Abstract

This research examines how reporters and photographers can use narrative style in daily news stories and in long-form investigative and feature pieces. It also addresses the objectivity of the story style. This research was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 11 recognized storytellers. Research participants said total objectivity is unattainable in any story style because of a journalist’s own biases and worldly experiences. However, data analysis showed there is a divide between respondents about using narrative style for story topics that are controversial or political. There was a link here with research question one. Respondents who said the narrative style could be used everyday for every story topic, also said the narrative is just as objective, if not more objective than the inverted pyramid style. Respondents, who said it’s hard to use the narrative everyday because it shouldn’t be used for every story topic, also said the narrative opens the door to less objectivity. Because television viewership is changing, some stations are turning to narrative style to better engage viewers, because of this, it is important to better understand how to use the style and whether or not the style is believed to be objective.
Introduction and Proposal

I believe narrative journalism, a style utilizing fictional writing techniques to tell a non-fiction story; can be used effectively and successfully in the day-to-day operations of a television newsroom and in long-form investigative and feature pieces. Through this research I will also address the challenges narrative storytellers encounter in terms of journalistic objectivity and truth telling. Many theorists have already asked this question. “What is the relation between a narrative and the events it depicts?” (Carr 1986, p. 117) Some argue that narrative and journalism are essentially at odds with one another. One writer labeled the relationship an “unholy alliance, if you have a kind of pure view of journalism” (Lepore 2002, p. 53). However, scholars and journalists have also argued that this writing technique is successful in not only informing the news consumer, but engaging them as well. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and the use of narrative theory I hope to address both sides of this argument. I hope to uncover the struggle reporters and photographers face in an attempt to remain truthful and objective while using this technique.

Research Question #1: How can reporters and photographers use narrative style in everyday operations of a television news station and in long-form investigative and feature pieces?

Research Question #2: Do reporters and photographers who use narrative style believe it is as objective and truthful as the straight news, inverted pyramid story structure?
As Kovach and Rosenstiel explain in their book *Elements of Journalism*, one of the key jobs of a reporter is to “make the significant interesting and relevant” (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2007, p. 187). They argue that the effectiveness of any piece can be measured by how much it engages and enlightens the audience. No matter how hard a reporter works on a story, the end result will be somewhat worthless if news consumers cannot understand the information, relate to the subject matter and recognize why they should care.

This is what can make storytelling and narrative journalism essential characteristics of successful news stories. Al Tompkins, former television journalist and current broadcast and online faculty member at The Poynter Institute, said there is a stark difference between fact telling and storytelling in his book *Aim for the Heart: Write, Shoot, Report and Produce for TV and Multimedia*. He argues “that the power of great storytelling will connect with the viewer’s heart” (Tompkins 2012, p.2). KGO-TV reporter Wayne Freedman says this technique is what makes a good reporter. He writes in his book *It Takes More Than Good Looks to Succeed at Television News Reporting*, that “In a perfect world, every news story would affect everyone directly. In reality this rarely happens, but good reporters will always find ways to make the material compelling” (Freedman 2011, p. 33).

This is true across all mediums of production, not just television. Newspaper, magazine and web journalists must also make conscious efforts to involve the audience in order to be successful communicators. I would argue that this can be accomplished by simply telling the reader or viewer a story.
This research will be valuable because television remains the most popular and widely used medium for national and international news consumption in the United States. A 2011 Pew Research study found that 66% of Americans get most of their news from television (The Pew Research Center 2011, p. 2). "However, numerous scientific studies have shown that the content of TV news is quickly forgotten or misunderstood by audiences" (Machill 2007, p. 186). If we better understand how television journalists can use narrative style in the day to day news cycle, reporters may obtain a better understanding of how to best reach audiences while maintaining the core journalistic values of truth and objectivity.
Theoretical Framework

I will utilize narrative theory for the scholarly analysis component of this project. Theorists maintain a multitude of definitions for narrative theory, and furthermore “how one defines narrative theory shapes one’s understanding of how the different approaches are related” (David Herman et al. 2012, p.7). Theorists James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz define narrative theory as simply “somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something” (3). This broad definition of narrative theory explains the purpose of the narrative, and in my research I will address the concepts of narrative theory, including “authors, narrators, and narration; plot, time, and progression; space, setting, and perspective; character; reception and the reader; and issues of value” (7).

