
Another Way to Tell the News, Another Way to Read the News: Immersion and Information in Narrative Journalism

Abstract

While Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* (1990) was only concerned with fictional and historical narratives, its influence on narrative theory has been much broader. Ricoeur's reflections expanded into the field of journalism, among others areas, notably through the notion of media narrative (or *récit médiatique*) as defined by Marc Lits (1997). Following Lits, Ricoeur's legacy—and, more specifically, the distinction it inspired between immersive and informative narratives (Baroni, 2018)—has been used to shed light on a specific kind of journalism often referred to as narrative journalism, that is journalism that uses the writing techniques of fiction to tell news stories. This article further examines the dialectic between immersion and information in narrative journalism by exploring both journalists' goals when writing their texts and receivers' experiences when reading them. First, interviews with journalists show that they are largely aware of this dialectic and purposefully use an immersive form to help readers better understand information. Then, an exploratory study with readers reveals that they claim to look mostly for information yet seem to favor immersive narratives.

Key words: narrative journalism, immersion, information, reading experience

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The work of Paul Ricoeur has been at the heart of the development of media narratology (Lits 1997b; 2008; Arquembourg and Lambert 2005) through the notion of media narrative—or *récit médiatique*—ever since that notion was first introduced in the francophone field of journalism studies. Marc Lits, among other scholars, proposed this concept on the basis of two main observations. First, he noted that the media have become “the main constructors of our relationship with others and with the world” (Lits 1997a, 44).¹ Second, he argued that there is “a narrative prototype that is so central in the media that it brings into its narrative logic other textual types or discursive manifestations, somehow caught up in this category by the dominant position that narrativity exercises over the whole field” (Lits 1997a: 45). Lits then proposed to extend the process of the threefold mimesis, conceived by Ricoeur (1990a) within the framework of literary and historiographical narratives, to the media sphere.

In keeping with Lits’s argument and example, Ricoeur’s framework—and, more specifically, the distinction it inspired between immersive and informative narratives (Baroni, 2018)—has also been used to shed light on narrative journalism, a particular form of journalism that uses the devices of fiction to tell true stories (Vanoost 2013a). This article first briefly recounts this theoretical journey from Ricoeur’s threefold mimesis to the notion of media narrative and to the dialectic between the immersive and the informative dimensions of narrative journalism. The article then examines this dialectic further through an exploration both of reporters’ goals when writing narrative journalism and of receivers’ experiences when reading it. Interviews with reporters show that many of them consciously aim at conveying information through an immersive experience, considering that such narratives help readers better understand the world they live in. The readers who were interviewed clearly perceived the double nature of narrative journalism and favored articles that were both informative and immersive.

From Ricoeur’s Threefold Mimesis to Narrative Journalism

Ricoeur’s threefold mimesis aims to account for the inscription of narratives in human existence by exploring the mediation between time and narrative.² In the first stage of the process, *mimesis*₁ or prefiguration, human beings develop a pre-understanding of the world in which they live—in particular, of its semantic structures, its symbolic dimensions, and its temporality. *Mimesis*₂ is the stage of narrative, or configuration, which gives shape to this intuitive apprehension of experience. The act of telling, of producing a narrative, creates a “synthesis of the heterogeneous” that “takes together” disparate events, different actors, diverse goals and means, or unexpected results, in order not only to integrate them into a chronological sequence but also to make a coherent, logical whole that leads to a congruent conclusion (Ricoeur 1990a: 65). During *mimesis*₃, or refiguration, the narrative is restored to “the time of action and of suffering” and acquires “its full meaning” (Ricoeur 1990a: 70): it is the stage of reception, when readers appropriate the narrative. The meaning of the narrative can then enrich the pre-

¹ All the translations of quotations from French are mine.

² This article only briefly outlines Ricoeur’s concept of threefold mimesis, without entering into the nuances of—and discussions around—*Time and Narrative*, which are beyond the scope of this article. For a more detailed examination, see, for example, Baroni 2010.

understanding of the world and be reinjected into mimesis₁, thus creating a loop linking the three stages of mimesis.

The process as a whole contributes to what Ricoeur (1990b, 1992) calls narrative identity. Ricoeur indeed considers that

self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the novelistic style of imaginary autobiographies. (Ricoeur 1992: 114)

While, according to Ricoeur, the threefold mimesis is at play in fictional and historical narratives, Lits (2008: 119) suggested that it also applies to narratives in the media—or what he calls media narratives: “Does not a news story, which takes up a given event or a wire story from a news agency, thus seizing an existing situation and transmuting it into an article, an organized narrative that will create an effect on the reader, follow this threefold mimesis defined by Ricoeur?” In Lits’s broad conception, the notion of media narrative encompasses all “texts”³ that take hold of real preexisting material and organize this material, at least partially, according to a narrative logic—for example, with a beginning, middle, and end or around key characters—and “whose individual and collective refiguration is taken into account as it contributes to create identity with strong social rooting” (Lits 1997a: 44). Compared to the literary narratives usually studied by narratology, each of these texts can be seen as a minimalist narrative, as it does not have to feature all the characteristics of narrative.⁴ Yet media narratives are also complex, as these single texts combine into larger ones. Media narratives grow from myriad different texts from various media, thus creating an “abstract entity” (Lits 1997a: 44) that every reader can then reassemble as a narrative. This act of refiguring media narratives is most important to Lits (1997a: 44) as he considers that today narrative identity mostly builds on the narratives offered by the media.

