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Different Narratives of the Same Story

Narrative shapes how we interpret information. When we hear one side of a story, we are more likely to be empathetic to that point of view. However, much of how "official" information is disseminated is in the form of dry facts such as statistics or plain numbers. These figures are not only difficult to understand from an intellectual point of view, but also incomprehensible from an emotional standpoint. They often do not engender the empathy that can lead people to change their behavior to rectify the situation. Statistics and numbers may be able to engage us on an intellectual level, but they do not engage us on an emotional level, and they therefore do not really make an impact on us.

Today, the most important scientific information that is being widely circulated is medical information relating to the novel coronavirus, or COVID-19. During this very difficult and scary time, people are looking for answers. We read about this in our very first short text for our Literature and Medicine course: "As medical information has become increasingly technical, patients are asked to trust what they cannot comprehend…. They need this information in order to resolve dialectical thoughts about mortality and intervention, pleasure and pain, quality and length of life" (Solomon). The coronavirus is affecting every aspect of people's lives, and they are looking for the information they need to properly handle the situation.

Even though numbers and statistics have the capability to engage us intellectually, that does not mean they automatically do. Therefore, many people rely on sources which can translate those dry statistics into a narrative, which not only increases the chances that they will connect to the content, but also the level of comprehension and retention. One of the most common ways that people consume this kind of information is through news outlets. News outlets can translate a dry statistic into a narrative, which is much more digestible than plain facts and figures. "Different formats of information—lists of facts, say, or charts—may be better suited to different situations, researchers say, but stories wield a particularly strong influence over our attitudes and behaviors" (Renken). Those who create the narrative have a huge amount of control over the flow of information. Not only do they decide what information to present, they choose how to present that information. Presenting the same information in different ways can result in wildly different interpretations.

During the coronavirus crisis, President Trump has been holding press briefings, which are often quite contentious. One of his most recent press briefings was especially controversial; and different news outlets have handled the briefing in different ways.

A Fox News report of the press briefing was titled "Trump, officials suggest coronavirus is weakened by sunlight and humidity." The report contained only one quote from the president; "'I just threw out a suggestion and it seems like that might be the case,' Trump said while mocking members of the media for criticizing his past comments" (O'Reilly). This quote refers to Trump's claims that the summer months will bring with them a significant decrease in numbers of coronavirus cases, claims which have recently been backed up by data from a study conducted by the Department of Homeland Security which indicated that "solar light along with high temperatures and humidity have a 'powerful effect' of creating environments less favorable for the virus to survive" (O'Reilly). Fox News created a narrative focused on the positive aspects of the press briefing, that scientists had discovered that coronavirus does not fare very well in sunlight or hot and humid conditions.

While Fox News put a positive spin on the press briefing, CNN took a very different approach. The difference in these stories is evident just from the title of the CNN piece, which is "Fact check: Trump dangerously suggests sunlight and ingesting disinfectants could help cure coronavirus." This article created a very different narrative, one focusing on President Trump's flaws and painting a picture of a very confused and mistaken president: "President Donald Trump added to his list of dubious or inaccurate coronavirus-related medical claims, dangerously suggesting at a White House briefing that

ingesting disinfectant could possibly be used to treat people who have the virus" (Dale). The article addressed the controversial quotes involving sunlight and disinfectant. The news that coronavirus does not fare well under sunlight or heat is all but glossed over.

I read the CNN article first, and what I took from it was that the president had said something incorrect and experts were hurriedly setting out to correct his false claims. I read the Fox News article second, and only when I read that article did the information about coronavirus's susceptibility to hot, humid, and sunny conditions sink in. If I had only read one of these articles, some of that information would have escaped me.

This is not a political paper, and therefore I will not waste time by debating which of these narratives is better or more valid. The point is that the same information was taken and used to create two very different narratives. Some of this difference in narrative stems from the inclusion/exclusion of certain pieces of information. Fox left out the most controversial quotes from the briefing, whereas CNN highlighted them. Some of the difference in narrative stems from how information included in both articles was presented; for example, how Fox highlighted the news that coronavirus is susceptible to sunlight and hot humid conditions while CNN only briefly mentioned that fact. By incorporating different parts of the information into the narrative in different ways, the two networks managed to create two very different narratives from the same source of information.

In these distressing and confusing times, finding a reliable and trustworthy source of information can be difficult. Especially since certain sources of information which we ought to be able to trust have been found to contradict each other. Narrative is a very powerful tool; one that I believe is necessary to properly communicate, especially in a time of emergency such as this. However, we must remember that not all narratives will bring us the same conclusions from the same sources, and that narratives are inevitably woven with opinion.

We should keep listening to these narratives. We need to keep listening to these narratives. I believe that if we listen to enough versions of the stories, including different ones from the same source as well as narratives from varying sources, that will give us the best chance of staying truly well-informed in this time of shared hardship. Listening to many narratives will allow us to communicate what is truly happening while mitigating the spread of misinformation which can so easily occur when we only listen to one side of a story.

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