Narrative Theorist David Carr explains narrative theory and the narrative as a “universal form of human expression” (Carr 2008, p. 19). We see this in movies, plays and books. Carr argues that the relationship between actions past, present and future could easily fit into the beginning, middle and end structure of narrative form. He said narratives are simply an extension of what we see in real life. But Carr also explains that even though the narrative form is widely used in our culture, the concept of narrative and an explanation of its meaning has not been widely explored.

In many ways the narrative style has been utilized successfully in multiple forms of journalism and historical writings. But the technique does not come without its criticisms. One journalist said:
When you have something called ‘narrative journalism,’ both those things are being violated slightly by the other because the narrative, the story you’re telling, would always be better if you didn’t always have to think of what had actually happened” (Lepore 2002, p. 53).

This article goes on to argue that the truth is “slightly violated” when using the narrative style because the writer must inevitably bend parts of the text to make it fit into the storyline. Other things are simply left out because they do not fit.

Theorists have long argued whether the use of the narrative is appropriate in literature. Some argue that the narrative does not present a true representation of real life sequences. Historians say that real events do not “hang together” in the narrative way; having a beginning, middle and end. Utilizing narrative techniques, critics say, paints a distorted account of reality (Carr 1986, p. 117). Theorist Louis Mink remarked that the world does not simply produce well-made stories, we as humans create them and imagine them in the world ourselves. Mink argues that the narrative is the writer’s creation. Paul Roth echoes these statements offering this example: “... to the statement that such and such a happening is tragic; there is only a telling which so presents it” (Tamura 2011, p. 153). Hayden White asks this about narrative; “Does the world really present itself in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles and ends? Or does it present itself as a mere sequence without beginning or end?” (153).

But narrative theorist Hannah Arendt looked to narrative as a way to make coherence out of sequences and occurrences in life. She said, “action and speech are the two activities whose end result will always be a story with enough coherence to
be told, no matter how accidental or haphazard the single events and their causation may appear” (Speight 2011, p. 116-117).
History of the Narrative in Historical Literature and Journalism

Theorist Lawrence Stone, a British historian known partly for bringing narrative writing back to academic history, defined narrative as the “organization of material in chronologically sequential order and the focusing of the content into a single coherent story” (Stone 1979, p. 3). He addressed the use of narrative style in historical writings and explained that the difference between structural and narrative history is the use of description instead of analysis. But for a while, the use of narrative style in historical writings was looked down upon. The use of the style has long been debated, and the discussion reached a head in the 1970’s. Historians traditionally focused on “quantitative history,” calculating numbers that showed growth or decline such as “death records, food supply, price fluctuations” etc. (Tamura 2011, p. 152). Description did not have a place in history. Stone challenged this thought by arguing that many historians viewed historical writings as a science, rather than an art – and that needed to change. He introduced the pregnant principle, that said narrative does not lack interpretation as long as there is a theme and an argument (Lepore 2002, p. 51).

Just as theorists and historians brought the narrative style back into historical writings, journalists began introducing the style into news reporting as well. According to literary journalist Jon Franklin, the late 19th and early 20th century was the time that reporters began what he calls “literary training” through writing short stories. He says when “short story writers turned to reporting, they brought a desk drawer full of literary devices, an economy of prose, an eye for detail and an ear for dialogue, and a keen sense of plot and resolution” (51). The
publication of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* was a definitive example of this. Published in 1965, the book created a new genre, the non-fiction novel. Many journalists label this literary movement as the introduction of “new journalism.” And some have praised this form of writing as a successful technique used to better connect with readers. Author Fergus Bordewich labeled the struggle this way in 1977. He said the “audience is a restless bunch. Grabbing them, let alone holding their attention, requires one to reach out with much, much more” (Garber 2011, p. 117).