However, media time has lately been accelerating, a movement that has reached its height with live coverage—first on television but nowadays mainly on the Internet—in which an event is no longer reported after it occurs but while it occurs. Lits (1995: 58) therefore comes to question whether the threefold mimesis process is still possible in the media: “If extra-textual time is one of the components of the act of reading and if such time is concomitant with the event in news broadcasts, to what extent can these broadcasts still allow a real appropriation, a refiguration in the sense that Ricoeur gives to his mimesis₃?” Lits’s questions also touch on the first two stages of the process (Lits 2010: 116): if journalists have less and less time between the moment when they become aware of events and the moment when they report on them, and if, moreover, the time dedicated to shaping their reports is also getting shorter and shorter, is it still possible to really configure a narrative through the news media? Under such conditions, what kind of identity can media narratives help build?

While there is no easy and definitive answer to such questions, narrative journalism asks that we reconsider the problem in light of its own specificities. Narrative journalism indeed constitutes an alternative model of journalism that differs from mainstream journalism in several regards. As a slower and longer form of journalism, it offers stories

³ This refers to “text” in the largest sense of the word, which includes images, audio, video, and so on.

⁴ This is largely due to constraints that are specific to journalism—in terms of time, means, ethics, but also in terms of form. For example, the form of the inverted pyramid strongly limits the type of structure that can be used and the possibilities to play on narrative tension. The principles of information selection usually lead to the exclusion of a series of details that are necessary to construct a character or to visualize a scene. The rules of readability reduce the possibilities of developing a truly personal style or voice.

in which characters perform actions unfolding over time in a certain setting. The journalist uses writing techniques often considered as “literary.” These include the use of voice, techniques that allow creating a form of experience for the reader (i.e. detail, expression of thoughts and feelings, etc.), and techniques that aim at capturing and maintaining the interest of this reader (i.e. suspense, conflict, tension between a complication and its resolution, etc.). The final goal of a journalistic narrative is to offer a better understanding of the real world, which implies that every detail has to be accurately reported. (Vanoost 2013a: 78–79)

Defined in these terms, narrative journalism presents a higher degree of narrativity than media narratives. It also presents a different relationship to time: while media narratives usually closely follow the events they tell, accompanying every twist and turn, without being able to predict what will happen next, narrative journalism only tackles events that are already over. This form of journalism thus requires a break from the prefigured world, which Ricoeur considers a condition for configuration. Moreover, this first break implies a second one: indeed, configuration takes time, which means that the narrative cannot be transmitted instantaneously to readers—there has to be a certain temporal gap between the writing and the reception of the narrative. Narrative journalism thus gives each of the three types of mimesis its full scope and can therefore appear as an important vector for the creation of narrative identity through the media. All the more so since it uses the devices of fiction to tell factual stories—and Ricoeur claims that narrative’s mediation on identity “borrows from history [thus from factuality] as well as from fiction” (Ricoeur 1992: 114).

Distinguishing and Then Reconciling Informative and Immersive Narratives

In order to understand what kind of vector for the creation of identity narrative journalism can be, it is necessary to understand what kind of narrative it offers. To do so, one can draw on some of the reflections that Ricoeur’s work has inspired in the field of postclassical narratology. Indeed, Raphaël Baroni argues that Ricoeur “has contributed to opening up a new field of research for the study of the relationship between temporal experience and its narrative rendering, while obscuring the diversity of narrative forms and functions in the media sphere” (Baroni 2018: 109).

According to Baroni, most scholarly discussion of Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* has focused on its first volume (1990a), in which Ricoeur details the threefold mimesis process without distinguishing between fictional and historical texts. In both cases, says Ricoeur, narratives help us transform our muddled and bewildering experience of time into a comprehensible and significant whole—such transformation being achieved through the narrative configuration. Yet Baroni claims that Ricoeur’s most interesting thesis only appears in the third volume of *Time and Narrative* (1990b), in which the philosopher highlights the differences between the two types of narratives. There, Ricoeur

asserts that fiction, by proposing “fictional experiences of time,” forms a “counterpoint to the historical world” (Ricoeur, 1985: 229). The historian’s task is to configure a “third kind of time” that consists, among other things, in relying on sources to re-inscribe “the phenomenological time in the cosmic time” (*ibid.*). Fiction, on the other hand, aims to explore “the innumerable ways in which *intentio* and *distentio* compete with, and complement, each other. In this, literature is the irreplaceable instrument for exploring the discordant concordance that makes the cohesion of a life” (*ibid.*: 248-49). (Baroni 2018; see also Baroni’s contribution to this volume)

