Storytelling: Narrative structures

Journalistic narration

There are many definitions of journalism. For the purposes of this lecture we can use the following brief description: any text in written, audio, or visual form presented to the audience as a true description of events, or presentation of certain new, previously unknown facts. This definition and elements that it emphasises allows us to distinguish journalism from other forms of cultural discourse, which may resemble it in some respects[1] (such as documentaries).

Research and its importance

An analytical approach to journalism means looking at certain information and data from all possible angles.

Many pieces of information, which a journalist needs for a quality and analytical approach to the work, are already available in the media. In order to elaborate the most comprehensive view on certain events or affairs and provide the best possible services to an audience, journalists should carefully examine freely available sources and compare them with their own direct sources. In many cases, it is possible to write a well-founded analytical study using only secondary sources. It's also important to pay attention to the context of information and data (historical, political, socio-cultural, or economic), and supporting materials (such as methods of data collecting), especially in the case of opinion polls.

It is an established practice that journalists rely on at least two independent sources. Such sources do not necessarily have to be primary sources, such as the author's own interviews. These can be secondary sources, such as articles in magazines and newspapers, radio and television news, or news agency reports[2].

Features of a news piece

Making and publishing news pieces is one of the main journalistic activities. It is a way of informing the audience about events and affairs which should be accurate and balanced, and free of any personal preferences of the author or external influences. News distortion takes place when those preferences and influences affect selection (gatekeeping) and sorting of news, or when authors are interpreting (or even misinterpreting) the information and data.

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[1] PORTÁL (January 19, 2004), Definice žurnalistiky, Aktuality, PORTÁL, s.r.o., Retrieved from: https://nakladatelstvi.portal.cz/nakladatelstvi/aktuality/79646

[2] Pehe, J. (November 6, 1995), Role analýzy a výzkumu v žurnalistice, www.pehe.cz and Kmit 7, Retrieved from: http://www.pehe.cz/clanky/1995/role-analyzy-a-vyzkumu-v-zurnalistice

Key principles of news are summarised under abbreviation "5W", which stands for questions that a news piece should answer: Who?, What?, When?, Where?, and Why? The characteristics of news genre are:

- novelty (news should bring at least one unknown fact (or the one that is already known, but shown in new contexts)
- topicality (it refers to phenomenon that recently has / has not happen, or will / will not happen);
- time and local relevance;
- clarity (it is usually free of all "unnecessary" words);
- accuracy (e.g. numbers are not rounded too much);
- completeness (no relevant context or fact is intentionally concealed);
- reliability (it is verified by several independent sources);
- emotional neutrality (for example it lacks words such as "fortunately" or "unfortunately", etc.);
- it is unbiased – not influenced by personal attitudes or external forces;
- the length is appropriate to the relevance and importance;
- it answers the basic questions mentioned above.

Creating and editing

1. Selecting a topic: it should be relevant for the audience and include a story. Novelty is also important, however topicality is not always required (for example when reporting on historical events). A press release can serve as a reminder of a current event or as a background. When deciding on whether to cover a topic or not, it's useful to think about whether you would like to read about it in the newspaper.

2. Format: define the length and genre.

3. Start with the most important: the title can be more creative, but above all it should be short, concise, and relevant to the topic. The first paragraph must contain all relevant information – follow the inverted pyramid structure described below. Sub-headlines also help to orientate in the text.

4. Use quotes when possible, which brings some valuable information.

5. Don't rush: take breaks and clear your head. After a while, go back to it and read it again.

*6. Question your own attitudes* – aren't they influencing your work?

7. Don't be afraid to ask for help (experts on the topic or colleagues).

Inverted pyramid structure

"Invented more than a century ago, the inverted pyramid style remains the basic formula for news writing"[3]. The information is presented in a descending order – from the most to the least important. This structure ensures that the most relevant pieces of information and keywords are at