This fight to keep the news consumer interested is not isolated to print publications. National Public Radio, or NPR, started utilizing the “everyday person narrative” around the same time Stone was calling for a change in historical writings and storytelling in the 70’s (Butler 2006, p. 29). The organization’s *This American Life* draws more than 1.6 million listeners every week. The show centers around the idea that the audience wants to hear personal stories and that storytelling “is such a timeless and basic human activity” (30). This technique has also been used in television. The strength of the narrative is the literary techniques that audiences see in film. “Plot, dramaturgy, sound and visual effects together can form a whole which is difficult for the viewer to turn away from due to the ambience and atmosphere of suspense which has been created.” (Ekstrom 2000, p. 472). These storytelling techniques arouse emotions in the viewer and create suspense and excitement.
Literature Review
This theoretical discussion has sparked some valuable studies regarding the narrative and its use in journalism. Kovach and Rosenstein explain, “journalism’s first obligation is to the truth” (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2007, p. 36). But if narrative is not entirely truthful some critics say the style may be deceptive to readers. A West Virginia University professor of journalism argued that the narrative has created a new form of journalism. He writes that there is the traditional objective form of journalism and a modern form of what he calls “narrative realism” (Hanson 1997, p. 387). Objectivity, he says, is a normative idea in which reporters should be fair, balanced and impartial. He believes that objectivity is a form of writing in which the story is presented in a neutral tone. He labels “narrative realism” as an alternative to the objective form. This form includes scene-by-scene construction, use of dialogue, third-person point of view and symbolic details. He says the “point of this form is to use language to make the reader call forth his or her own experiences and emotions and apply them to the story at hand” (390). Hanson says objectivity and narrative realism are completely separate. He quotes writer Dwight Macdonald who dismisses narrative style to subjects that are sensational in nature. He calls narrative a “bastard form, having it both ways, exploiting the factual authority of journalism and the atmospheric license of fiction” (393).

Kalle Pihlainen, a professor of cultural history, argued a similar point for the use of the narrative in historical writings. He says the historical narrative is in essence fictional. Because a writer has to select material and fit facts into the narrative form, he argues that the elements of history are changed. Pihlainen says
the narrator of the story plays too prominent a role in the story structure. “Any structure, then, is ultimately an imposition of the historian’s own values on the material used” (Pihlainen 1978, p. 8). Though historical writings clearly differ from journalism and the ethics reporters adhere to, it should be remembered that both areas of study rely heavily on facts and truths of events that happened in the past. Pihlainen, Hanson and multiple other theorists and writers have argued the narrative style simply does not coincide with principles journalists and historical writers are based upon.

However, other researchers have found the narrative is the best way to connect with the audience and say it furthermore does not jeopardize objectivity and truthfulness. Nieman Fellow and New York Times Miami Bureau Chief Rick Bragg said it this way; “A little bit of narrative, like sugar, just makes everything better. Narrative conveys emotion. Narrative shows, not tells” (Bragg 2000, p. 30). He argues that a reporter can weave story telling into any day-turn story and provides his coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing, written in two hours as an example. Show, he says, don’t tell the reader the story. Good writing and storytelling will keep the news consumer reading and coming back for more.

Researchers have found this to be true. Researcher Jane Johnston conducted a pilot study of narrative writings in two daily newspapers in Australia. Over the course of a month, Johnston examined 2,435 stories on the front pages of The Australian and the Sydney Morning Herald. The study showed that the reporters at Sydney Morning Herald used the inverted pyramid style, which begins with a summary lead and then presents information in descending order of importance,
the majority of the time in its news writing. However, the news section of the paper did contain narratives. According to the study, one out of every five stories in the news section used the narrative style. This style was used in both soft and hard news stories at both of the papers.

It’s important to understand how and why reporters use narrative style. Researcher Marcel Machill argues in his study that it’s out of necessity. He says TV news programs are the way people find out about what’s happening in the world around them. However, he also notes that “numerous studies have shown that content in TV news is quickly forgotten or misunderstood by audiences” (Machill 2007, p. 186). Studies have shown that news consumers have a short recall of television news stories and often cannot answer questions about the content. Machill conducted a study that shows this point, and furthermore argues that the narrative gives a clearer perspective to television news stories. His study involved 215 participants and analyzed how narrative style can improve retention and comprehension of news content. Results showed that the use of narrative can increase retention and understanding of news content. However, Machill also admits that this style is by no means objective in the traditional sense of the word in journalism. He argues in his conclusion that the:

  Concept of narrative news presentation could thus lead to a
  renaissance in research in news journalism. It is clear that narrative news does not meet the conditions for a naïve claim to objectivity.
  However, overall journalistic quality could be improved. In
  conjunction with descriptive, commentary or advice-giving news
items, narrative news contributions could enhance the variety of the overall offering, thereby opening up the possibility of achieving objectivization by means of a change in perspective (200).