Drawing on this thesis and on his own work on both fictional and factual narratives, Baroni (2018, 2009) suggests that there are two types of narratives: immersive narratives, which mostly play on an intriguing function; and informative narratives, in which a configuring function prevails.⁵ The former present a plot in the sense that Baroni gives to the word.⁶ The plot, according to Baroni (2007), consists of a complication and the promise of its resolution, which creates narrative tension. In immersive narratives, “the plot is designed to immerse the receiver in a simulated experience and to build tension towards a possible resolution. The aim is to construct a ‘quasi-mimetic’ experience based on suspense, curiosity and surprise, which implies that the overall comprehension of the events is strategically delayed or permanently prevented” (Baroni 2018: 114). This definition explicitly points to what Monika Fludernik calls “experiential” narratives, which provide “quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience” (Fludernik 1996: 12). Immersion can be defined as the “operating mode” of such narratives, which activates “simulationist processes” for their readers (Schaeffer 2015: 246-47), prompting them to “immerse themselves in what is represented as if it was real” (Schaeffer 2015: 244). It creates “the sense of being present in a scene, the cognitive dissonance that comes from feeling like you’re elsewhere while knowing that you haven’t moved” (Griffith 2008: 4). The phenomenon can be broken into three dimensions: spatial immersion, or the “imaginative projection of the body into the represented space”; temporal immersion, the “moment-by-moment reenactment of the narrative”; and emotional immersion, the “participation in the emotions of the characters” (Ryan 2001: 119). Certain writing techniques “facilitate” these different processes, which include scene (versus summary), internal and variable focalization, dialogue and free indirect discourse, “showing” (versus “telling”), and so on (Ryan 2001: 133-34). Immersive texts therefore exhibit a specific poetics. Yet while immersion has mostly been studied in the context of fiction, both Schaeffer (2015) and Ryan (2001) insist that it can also be at play in nonfictional narratives. However, Schaeffer adds:

Fictional narratives can push the power of fictional immersion much further than factual narratives. The reason for this is that when we read a factual narrative, we are supposed to engage in a critical “monitoring” activity regarding the truth value of the content that is transmitted narratively. We do not need to have such scruples in fiction, since by definition the question of referential truth is put aside. (Schaeffer 2015: 246)

In informative narratives, by contrast, the notion of plot is in line with Ricoeur’s use of the term *plot*—or rather *emplotment*—as the configuring operation that occurs through mimesis₂ (Ricoeur 1990a: 65). In such texts, “the narrative configuration aims to inform, to organize the past, to establish facts, and to associate events with interpretive frameworks that make them understandable” (Baroni 2018: 114). These texts would be considered by Fludernik not as narratives per se but as reports, “used simply to summarize or present the facts of the case, to provide *information*” (Fludernik 1996: 71). According to Baroni, most news stories fall into this category.

[A news story] resembles more the retrospective configuration of historical works than the reticent dynamics of fictional works; it crushes temporality; it focuses on elaborating an explanation of the action to the expense of creating a tension that would be oriented towards an uncertain outcome. What the journalist seeks to reconstruct is a form of

⁵ Baroni first introduced the distinction between the intriguing and the configuring functions of narrative in his book *L’œuvre du temps* (2009). He later refined this distinction in terms of immersive and informative narratives (2018) and, in his contribution to this volume, in terms of mimetic and informative narratives.

⁶ Baroni holds a narrow conception of the plot, which is in line with the view of Jean-Michel Adam and Françoise Revaz (1996) but also integrates a functionalist approach that draws on the work Meir Sternberg (1993).

coherence that allows the recent event to be connected to the overall reality or state of society. (Baroni 2009, 77)

While Baroni does not conceive these two types of narratives as nonporous categories but rather as two extremes between which many variations are possible, I have suggested that narrative journalism can be seen as an attempt to reconcile the two types within a single text (Vanoost 2013a).⁷ Indeed, narrative journalism is a form of factual journalism: its primary goal is to inform. As Mark Kramer and Wendy Call put it in the introduction of their writing guide, narrative journalism “unscrambles and sorts the messages of a complex world” (Kramer and Call 2007, xv). Kramer even adds that “if it is not an antidote to bewilderment, at least it unites daily experiences—including emotional ones—with the wild plenitude of information that can be applied to experience” (Kramer 1995, 34). According to Norman Sims, accuracy is one of the defining features of this form of journalism, in which the goal is to provide a larger “cultural understanding” as these reporters “understand and convey feeling and emotion, the inner dynamics of culture” (Sims 1984, 4-5).⁸ These claims are in line with other researchers’ claims about the societal role of narrative journalism. According to a systematic literature review, narrative journalism “is seen as a powerful means to (a) increase the audience’s understanding of society in all its complexities and (b) enhance the audience’s sense of being part of that society” (van Krieken and Sanders 2019).

Yet, as is apparent from Kramer’s and Sims’s quotes, narrative journalism aims to inform and increase readers’ understanding of the world they live in through plot and experience, which are both at play in immersive narratives. Jon Franklin, who wrote a very influential handbook for narrative journalists, explains that “a story consists of a sequence of actions that occur when a sympathetic character encounters a complicating situation that he confronts and solves” (Franklin 2002, 71; see also Hart 2011). According to Walt Harrington, narrative articles “are reported to uncover and structured to evoke the emotional textures of their subjects’ lives. They make readers leave themselves momentarily and feel what it’s like to *be* another person” (Harrington 1997, xv). Roy Peter Clark concurs, claiming that narrative journalism provides “a form of vicarious (or substitute) experience. The story transports the reader to a place and a time not otherwise available to the reader” (in Scanlan 2011). But as Clark clearly states, the purpose of creating such experience for readers is to develop “human understanding” (in Scanlan 2011).

