

How to Tell a (News) Story? Quantifying the Impact of News Format and Storytelling on Engagement

Storytelling design features such as narrativity and emotional sequence in traditional and satirical news influence social media engagement in traditional and satirical news – but not in the same ways.

This research by Subodha Kumar, Susan Mudambi, Joydeep Srivastava, and Debashish Ghose (Northeastern University, Temple University's Fox School of Business PhD Alum, '21) explores how the way news stories are told affects how people engage with them on social media. The study focuses on two main storytelling features: narrativity, which is how the story is structured and revealed over time, and emotional sequence, which refers to the order in which good and bad news are presented. The research compares two types of news formats. Traditional news primarily aims to inform readers, while satirical news seeks to entertain by using humor and irony.

Using a combination of real social media data from a news organization and experiments with AI-generated news stories, the researchers found that storytelling effects vary based on the news format and audience characteristics. For satirical news, stories with a high degree of narrativity and a bad-to-good emotional sequence are more engaging when the language is complex and the audience is motivated and connected to the brands mentioned. In contrast, traditional news stories tend to perform better with simpler language and a good-to-bad emotional sequence, especially for audiences with lower motivation.

Engagement with news stories depends on how interesting the audience finds the content and the type of gratification it provides. Traditional news offers informational gratification, while satirical news provides entertainment gratification. People who feel a strong connection to the brands mentioned in the news are willing to invest more effort to understand complex stories and enjoy them more. Additionally, satirical news must reach a higher level of interestingness to encourage sharing compared to traditional news. These findings provide useful guidelines for news publishers and content creators to tailor storytelling approaches based on format, audience motivation, and language complexity to boost social media engagement.

MAJOR TAKEAWAYS:

- High narrativity increases engagement for complex satirical news but has little effect on traditional news.
- Emotional sequence has opposite effects: bad-to-good works best for satirical news; good-to-bad is better for traditional news.
- Audience motivation and connection to brands influence willingness to engage with complex content.

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW:

- Journalists
- Social Media Marketers
- Academics

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- How to Tell a (News) Story? Quantifying the Impact of News Format and Storytelling on Engagement
- Journal: Information Systems Research
- DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.2022.0650>