To further support this point professor of philosophical and cultural studies Slavka TOMAŠČÍKOVÁ argues that objectivity isn’t the right goal. He says television news reporters already relay messages about reality to the audiences. These messages are sent in signs and the audiences decode the signs in real social contexts. So news agencies and reporters are always constructing the meaning of news events. However, in narrative style, TOMAŠČÍKOVÁ says there are fewer possibilities for audience members to have their own interpretations of the narrative. He says multiple codes in a news story, including anchor appearance, voice, video, editing, influence the way the viewer perceives the information, regardless of style. He says the “facts and figures fulfill the role of narrative linked to the idea of realism and accuracy. Television news narrative does not display ambiguities or uncertainties, this makes television appear both authoritative and omniscient” (TOMAŠČÍKOVÁ 2010, p. 264).

This research and narrative theory show that there are conflicting beliefs regarding the use of the narrative in journalism. Though studies have shown the narrative to be effective in successfully engaging the news consumer, it is also debatable whether or not the style adheres to core journalistic principles such as objectivity and truthfulness.
Methodology

I will carry out this research by conducting interviews to answer my research questions. As Fontana and Frey explain, the interview is extremely complex and exists in multiple forms. I plan to utilize semi-structured, in-depth interviews in which I will ask “each respondent a series of pre-established questions with a limited set of response categories” (Fontana & Frey 1994, p. 363). Fontana and Frey set up the guidelines for this type of interview. Through my research and experience from working in a broadcast newsroom, I already know basic knowledge of narrative style broadcast news stories. During the interview I will not ask leading questions, interpret the meaning of questions or improvise in questioning (364). However, because these interviews will be “semi-structured” I plan to allow some room for open-ended questions to allow participants to elaborate on certain ideas. These interviews will be “in-depth” because I plan to with participants in person for at least 45 minutes. This will allow time to get to know the journalist and walk through decision making in the construction of their stories.

I am IRB (Institutional Review Board) certified through the University of Missouri for my research, and the board has approved the proposed research for this professional project. I have attached my IRB completion report and my IRB exempt application.

I plan to contact both reporters and photographers in the industry who currently use the narrative style. My hope is to study three to five broadcast journalists. I want to conduct these interviews in-person and have the opportunity to analyze the journalist’s work with them. This may require some traveling or a
change in what I expect for my study. As I begin contacting reporters and photographers I will see what is feasible for the four-month time period I have allotted for this project. I also plan to conduct some of the interviews via Skype. This will broaden the amount of people I can talk to. I hope to get participants with varying job titles, including but not limited to local news reporter, national news reporter, one-man-band reporter, in-depth or long-form news producer/editor/writer, photographer etc.

I plan to contact KGO-TV reporter, and University of Missouri alumnus, Wayne Freedman for this study. Broadcast journalism students taking classes at the University of Missouri read Freedman's book *It Takes More Than Good Looks to Succeed at Television News Reporting* that highlights his successes and failures in using narrative style. He is well known for his storytelling and has worked with University of Missouri journalism students in the past. If he cannot help me he may be able to connect me with other reporters or producers in the industry who would be willing to participate.

Other possible research participants are reporters Andy Choi of WISC in Madison, Wisconsin, and Jason Lamb who works in Nashville, Tennessee. Both are University of Missouri alumni. I will also contact Boyd Huppert of KARE in Minnesota. He is one of the best and most respected storytellers in the journalism industry. I will also be contacting Les Rose a photographer for CBS.

University of Missouri professors including members of my committee Greeley Kyle, Kent Collins and Randy Reeves are in constant contact with reporters
and producers in the industry. They will be consulted for candidate suggestions for this study.