It therefore seems that both types of narratives—immersive and informative—closely interact in narrative journalism as they are both part of the very definition of such journalism. Yet according to Baroni, the two types of narratives have different “anthropological functions.” Immersive narratives “momentarily distort the sense of the events in order to re-create passion,” thus helping readers come to terms with the ineluctable uncertainty of their lives, while informative narratives “try, on the contrary, to close the gap created by the event, to give sense to the insanity of experience” (Baroni 2008). Reconciling immersion and information in narratives therefore appears as a challenging endeavor.

⁷ This claim was first suggested on the basis of a literature review (Vanoost 2013b), then validated on a large corpus composed of American and French pieces of narrative journalism (Vanoost 2014).

⁸ Sims (1984) uses the term *literary journalism* and not *narrative journalism*. Some scholars consider that these terms point to different forms of journalism—the latter being then considered as larger than the former (for example, Roiland 2015: 73). But most acknowledge that literary journalism is “narrative in mode” (Hartsock 2000, 11). While the term *narrative journalism* is not as widely used in scholarly circles as *literary journalism*, their definitions remain largely similar, mostly varying in how they shed light on different aspects of the same broad phenomenon (Vanoost 2013b). As the focus of this article is on the narrative qualities of such phenomenon, I will hold on to the term *narrative journalism* here, without entering the debate on the most appropriate label.

In order to further examine the complex dialectic between information and immersion in narrative journalism, the present article analyzes both the discourse of narrative journalists on their craft and the discourse of receivers on their reading experience. This examination aims to confront the previous scholarly discussion of narrative journalism as a vehicle to create narrative identity through a slower and more meaningful triple mimesis process with both practitioners' reflections on what they try to achieve through this form of journalism and readers' considerations on why and how they read such texts.

The first part is based on a series of fifteen interviews with American narrative journalists. The second part presents the results of an exploratory study conducted with five American readers of narrative journalism. The two sets of interviews were analyzed separately through a two-level qualitative content analysis consisting both in the "structural deciphering" of each interview and in the transversal comparison of the entire set of interviews (Bardin 2013, 96-97). The analysis focused on the themes that emerged from the material and the characteristics of each theme, but also took into account the ordering of themes and the relations among different themes—especially the systems of oppositions.

What Narrative Journalists Attempt to Achieve

Various studies have long explored journalists' perspectives on different aspects of their own practices (see, for example, Tuchman 1978; Fishman 1988; Ettema, Glasser, and Glasser 1998), highlighting the importance of understanding their thinking and processes in order to fully comprehend how the news media operate and attempt to fulfill their missions. However, only a few such works have been specifically concerned with narrative journalism. Several important books in the field offer essential insights into how practitioners view their craft (Hart 2011; Kramer and Call 2007; Boynton 2005; Sims 1984). However, as useful as they are, these books mostly present collections of speeches or raw interviews that were not collected or conducted with the purpose of being analyzed.⁹

David Craig's *The Ethics of the Story* (2006) provides a more extensive and systematic study of how narrative journalists work, specifically discussing the ethics of such journalism through a series of sixty interviews with journalists at three large American newspapers. Craig's book, however, focuses on detailed discussions of different writing techniques and does not dwell on larger considerations about the motivations and goals of narrative journalists—and how to achieve them.¹⁰

This part of the article follows Craig's example by systematically studying the discourse narrative journalists produce about their own craft—although the focus here is larger than Craig's. It is based on a series of fifteen interviews with American narrative journalists.¹¹ The journalists were selected following the recommendations of two reference institutions in the field of narrative journalism: the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, and the Poynter

⁹ For example, Jack Hart's contribution is a handbook aimed at journalists that uses his own experience as an editor. Kramer and Call's book consists of presentations that were given by different professionals at the Nieman Conference for Narrative Journalism. Robert Boynton's "conversations" are transcripts of discussions with journalists that took place during his classes at New York University. Norman Sims conducted thorough interviews with the authors of the works he collected in his anthology but his discussion on these interviews is limited to the introduction of the book.

¹⁰ The author does nonetheless reflect on the missions that such journalists could and should pursue. His reflections will be useful to contextualize and interpret the results discussed in this part of the article.

¹¹ The interviews were conducted from February to April 2013.

Institute.¹² Among the fifteen interviewees, thirteen worked for newspapers, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Tampa Bay Times*, *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* and *Star-Ledger*, and two worked for magazines—the *New York Times Magazine* and *Boston Globe Magazine*.¹³ While the interviews covered a large range of topics, this article focuses on the reasons why the interviewees opt for narrative journalism and the value they attribute to the form.