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[3] Roberts, J. (2021), 26. Inverted pyramid style, Writing for Strategic Communication Industries, Pressbooks, Retrieved from: https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/stratcommwriting/chapter/inverted-pyramid-style/

the beginning of the article and catch the attention of the reader and search engines. Therefore it also allows for SEO optimization. The same principle applies to each section of the text (after subheadlines).
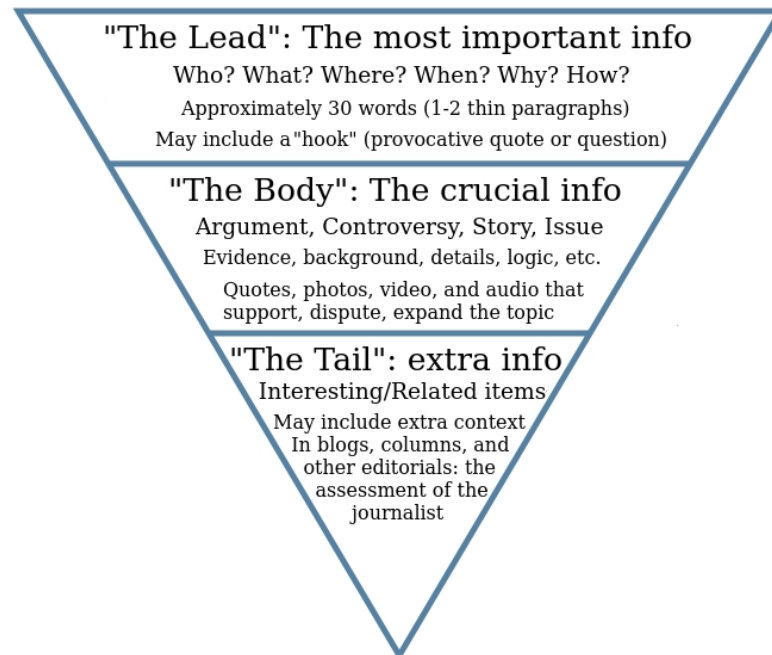
"Inverted pyramid in comprehensive form" by Christopher Schwartz is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0[4]

The top of the page (or beginning of video and audio) gets the most attention from the reader or audience. When reading the text, the readers usually pay bigger attention only to the first 3 words of the subheadline and then jump to the next subheading; or they read a few words of the first sentence of the paragraph and then skip to the next one[5].

Headline

It is basically a one-sentence summary of the media piece and therefore it needs to correspond with the rest of the media. The audience usually does not know anything about the quality of the article at the beginning. People can only assume what the content is and whether they will like the media piece only on the basis of the headline. It is like a business card, advertising banner, or window of

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[4] Roberts, J. (2021), 26. Inverted pyramid style, Writing for Strategic Communication Industries, Pressbooks, Retrieved from: https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/stratcommwriting/chapter/inverted-pyramid-style/

[5] Dobiáš, R. (January 19, 2011), Jak na prioritu informací v textu – obrácená pyramida v akci, blog O psaní a web copywritingu, Retrieved from: http://www.o-psani.cz/jak-na-prioritu-informaci-v-textu-obracena-pyramida-v-akci

a shop – it invites you to visit the text. If the headline is good, people will enter the medium. Otherwise they will stay behind the door. In short, a few simple rules apply:

Good headline = higher number of visits – reads, or views

Good headline = higher number of reactions (likes, comments, sharing)

Good headline = higher conversion rate (newsletter subscription, demand)

Bad headline = lower number of visits – reads, or views

Bad headline = higher number of reactions (likes, comments, sharing)

Bad headline = lower conversion rate (newsletter subscription, demand)[6]

At the same time, it's important to **prevent the risk** of creating *clickbait headlines*. Their purpose is to be more attractive and draw bigger attention to the media piece (in other words, to generate more traffic and clicks). Connected problem is that these headlines can contradict the rest of the text, or simply not be related to it.

There are four main types of headlines (titles):

Neutral (or traditional) headlines provide an overview of the main idea and information in an inverted pyramid-structure of the news story. The authors - editors and writers - compose these headlines to be short, concise, and clear. They leave no, or almost no, space for an individual interpretation of the content. The idea is then elaborated in the rest of the text. However, these headlines can be creative and attractive to the audience as well.

Forward-reference headlines cause uncertainty about information and ultimately the whole story in comparison with neutral headlines, as they highlight something unknown, which should be explained or described more in the remainder of the media piece. They are representing so-called clickbait headlines.