Researchers used the method of semi-structured, in-depth interviews while conducting a study in India to explore women’s perspectives of medical abortion in 2010. The goal of the research was to find the reasons why women used this form of abortion and to gather reactions to the medical process. Researchers recruited participants (before patients knew the results of the abortion) during a follow up visit 12 days after the procedure. Researchers conducted semi-constructed interviews alone with the participant; interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and included open-ended questions. Additional interviews were scheduled if participants agreed to it. The additional visit was a supplement to see if a women’s perception of her abortion had changed. Researchers coded interviews to analyze women’s perceptions of the process (Ganatra et al. 2010, p. 336-337).

Semi-structured, in-depth interviewing was the best method of research because women shared personal and intimate experiences in the study. This method allowed participants to explain emotions, expectations and individual circumstances (337). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews will also be the best method for my research because I am trying to identify what goes into a journalist’s decision making when using narrative style in broadcast news stories. I need to get at the heart of how reporters and photographers see the narrative and whether or not it aligns with core journalistic principles and values. To obtain personal opinions such as this and to allow reporters and photographers to open up about their work I must
speak with them in person. I believe this method will be the best way to gather research regarding this topic.
Recruitment and Interview Process
This research introduced me to some of the best journalists and storytellers in the industry. When I began the recruitment process for this research I decided I wanted to try to include a variety of different job titles and generations. My goal was to have at least one investigative journalist, one feature reporter and/or photographer and one general assignment reporter and/or photographer. Within those categories I also wanted a variety of experience. I wanted to include journalists considered to be experts in their field and those just starting out in the business.

The job title was fairly easy to specify, however, some journalists fell into multiple categories. For example Boyd Huppert is a general assignment reporter for KARE, a Gannett owned station in Minneapolis, but he is widely known for his feature franchise “Land of 10,000 Stories.” Other journalists were easy to categorize, for example John Ferrugia works almost exclusively as an investigative reporter for KMGH, a Scripps owned station in Denver.

Experience was a little harder to identify. Experience can be gauged by number of years in the business, market size one is currently working in, awards won and a multitude of other factors. I eventually decided on years working in the industry. If a journalist had been working for less than 10 years I considered them new. If a journalist had been working for more than 10 years I called them experienced. Admittedly, this is a vague differentiation between new and experienced journalists, however, I think the importance of showing the difference between the generations is to identify the general changes in the industry and how
things have changed because of advancements in technology. Also, all of the research participants are award-winning journalists and the market size they work in is not necessarily linked with experience.

I started contacting people for this research in early January. After consulting my professional project committee members, I had a number of people I wanted to reach out to. I decided I would send emails to 10 journalists and see who agreed to participate. All of the people I contacted agreed to participate in the research and I was able to interview all of them except for one. In sum, I interviewed 11 journalists for this project and met the criteria for diversity in job title and experience level. I made the decision early on in the data collection to do all of my interviews in person and request a job shadow if the reporter and station allowed it. I made this decision because I believed conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews in person would garner better, and more honest results. I think this decision was the right one.

Meeting and shadowing these journalists not only gave me extra insight for this project, but it helped me better understand some of the obstacles I came to face when using this story structure in my own work. The questions that I asked of these journalists were not easy ones. Doing interviews in person allowed me the exciting opportunity to watch these journalists think and wrestle with some of the ideas.

The interviews took approximately 45 minutes and included a set of pre-established questions. Before each interview I watched multiple examples of each participant’s work so that I could include questions specific to each journalist. Through this research I sought to answer two questions:
Research Question #1: How can reporters and photographers use narrative style in everyday operations of a television news station and in long-form investigative and feature pieces?

Research Question #2: Do reporters and photographers who use narrative style believe it is as objective and truthful as the inverted pyramid story structure?

I changed these research questions slightly from the ones I had in my original proposal. In the first and second research question I changed “producers” to “photographers.” Throughout this research I was only able to interview reporters and photographers. The second research question deviated from the original question: “How do reporters and producers remain objective and truthful in news stories when using narrative style?” As I gathered data, I realized it was important to first address whether or not journalists who used storytelling in their work thought it was objective. I also thought it was important to compare narrative style to the inverted pyramid story structure, which is arguably one of the most common formats used by broadcast and print news outlets.

The transcripts of the interviews I conducted can be found in the Research Component Appendix section of this project. Below is a list of all of the research participants, their position and station they work for.