When asked about the reasons why they do narrative journalism and what they consider its strengths or purpose, all fifteen journalists interviewed responded that narrative journalism creates a particular experience for readers distinct from other forms of journalism, even if a few of them pointed to differences that may not seem essential. Among these few, one journalist said that readers respond differently to narrative journalism but did not detail how their responses differ. Two reporters pointed to a richer or a more emotional experience, without explaining why it matters for journalism. Finally, another journalist saw narrative journalism mainly as a way to attract and keep readers: “I think it brings in more readers. Readers want to read something with a story line to it.” While the ideas of emotional experience, story line and reading enjoyment are more commonly associated with immersive narratives, engaging readers and making them read stories that they would not have read otherwise also serve the information mission of journalism, as it brings “some truth to them that they would not have seen” (Craig 2006: 188).¹⁴

The rest of the reporters—eleven out of fifteen—all explicitly underlined the connection between the immersive and the informative dimensions of narrative journalism. As one of them explains, “Narrative is about the rendering of felt experience. *It’s not just informational; it’s experiential*. You are trying to get the reader to understand what *it’s like to be living inside these huge news questions*, whether it’s health care, or war, or a natural disaster like a hurricane. . . . It’s not just the information, *it’s what the information means inside your life*.” (Emphasis added). Or, to quote another interviewee:

I think part of it is it’s important as a self-preservation technique for writers and newspapers.¹⁵ I think you have to make people care to be invested in the things that you’re writing about. But I also think that there is no better way to understand what people are going through and what people’s lives are like. . . . Instead of just reading a report about “this is how many people are on food stamps,” I think it’s a lot more effective to be with somebody as their refrigerator is getting empty at the end of the month and they’re waiting to go shopping and to *put [readers] in that kitchen with that family and have them feel it*. I think people remember that more, I think *it helps them understand an issue in ways that they wouldn’t just reading the numbers and the facts*. (Emphasis added.)

By immersing readers in the scene, putting them in that kitchen with that family and making them experience what the family goes through, such a narrative “render[s] the uncertainty of a future consisting of plans, hopes and fears on the one hand, and the underdetermined aspect of our relation to the world on the other hand” (Baroni 2007, 406)—like immersive narratives. Yet, like informative narratives, this kind of account also tries “to give sense to the insanity of

¹² The two institutions were asked to suggest the names of journalists that were, according to them, most representative of current American narrative journalism. All twenty-one journalists whose names were suggested were contacted for the study; fifteen accepted to take part in it.

¹³ It would be interesting to conduct more interviews with magazine writers, in order to make sure that their views do not differ from the views of journalists working for newspapers.

¹⁴ Considering the readership, trust, and revenue crises that the press has been undergoing, this is obviously also an economic issue.

¹⁵ This, again, points to economic considerations.

experience” (Baroni 2008), informing readers on the state of society through the simulated experience of poverty.

For all these journalists, the immersive form—the recreation of lived experience—is strictly meant to serve or even reinforce the informative mission of journalism. As another reporter emphasizes: “I’m a journalist, not a fiction writer, and I’m here to tell people, give them context and help them understand and feel, but it’s to convey information.” In their view, there is no opposition between the two types of narratives, but rather a form of synergy that fosters readers’ comprehension of others and of the news. According to Craig, by doing so, narrative journalism “can help build and sustain a sense of connectedness among members of a community” (Craig 2006, 3), which is another mission of the media (McBride and Rosenstiel 2013) that highlights the collective dimension of narrative identity.¹⁶

Two interviewees go one step further, considering that this synergy may even inspire readers to take action as informed citizens. One of them explains:

Information without human context is an abstraction that I can easily ignore or not truly understand. . . . And not only that, I can use those numbers [or facts] to distance myself from those people and from that situation, because I can say “well that’s nothing to do with me.” . . . If I read about the two men who are farmers in Minnesota, who are gay and died of AIDS, and I realize they’re just like all the kids I grew up with, I suddenly have to put aside my own distance—even if it’s not a bias or prejudice—and say “do I really want to turn my back on this or do I, as a society, want to say we should care about these people the same way we care about women with breast cancer?” (Emphasis added.)

The other reporter says that he wants “to tell people stories that would be informing and entertaining, and also make them see something that they have never seen before. And ultimately like, you know. . . heal the world. I don’t know, that sounds silly but. . . I come to work most days thinking that.”

More than allowing readers to form their own opinion—according to a classic formulation of the mission of journalism (Cornu 2009: 80; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001: 17)—the goal of these two journalists in writing immersive narratives that put readers in someone else’s shoes is to prompt these readers to take action, as citizens, on current issues, in order to improve the society they live in. This is again in line with Craig’s claim that “the truthful and compelling use of journalistic storytelling devices helps to nurture a form of communication that not only provides credible information for citizens about public issues but also has the potential to inspire them to press for change” (Craig 2006: 3).

The discourse of the fifteen reporters who were interviewed thus largely supports the proposition that narrative journalism be viewed as an attempt to reconcile immersion and information within a single narrative. Most of the interviewees consider that immersion serves information by attracting readers and by helping them understand and remember the news better. A few of them even think that the immersive form can inspire readers to take action toward a better world. Such missions are completely in line with Craig’s reflections on what narrative journalism can and should achieve. They are also in line with the view according to which narrative journalism can significantly contribute to the creation of narrative identity, by making readers not only more factually informed but also more emotionally involved and civically concerned. Narrative journalists aim to offer the same kind of “thought experiments” as fiction, except for the fact that, their stories being true, they involve moral judgement that

¹⁶ Ricoeur’s (1992) conception of narrative identity indeed concerns individuals as well as communities.

has direct implications in real life.¹⁷ However, while it appears obvious that these fifteen practitioners are highly aware of what they are trying to achieve through their craft, how readers actually react to such narratives remains largely unexplored.