Question-based headlines also belong to the category of clickbait. They are supposed to cause uncertainty, in this case by posing a question relevant to the story. Said question should then be answered by the media piece, but sometimes it remains unanswered, especially when the rest of the text is talking about something else.

Shocking/emotional headlines are also clickbait, made to get the audience's attention by scandal, attempt to scare, or simply through positive or negative emotions. Naturally, the perception of these headlines is also individual, because what scares one person can be considered as ordinary by the other.

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[6] Šenkapoun, P. (July 27, 2015), Titulek je základ článku. Jak napsat 10x účinnější nadpis a přivést na web 30 000 lidí za 500 Kč, nejlepsicopywriter.cz, LOGOS AGENCY, s. r. o., Retrieved from:
https://nejlepsicopywriter.cz/titulek-je-zaklad-clanku-jak-napsat-10x-ucinnejsi-nadpis-a-privest-na-web-30-000-lidi-za-500-kc/

Types of questions

The questions can be asked during interviews, but also when an author thinks about the structure of the text or plan of the research. It's important to elaborate them carefully, as only the right type of question can bring valid information or data and move the journalistic or media piece forward. Wrong questions may bring useless information and, in the worst case, lead to creation of misinformation. There are also questions which should be avoided by professional journalists, because they are constructed to presume or lead towards an answer, force an interviewee to respond in a certain way (leading and loaded questions), or contain biases.

The most common types of questions are:

Open-ended question: the answer is not limited, there are no options and interviewees can answer whatever they want. However, even this question can have some limits, such as minutes or number of characters.

Semi-open ended questions are limiting the answer, for example "Tell me about your country" (subject matter limitation) or "What will happen afterwards?" (chronological limitation).

Closed-ended questions: it is possible to answer only by one word (yes, no) or through a limited number of options (suggested by the interviewer).

Leading questions are leading people to answer questions in a specific way that is desirable by the interviewer. *"Often they contain information that they want confirmed rather than a question that tries to get at the true answer."*[7] An example can be *„When would you like to sign up for our newsletter?"*

Loaded questions are constructed in a way that is suggesting or presuming the answer. They do it more or less subtly, but in any case it's difficult or even impossible to avoid the desired answer. They are effective, because *"the defining feature of this question type is the assumption about the respondent that is included implicitly in the question."*[8] An example can be *„Have you ceased to support this politician?"* or *„Have you stopped drinking alcohol before the event happened?"*

The following questions are used less often in journalism and media, but they can come in handy:

Dichotomous question: they are closed-ended questions, which have only two possible answers. It serves to clearly distinguish the characteristics, experiences, or opinions of the respondent. Commonly they are "yes / no" questions.

Likert scale is suitable for examining and measuring respondents' attitudes. It is most often used to determine the level of satisfaction or consent of respondents (strongly agree – strongly disagree). It is one of the favourite scale questions in the questionnaire.

Single choice and multiple choice: it is a form of closed-ended question that offers respondents a larger number of answers from which they can choose one or more options.

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[7] FormAssembly (2021), Leading and Loaded Questions: How to Avoid Telling Your Users What to Think, FormAssembly Inc., Retrieved from: https://www.formassembly.com/blog/leading-loaded-questions/

[8] FormAssembly (2021), Leading and Loaded Questions: How to Avoid Telling Your Users What to Think, FormAssembly Inc., Retrieved from: https://www.formassembly.com/blog/leading-loaded-questions/

Ordering questions: this type is used to sort the answers according to the importance for the respondent. They are usually sorted by assigning numbers, or by moving individual answers – by dragging the mouse, the respondent moves the answers.

Matrix questions allow the interviewer to solve several parameters in one block. Using a matrix is useful when you need to get multiple different answers with the same variable.

Star rating: this type of question is most useful if you only need information on whether something was good or bad and how much. It is sometimes preferred over the Likert scale.

Semantic differential will come in handy when you want to measure certain nuances in attitudes or feelings. It can be often found in sociological or psychological questionnaires.

Distribution of points: this type of question is useful when you want the respondent to divide the value (e.g. points, money, percentages) between the different options. The answers provide information on how important each option is to the respondent. The whole value must always be divided (all points without remainder)[9].

Resources

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[9] Survio (November 12, 2020), Typy otázek v dotazníku, Survio, Retrieved from:
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