Andy Choi, Daily Reporter, WISC (Madison, Wisconsin)
Boyd Huppert, Daily/Feature Reporter, KARE (Minneapolis, Minnesota)
Chris Vanderveen, Daily/Feature Reporter, KUSA (Denver, Colorado)
Fritz Wetherbee, Feature Reporter, WMUR (Manchester, New Hampshire)
Jana Shortal, Daily Reporter, KARE (Minneapolis, Minnesota)
Jeremy Nichols, Daily Photographer, WISC (Madison, Wisconsin)

Jim Matheny, One-Man-Band Daily/Feature Reporter, WBIR (Knoxville, Tennessee)

John Ferrugia, Investigative Reporter, KMGH (Denver, Colorado)

Kevin Torres, Daily/Feature Reporter, KUSA (Denver, Colorado)

Les Rose, Feature Photographer, CBS (Los Angelos, California)

Mitch Pittman, One-Man-Band Daily Reporter, KSTP (Minneapolis, Minnesota)
Definition of Narrative Storytelling
When I started analyzing the data I collected for this research, I realized it was important to first define narrative storytelling. What’s interesting about storytelling and narrative theory is that there is no one definition for this concept. Theorists maintain a multitude of definitions for narrative theory, and furthermore “how one defines narrative theory shapes one’s understanding of how the different approaches are related” (David Herman et al. 2012, p.7). Theorists James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz define narrative theory as simply “somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something” (3). Narrative Theorist David Carr explains narrative theory and the narrative as a “universal form of human expression” (Carr 2008, p. 19). In my proposal I defined the narrative as “the use of fictional storytelling techniques in a non-fiction story.”

Many of the research participants likened the narrative structure to movies, books and plays. KARE daily and feature reporter Boyd Huppert said:

To me it’s not unlike any good book or any good movie. Beginning, middle, end, characters, suspense, and surprises... those are the elements of all types of stories you’re telling. I’ve come to believe that news stories can often be better told with the narrative style than without.

KMGH Investigative reporter John Ferrugia said, “I see narrative or storytelling as one of the most basic human interactions.” WISC photographer Jeremy Nichols said:
It’s not just, ‘give me the facts and lead with the most important thing.’ If you do it correctly, and you leave the viewer with something to remember, that means you did something right. Frankly, I don’t know how people are successful in television news without telling good stories.

All of the research participants defined the narrative a little differently, however, they did mention four common elements (Characters, Emotion, Focus, Structure) that are important parts of narrative storytelling.

**Characters:**

Every participant in this research identified characters as an essential part of the narrative. Characters can be the people you interview, and sometimes objects or animals relevant to the story. For many respondents, finding a character to tell the story was one of the first thoughts in the reporting process. Ferrugia said the character is a porthole through which you can see the broader horizon. He explained the character as the tool that helps people understand the story on a personal or human level. KUSA reporter Chris Vanderveen argued characters are what help viewers identify and care about the subject matter.

Many participants said that you can’t have a successful narrative without a character or characters that help tell the story. WBIR’s Jim Matheny said, “You can have a humanized story that’s not necessarily some great artistic narrative, but you rarely have a great narrative that doesn’t have a compelling character with it.” CBS photographer Les Rose went further to say “you’re not going to like the story unless you like the characters.” These characters are essential vehicles to get the story moving. However, respondents also noted that it’s important to let the characters be
who they are. KARE reporter Jana Shortal said, “I prefer them to be the narrator and me say as little as possible.” WMUR feature reporter Fritz Wetherbee said, “I let the characters be who they are.” Allowing the characters to be the driving force of the narrative is arguably a reporter’s style; however, the concept of allowing the characters to be who they are will be an important piece in addressing objectivity in the narrative.

**Structure:**

Participants identified story structure as another part of the narrative. There isn’t one set story structure that defines the narrative, however, the idea of a “beginning, middle and end” came up on multiple occasions during the interviews. Structure is where the narrative differs the most from the inverted pyramid style. In the inverted pyramid, the writer starts with the most important information first and follows with facts explaining who, what, where, when, why and how. (Knowing the inverted pyramid style will be important in answering research question #2). Many of the research participants argued that the inverted pyramid story structure is not the best for broadcast news. Huppert said it works great for newspapers because many people don’t read to the end of every article. However, if a viewer gets bored with a television piece, moving on to the next story means changing the channel.