What Readers Actually Experience

As Lindsay Morton notes, “the effects of reading literary [or narrative] journalism have been a topic of much scholarly discussion from the 1970s onwards, but much scholarship has primarily focused on the experience of the ideal, implied and/or interpellated reader” (Morton 2020: 8).¹⁸ While a few experimental studies have started to explore the differences between reading fiction and nonfiction,¹⁹ Morton emphasizes the need for more empirical research on the experience of reading narrative journalism. This article intends to contribute to such an endeavor through an exploratory study of the reading experience of a sample of five American readers.²⁰

These readers responded to a call for participants that was distributed through different networks in a small town in the US South. The participants were not chosen on the basis of any demographic criteria but solely in response to their own assertion that they read narrative journalism.²¹ The sample consisted of two women and three men, their ages ranging from twenty-nine to eighty-four, and their occupations varying from PhD student to software developer, NGO worker, unemployed, and retired. The most striking common point in their demographics was their high level of education—they all had at least a master's degree.

These participants were asked to keep diaries recording all their nonfiction reading activities for three weeks.²² After the three weeks, the diaries were analyzed and interviews were conducted with each participant on the basis of their diary's analysis. This part of the article only focuses on their stated reasons for reading narrative journalism, as well as the elements of the texts that they put forward when discussing their reads.

When asked why they read narrative journalism, all five participants pointed to the informative dimension. They all responded that they want to learn something, which could mean either gaining new knowledge or discovering a new perspective on something they already know. For Laura (eighty-four years old, retired), learning is the only reason mentioned—but it is also what she looks for when reading the news or fiction: “In all my reading, I want to learn; I want to know more than I did when I started.” This participant thus only emphasizes the informative dimension of narrative journalism. For Michael (twenty-nine, graduate student), the goal is either knowledge or enjoyment—depending on the topic. He thus seems to make a distinction between informative and more entertaining texts, but the distinction appears to depend on the topic rather than on the poetics of the narrative.

The three remaining participants give learning as the main motivation but add that they also want to enjoy their reading. One of them, Ben (forty-eight, NGO worker), explains for example that the best kind of nonfiction is “funny, it's insightful, it's interesting, it makes you want to find out where [it] winds up.” This comment echoes the dynamics of plot in immersive

¹⁷ In fiction, “telling a story . . . is deploying an imaginary space for thought experiments in which moral judgment operates in a hypothetical mode” (Ricoeur 1992: 159).

¹⁸ On *narrative* versus *literary* journalism, see note 8.

¹⁹ See Morton's (2020) article for a detailed discussion of these studies.

²⁰ The study was conducted from March to May 2017.

²¹ All the people who responded to the call for participants were included in the study. The low number of respondents may be due in part to the tight time constraints of the study. Another possible explanation may be that potential participants did not identify their readings as “narrative journalism.”

²² This was the instruction, yet one participant also recorded her fiction-reading activities and another recorded all her reading activities, including fiction and news reading.

narratives: “placing oneself in a concrete imaginary situation, living its evolution moment by moment, trying to anticipate possible developments, experiencing the disappearance of possibilities that comes with the passing of time but remaining steadily focused on the hatching of the future” (Ryan 2001: 113). These three participants each seem to acknowledge, in their own ways, the dialectic between the informative and the immersive dimensions in narrative journalism, with information remaining the main purpose while the immersive form allows for enjoyment.

Yet when the participants talked about the pieces that they liked most or that stood out—either from their diary or from previous readings—almost all of them focused on the immersive aspects of these pieces. After explaining that her goal in reading is to learn something, Laura (eighty-four, retired) talked about three articles that she had read recently. For two of these, she only commented on the new perspective that she had gained from reading them. These are the only two pieces that a participant highlighted without reference to any immersive element. This suggests that immersion is not absolutely necessary to induce the public to read narrative journalism. Yet it should also be noted that Laura is the only participant to declare that her only reason for reading is to learn.

By contrast, Jo (fifty-one, unemployed), another participant, talked at length about how the rendition of many meticulous and carefully chosen details created a deeply immersive experience in a piece about the transition between Presidents Kennedy and Johnson just after the former was shot, by Robert A. Caro, published in the *New Yorker* in 2012.²³ For her, the narrative “wasn’t anything new, but it was all brought together and presented with vivid detail, so *you really felt a part of what was going on*” (emphasis added). This shows that information can sometimes give way to immersion, at least for some readers. Jo did not learn any new information from the piece, yet she greatly enjoyed it for the immersive experience that it created.

