towards the marginalization of other, story-untypical structures, topics and forms of presentation.

Instead, many of the justifications for the prevailing news formats can be called into question. After all, media content and forms continue to develop. The technical and organizational production conditions for television news are also modifiable. For example, the journalistic activities and areas of responsibility relating to the production of news programmes and news items could be altered. This would free up resources, thus enabling journalists to use narrative structures in the planning, production and presentation of time-consuming, indeed 'complex' stories, featuring background and depth, a central character and minor figures. Such an approach would in turn allow a different perspective to come to the fore.

The concept of narrative news presentation could thus lead to a renaissance in research in news journalism. It is clear that narrative news does not meet the conditions for a naive claim to objectivity. However, overall journalistic quality could be improved. In conjunction with descriptive, commentary or advice-giving news items, narrative news contributions could enhance the variety of the overall offering, thereby opening up the possibility of achieving objectivization by means of a change in perspective.

More and possibly different types of viewers appear to be reachable on more 'channels' (in the spectrum between ratio and emotio) than hitherto — and so perhaps to a deeper extent and for a more prolonged period than is now the case. As long as narrative contributions are offered from explicitly different, complementary and also conflicting perspectives, changes in perspective also become easier for the public.

At the same time, if transparency enables understanding of the particular perspective of the news offerings, improved media competence on the part of the viewers can result: 'To understand news as dramatic reports and stories makes their structure transparent; it permits a fundamental doubt to be harboured about what is told and is claimed to be incontrovertibly true' (Hickethier, 2000: 74). Consequently, viewers (at least to a greater extent than hitherto) could categorize, relativize and criticize news offerings and confront them with alternatives; in short: take them up productively in their own actions.

## Note

1. Reference is made here to schemata theory, which has been a theme of cognitive psychology since the 1970s. The differentiation between an episodic and a

semantic memory as Tulving (1972) expressed it is fundamental. Accordingly, unique spatial-temporal events are recorded in their entirety in the episodic memory. By contrast, the semantic memory stores generalized forms and progressions of events that have been abstracted from details.

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