Huppert created what he calls the Christmas tree structure. He explained his structure this way:

You’re basically flipping the pyramid upside-down and you’re adding these little points which are the surprises in the story. So you’re building to the
surprise, reinvesting the viewer, building to a surprise, reinvesting the viewer. You keep doing this through your story and when you run out of surprises or new information then the story has to end because I don’t want people to lose interest so I have to continue providing surprises.

One popular story structure is the “hourglass.” You start the story with a big issue and then narrow in to one specific example. You end the story by going back to the big issue you started with. There’s also the pregnant eye, which is essentially the opposite of the hourglass structure. Start the story with one specific example; broaden out to show the bigger picture and then end with the specific example you started with. The point is not to explain every story structure out there, but rather to show there’s more than one way to tell a story. Matheny likened the story structure to a tour through a museum:

You have to charter a path for the story. How am I going to share this information? It’s kind of like a tour. How are we going to start the tour? Like when you go to a museum, it’s like here’s the timeline, do we want to start at the beginning and progress? Or is it like, ‘hey look at this now and let me show you how we got here and then let’s bring it back.’ There are a million ways to tell it, and I don’t know that any are wrong or right.

Focus:

Structure brings us to focus. WISC reporter Andy Choi said, “Structure is a big deal, but then at the end of the day it’s all about the focus.” Many of the research participants said similar sentiments. Huppert called focus the trunk of his Christmas tree. He said, “I don’t know how to write without having a focus at the beginning...
focus is like the bag that you put all of the pieces of the story in." Vanderveen said something similar. He said, "I'll write one or two lines on the top of the log sheet and I'll just try to keep with that theme."

Focus is what helps keep the narrative going. Choi said a good practice is to sum up your story in a three-word sentence with a subject, verb and predicate. He said, "If you can’t do that then you don’t have a tight enough focus... The ones who can really hone in on a focus and commit to it can get to the narrative faster." Rose said this three-word sentence is a good way to tell your own prejudice in a story. He says you find your own bias in the verb. Is the story, “bombers terrorize marathon?” Or is the story “runners help injured?” You can find your focus in a single word or a short sentence.

Choi, Huppert, Wetherbee and other participants also mentioned that focus is not exclusive to broadcast news. You can find focus in effective advertising, award-winning movies and legendary fables. Focus is what keeps a story strong. It’s also what keeps a reporter from putting in things that aren’t necessary. Choi likened this to deleted movie scenes. He said:

That’s the product of people tightening their focus. They’re saying, ‘this scene does not belong. We love this scene but it doesn’t do anything. You lose the tension...’ We’re constantly doing that. We’re constantly making decisions like, ‘well there’s a fact here and it may be cool but do we need it?’

**Emotion:**

Emotion is probably the most complex and controversial of the four narrative elements. Many participants said emotion is one of the most important
characteristics of storytelling. “You tap into a different level when you find emotion,” Huppert said. “I always find it in a story.”

However, sometimes it’s a hard sell as a news reporter. Choi said, “I’ve always felt the viewer will always remember what they feel longer than what they learned in the story. Which seems kind of counter intuitive because we’re in the business of fact telling. But you know, if that fact doesn’t last long enough in the head then what kind of an experience is it?”

Many research participants argued that emotion is part of the human experience and leaving emotion out of a story would make it less true. Matheny said, “you’re doing a disservice to someone by pretending to be the detached eye in the sky with no emotional involvement in anything.”

Respondents said sometimes when journalists strive to be impartial they forget their humanity. Journalists are human begins too and it’s important to show it when it’s appropriate. Choi described his emotion as his compass. He said:

I trust my emotion. I trust how I feel in that moment when I hear someone describe a loved one that they’ve lost or a loved one that they’ve just seen since they went to war… I think it does determine the way I write things and I lean on that.

But emotion is a powerful thing. Vanderveen said television does emotion and immediacy better than any other medium because you have visuals and sound. He said that’s why it’s so important to do it right. He said, “Super emotional stories you just get out of the way. Don’t overwrite. That person is being honest with you on camera so you have to make sure their point is getting across.” Wetherbee said
something similar. He said, “They don’t want to see how sad the reporter is. First, because it calls attention to the reporter and you’re not important in this story.