All the other discussions of articles that stood out for the participants centered on the immersive qualities of the narratives, while also pointing—more and less directly—to the opportunity the narratives afforded to learn something or to discover new perspectives on things. For example, about the third of the three articles that she had recently read, Laura (eighty-four, retired) said: “this morning I read a really interesting article in the *New Yorker* about how people who have impairments, for example a man who’s blind from the beginning, learned to see with his tongue. Now that’s startling, isn’t it? . . . That was the catch, you know, you read that because there’s a nice little anecdote.” This excerpt reveals that Laura actually cares for immersion—and more specifically here, emotional immersion—like the other participants. It also shows that immersive writing techniques—for example, opening with the experience of a particular subject, instead of the scientific explanation—do help attract readers, even when readers are aware that these techniques are used as a “catch,” in order to trick them into reading the piece.

Furthermore, when revisiting her diary, Laura also elaborated on “A Father’s Final Odyssey,” a personal essay written by Daniel Mendelsohn for the *New Yorker* in 2017. Commenting on the text, she said: “It’s emotional. It’s personal. There is that translation into the universal that is so important in fiction, you have the particular and the universal. And you know, it’s a story, it had a plotline and, you know, it had an arc, and it was just great. I loved it.” Here, Laura clearly highlights the qualities of immersive narratives according to Baroni (2018)—the personal and emotional experience created through the plot. She also hints that the text offers the same kind of insight as fiction, which resonates with Ricoeur’s idea that we understand human lives better “when the narrative models of plots—borrowed from history or from fiction

²³ Although the piece was published in 2012, Jo read it during the three weeks when she was keeping her reading diary for the study.

...—are applied to them” (Ricoeur 1992: 114). The informative dimension of this piece does not seem to lie in the facts themselves as much as in the nonfictional framework that it adds to Laura’s own library of intelligible narrative models.

This also seems to be the case for Michael (twenty-nine, graduate student), who liked a story published in 2017 on the ESPN website and headlined “Pat Riley’s Final Test.” The reason why Michael liked this particular text was that “*it was more like a story. Like I got into it. . . . They talked about things that I think about, like kind of dreaming about the future, you get to start to imagine what it would be like to be in Malibu and retiring or something like that. So you could visualize, you know, daydream a little bit.* The other ones [i.e. articles read during the time of the study] I couldn’t really do that with” (emphasis added). Here, again, the experiential quality of the narrative seems to offer the reader both an opportunity and a reality-based framework to think about life.

Another participant, Josh (thirty-four, software developer), said the story that stood out from his diary was “My Family’s Slave,” an autobiographical piece by Alex Tizon published in the *Atlantic* in 2017, about a Filipino woman living with the author’s family as an unpaid servant. Josh explained: “you hear about those problems, you know the human trafficking or slavery . . . , but to hear a personal story about it, I think, was a big difference”—which points to the emotional dimension of immersion. He later expanded on this: “for this type of problem, in the news, you only hear about it in the abstract or, if any victims are mentioned, they’re typically anonymized. . . . And then, this article, it was, you know, the author and his family and their, I guess slave is all you can call her, and they’re all identified by name, and there is pictures and memories and stuff like that, so it’s all very personal.” That the story was so personal was important, according to Josh, “to give it reality.” When asked if this was the best approach to the issue, he responded that “the statistics are important to get a feel for the scale of things but, you know, if you hear a hundred thousand people are being trafficked every year or something like that, it doesn’t, it doesn’t really affect people.” Such comments directly point to the dialectic between information and simulated experience in narrative journalism, and closely echo journalists’ claim that narrative journalism helps readers “understand an issue in ways that they wouldn’t just reading the numbers and the facts.”

During his interview, Ben (forty-eight, NGO worker) said that none of the texts he read during the time of the study really stood out. However, he spontaneously brought up a story he had read more than ten years before, “The Peekaboo Paradox” by Gene Weingarten, which appeared in the *Washington Post* back in 2006:

I remember reading that one. I used to live in Washington, DC, and I’m reading from my bus stop near our house all the way to downtown, where my job was. And by the time I got to the end of the article, I literally, I was late to work; *I had to get off the train and stop at the bench and sit down and finish the last two pages of this thing. And then I was like sobbing, because it has this very emotional ending to it.* And I remember thinking like “wow, this is one of the best things I’ve ever read” because, you know, *I had to know where this guy winds up.* (Emphasis added.)

Ben obviously had very vivid memories of the text because of its strong intriguing and experiential qualities—indeed he seemed to have been so immersed that he was unable to get out of the textual world.²⁴ When asked why, he responded that it was because of the character, in which he became really invested. He said it depended on whether the narrative created “a reason for [him] to really remember what happened to certain people in the story.” Then he

²⁴ Even if it is impossible to determine whether Ben’s immersion would have been even stronger if the text had been fictional, as Schaeffer suggests (2015: 256), this shows that factual narratives can provoke extremely powerful immersion.

mentioned another piece, from 2012, “Never Let Go” by Kelley Benham French in the *Tampa Bay Times*, a very emotional piece in which the author tells how she gave birth to an extremely premature baby and decided to fight for her to live. Ben was able to remember both the specifics of the story and the larger ethical questions that it discussed. And he noted: “I remember so many things about that story just because it was so, you know, powerful.”

