

Narrative impact: How stories change minds

Hans Hoeken

Department of Languages, Literature, and Communication, Utrecht University, The Netherlands
E-mail: j.a.l.hoeken@uu.nl

Leon de Stadler has shown a remarkable talent for studying the importance of language for cohesion in society and communication among people of various ethnic backgrounds. Far more than being a scholar staying in his ivory tower, he has aimed to apply these insights to both societal and educational issues. In this research note, I discuss some recent research on how stories can influence people's take on an issue as they invite readers to view this issue from another perspective. I believe that this line of research could interest Leon as it opens new roads for deploying language and communication to increase understanding among people.

There is abundant evidence for the impact that stories can have on what we hold to be true, believe to be good and how we act. The evidence is partly anecdotal, such as how Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) influenced the public opinion about slavery, but there is also scientific evidence. Braddock and Dillard (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of a large number of empirical studies and reported that stories could indeed impact their audience's beliefs, attitudes, intentions and even behaviours.

Slater and Rouner (2002) argue that the extent to which stories can influence people's opinions and attitudes is related to the extent to which the audience is involved in the story, an experience often referred to as being 'lost in a book'. As a result of being involved in the story's events and its characters, the audience should be less resistant to the persuasive subtext of a narrative. That is, whereas rhetorical texts with an overt persuasive goal typically evoke resistance in their audience, leading to counterarguing, stories would be less likely to do so because of the implicit nature of their persuasive goal and because such a response would spoil the fun of reading. Slater and Rouner argue that stories can also impact people's opinions as a result of their adopting the opinion of a character that they identify with: the stronger people identify with a certain character, the more likely they will accept the opinions expressed by this character.

Hoeken and Fikkers (2014) have studied these two proposed mechanisms of narrative persuasion. First, they were interested in the question as to whether readers indeed would not engage in counterarguing when involved in a story. For readers to engage in counterarguing, it has to be clear what the claim and the arguments are that could be counterargued. In addition, the claim has to be related to an issue that is relevant for the readers. To satisfy these conditions, Hoeken and Fikkers wrote a story about a student who was studying hard for an exam. During a lunch break, he meets with a friend and they have an argument about the desirability of raising the college tuition. As a result, the contested claim as well as the arguments in favour of or against such a raise was part and parcel of the story.

In a previous study (De Graaf et al. 2012), it had become clear that narrative perspective could influence the level of identification with a character. When the story events are experienced through the eyes of a specific character, readers not only tend to identify more strongly with this character (the protagonist) but are also more likely to agree with his or her opinions. Hoeken and Fikkers (2014) constructed two versions of the story that only differed with respect to the opinion held by the perspectivising character (in favour of or against the tuition raise) as well as the arguments that he forwarded in support of his position. As a result, the two story versions contained the exact same arguments. Participants were asked, amongst others, to list any thoughts that they had while reading the story, the extent to which they identified with the protagonist and the extent to which they were in favour of the tuition raise.

Hoeken and Fikkers' results showed that approximately half of the participants (students) had had one or more thoughts about the pros and cons of a tuition raise. Whether they had such thoughts was *not* related to the extent to which they felt involved in the story. In addition, these thoughts were related to their attitude towards the tuition raise. However, this attitude depended for a much larger part on the position taken by the protagonist. If he was against the tuition raise, participants held a more negative attitude compared to when the protagonist was in favour of the raise.

So, if a story contains explicit claims and arguments, at least some readers think about these arguments and the acceptability of the claim. These thoughts appear to determine at least partly the attitude towards the issue. However, identification with a character proves more important for the story's persuasive impact. It is interesting to note that the participants identified more strongly with the perspectivising character even if he held an opinion (in favour of a tuition raise) that went against their own interests and opinions (which were established through a control group).

Given the importance of identification for the creation of an open mind towards issues that people already have an opinion about, the question is what the limits of the impact of perspective on identification are. Hoeken, Kolthoff and Sanders (2016) show that perspective can have readers identify with a character even in the presence of other characters that are more similar to the reader. Apparently, the strategic deployment of language can open people's minds and have them view complex issues from another person's or party's perspective, thereby generating understanding for this person's or party's motives and goals. Stories may therefore build bridges between opponents and can temper attitudes towards issues, even those as controversial as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (see Cohen, Tal-Or and Mazor-Tregerman 2015). Stories may therefore have their use in South Africa as well.

References

- Braddock, K. and J. Dillard. 2016. Meta-analytic evidence for the persuasive effects of narratives on beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. *Communication Monographs* 83(4): 446-467.
- Cohen, J., N. Tal-Or and M. Mazor-Tregerman. 2015. The tempering effect of transportation: Exploring the effects of transportation and identification during exposure to controversial two-sided narratives. *Journal of Communication* 65(2): 237-258.
- De Graaf, A., H. Hoeken, J. Sanders and J. Beentjes. 2012. Identification as a mechanism of narrative persuasion. *Communication Research* 39(6): 802-821.

Hoeken, H. and K. Fiekkers. 2014. Issue-relevant thinking and identification as mechanisms of narrative persuasion. *Poetics* 44: 84-99.

Hoeken, H., M. Kolthoff and J. Sanders. 2016. Story perspective and character similarity as drivers of identification of narrative persuasion. *Human Communication Research* 42(2): 292-311.

Slater, M. and D. Rouner. 2002. Entertainment-education and elaboration likelihood: Understanding the processing of narrative persuasion. *Communication Theory* 12(2): 173-191.

Stowe, B. 1852. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Boston: Jewett & Company.