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What is Narrative?

By Mark Kramer

Sometimes terms that everyone uses but no one can quite define are about vast, various concepts. I get asked "What's narrative?" all the time and, given the name of our slice of the Nieman Foundation, I've been pressed on it.

When the program was new, I suggested, in jest, that we should call ourselves The Nieman Program for "Contactful" Journalism: journalism that doesn't assume the reader is a robot, that acknowledges the reader knows lots and feels and snickers and gets wild. Perhaps the question "What's up with this narrative stuff?" is an uneasy one -- a question that denotes factions and discomfort with the clear movement toward more narrative in news coverage.

At a minimum, narrative denotes writing with (A) set scenes, (B) characters, (C) action that unfolds over time, (D) the interpretable voice of a teller -- a narrator with a somewhat discernable personality -- and (E) some sense of relationship to the reader, viewer or listener, which, all arrayed, (F) lead the audience toward a point, realization or destination.

To comment on each of these:

(A) Set Scenes: Lots of unpracticed narrative writing simply is haphazard or naive about painting physical location: Objects fly about, are near and far, we're inside and outside. I call it "Chagall-like description." Narrative -- engaging narrative -- sets the reader down in a scene.

(B) Characters: The standard news-voice is the voice of a beneficent bureaucracy -- the speech of informative sentinels on the walls of the city, issuing heads-ups to citizens ("A fire yesterday at 145 Elm St. destroyed . . . damage is estimated at . . ."). It is a voice that eschews investigations of character. In the world of news-voice, people are citizens, not characters, and they have "civic traits": addresses, ages, arrest records, voting district and precinct locations, official hospital conditions and military statuses. Narrative is about people doing stuff and, to some extent and in the right places, must reach past civic traits if it is to cover real folks' real stories well.

(C) Action that unfolds over time: This is the very essence of narrative construction: the I-beams of narrative on which all else leans. Action also offers a nontopical way of organizing material -- arraying it chronologically as it's experienced by a character in a setting, crossing outline categories but following experiential ones.

(D) Voice: Most narrative articles, books and documentaries represent a sensible truce in the struggle between chronological and topical organizational principles. This is possible only (1) if readers, viewers or listeners are so engaged by the strong voice of the teller that . . .

(E) Relationship with audience: . . . they willingly follow the teller through unset topical digressions, shift gladly and interestedly to other settings and characters and back; and (2) if readers then start assembling in mind a sequence of subtextual comprehensions that works toward their engineered discovery that . . .

(F) Destination: . . . the story has a theme, purpose, reason, destination and that it's worthwhile to ingest.

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