Again, these two examples mostly relate to emotional immersion: “the participation participations in the emotions of the characters” (Ryan 2001: 119). They show that the use of immersive narratives in journalism can create long-lasting memories in readers and that these memories contribute to the way readers understand important societal issues in the long run—which, again, echoes what the journalists said they wanted to achieve through narrative journalism. And although Ben did not say if reading this last piece made him take any action—according to the hope of some narrative journalists—it certainly made him more informed and aware as a citizen.

It thus appears that readers seek both information and immersion when they choose to read narrative journalism. They do sometimes read only for information, like Laura for two of the pieces she talked about, and sometimes only for immersion, like Jo who read a narrative about a story she already knew and enjoyed the experience it created even if she did not learn anything. Yet most of the articles that stood out for these five readers were pieces that brought them both immersion and information—information being understood in a broad sense, not only as facts about the world we live in but also as issues that are embodied in the narratives, and even as life examples and narrative frameworks that help readers think about their own lives.

Conclusion

If, as Ricoeur proposes, narrative identity is “the sought-after place of [the] chiasm between history and fiction” (1992: 114), narrative journalism seems to be particularly well-suited to contribute to narrative identity. As Lits (1997a) observed, journalistic media have now become one of the main purveyors of narratives. However, they appear to be caught up in an accelerating circle that threatens their capacity to provide thoroughly reported and fully configured narratives and undermines the possibilities of refiguration by the public (Lits 1995, 2010). As an alternative to mainstream media practices and texts, narrative journalism proposes to slow down the news cycle, giving journalists time to report and configure their stories, and offering richer opportunities of refiguration to readers. Moreover, narrative journalism borrows its material from contemporary reality—or, in other words, very recent history—and its form from fiction, thus combining the “two great classes of narratives” that Ricoeur (1992, 114) sees at play in creating narrative identity. Narrative journalism thus seems to offer the qualities of both informative and immersive narratives (Baroni 2018) as resources for readers’ narrative identity.

In this article, the relationship between information and immersion in narrative journalism was first explored from the perspective of journalists. Indeed, refiguration necessarily depends on configuration; the way readers appropriate a narrative can never be fully anticipated but is inevitably constrained, to some extent at least, by the narrative itself. The fifteen American narrative journalists who were interviewed here seemed highly aware of the double nature of their narratives—both informative and immersive. They saw their craft not only as a way to impart facts and figures, but also and mostly as a way to share human experiences and thus deepen the public’s comprehension of the news and the issues we face as a society. A few of them even considered narrative journalism as a way to inspire action in order to make the world better. That reporters assign such goals to their craft and are so aware of what is at stake in their writing choices are essential conditions for narrative journalism to fully play its part in the creation of narrative identity.

As the interviewees were chosen according to the recommendations of experts in the field, they might not be representative of all journalists who try their hand at narrative journalism. It seems essential, therefore, to invest in journalists' and future journalists' educations, to help raise their awareness around these issues. Such awareness should also be raised among media owners and decision-makers, as they are the ones who can ensure the working conditions necessary for the practice of narrative journalism.

The second part of the article examined the dialectic between information and immersion in narrative journalism from the perspective of five American readers. This exploratory study revealed that the double nature of narrative journalism was also clearly perceived by the readers who were interviewed. Although these readers first seemed to put more emphasis on their desire to learn something, the interviews later showed that the immersive experience created through narrative journalism constituted a crucial part of their reading experience. The five readers tended to enjoy and remember more the narratives that were more immersive. The immersive form allowed them to understand information in a different way, made them more concerned with societal issues, and offered them reality-based narrative frameworks for thinking about their own lives.

As this is an exploratory study, these results must of course be interpreted with caution. It is obviously impossible to determine if the results represent the most common response to narrative journalism. Yet it is interesting to note that, for some readers at least, the reading experience largely tallies with the theoretical model as well as the intentions that were expressed by the reporters. This seems to indicate that narrative journalism actually plays the part scholars and professionals claimed it plays in the creation of narrative identity—although it is still impossible to ascertain to what extent. In Ricoeur's terms, narrative journalism contributes to the elaboration of "a properly historical time . . . which mediates between lived time and cosmic time" (1990b: 99), creating culturally shared milestones and points of reference. But it also provides the same kind of "thought experiments" (Ricoeur 1992: 159) as fiction—only accurately anchored in reality—to help us understand the world, others, and ourselves. However, as refiguration does shape the way we relate to ourselves, others, and the world, this exploratory study calls for more empirical research on the reception of narrative journalism.²⁵

With regard to narrative theory, this article shows how relevant and fruitful Ricoeur's reflections still are today in the media, a field that could at first seem completely foreign to his reflections. Applied to the media, Ricoeur's threefold mimesis and notion of narrative identity seem more important than ever in the way they help us reconceptualize the societal responsibility of news tellers. In return, the two studies presented in this article contribute to grounding Ricoeur's theoretical considerations in our daily lives and invite us to prolong Ricoeur's work, as Lits and Baroni have already done. The study of the complex relationship between immersion and information in narrative journalism calls for other studies exploring this relationship in various narrative forms—for example, in documentaries, docudramas, or movies and series based on real events, all narrative forms that are becoming more and more central in today's society.

²⁵ It also calls for research on the reception of journalism in general, as narrative journalism remains a minority model in the media.

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