What you’re telling me is important. If you tell me, I will weep.” A lot of the time it comes down to a journalist’s ethics. KSTP’s Mitch Pittman said, “I think you could abuse the facts just as easily as you could abuse the facts with emotion. It just makes it more interesting to watch while being responsible.”
Use of Narrative
Now that we have defined the important elements of the narrative, we can address the first research question:

*How can reporters and photographers use narrative style in everyday operations of a television news station and in long-form investigative and feature pieces?*

To do this we first have to break down each part of this question into the two different news concentrations: daily assignments, and long-form investigations and features.

**Daily:**

All of the research participants said narrative storytelling could be used in daily assignments; however, it’s important to identify when and how to use the style. Reporters can create strong narratives in daily news, but there are many factors that impact how well they can do that. Participants identified deadlines, limited resources, breaking news, story assignments and station ethos as elements that can impact how well a reporter can put together a narrative in one shift.

Respondents identified deadlines and story assignments as the two biggest factors in deciding when or how to use the narrative in daily assignments. Pittman said, “Sometimes you’ll be limited by time. I think you shouldn’t be limited by your efforts. If you care you can make it interesting.” Many respondents agreed by saying you can always try and incorporate at least one or two elements of the narrative into your work on a daily basis. Choi said, “I know a lot of people say don’t try to hit
the home run, but get the base hit and see if you can do one thing well.” Pittman also said, “Not every story is going to be ‘Duck in a Truck’ or something like that, but you can always do something a little bit more just to make it better.”

Under the time constraints of a deadline and the responsibility of covering all of the daily news, respondents said it can be difficult to structure and focus stories, and find good characters and emotion. But many respondents said it’s also important to look at your story assignment and evaluate whether or not the narrative style is the best approach for your story. KUSA’s Storytellers segment producer and general assignment reporter Kevin Torres said, “I think that you can use the narrative style towards anything, but ... sometimes it’s best to just give the people the story the way it’s supposed to be done.”

KARE’s Shortal and KUSA’s Vanderveen both said they’ve turned away from the narrative style for some assignments. Shortal said:

I think your obligation is to tell them the news. If you have the opportunity to do a narrative then great, but I’ve kind of reverted back to news actually. I leave the narrative stuff for when I can, but it’s not my first priority.

Vanderveen said you have to be careful with volatile issues. He said:

If you’re doing a day-turn you don’t want to get too cute with the abortion story, or the same-sex marriage story or the presidential election story. The country is incredibly polarized anyways. You’re going to make a lot of enemies if you’re trying to get too cute with certain stories.

But Huppert said, “It works everywhere. I did a story on gun control at the legislature yesterday.”
Reporters in this study responded differently on when and how to use the narrative on a daily basis, however, it’s important to recognize what goes into their decision making when deciding whether or not to use the style. From the data I collected most reporters make this decision on how much time they have to put the story together and what their story assignment is.

**Long Form Investigations and Features**

Respondents said long-form feature assignments and investigations usually allow for more control over the two elements that are sometimes uncontrollable in daily assignments: time and story topic. Reporters and photographers usually pitch their own story ideas for special features or investigations. They also generally have more than one day to work on their piece. Having control over these two factors allows the reporter or the photographer to incorporate elements of the narrative they might not otherwise include in a daily story.

Huppert may be the best example of the time element because he is both a daily assignment and feature reporter. Three days of the week he works as a general assignment reporter and two days he works on the KARE feature franchise “Land of 10,000 Stories.” He argues that you can use narrative style in any story assignment. Many of the stories Huppert produces for the “Land of 10,000 Stories” franchise would be considered features, however he does tackle public policy and political issues in some of his pieces.

When Huppert explained the process of putting together one of his “Land of 10,000 Stories” pieces, it’s clear that time is one of the major factors in the production process. He said on average each story takes two or three days to
complete. He said he and a photographer usually shoot the story one day, log the interviews and write the script one day and then edit on another day. Huppert said most of his time is dedicated to logging interviews and tape. He said he usually has 12 to 14 pages of typed notes for one “Land of 10,000 Stories” piece. He said:

If someone takes a heavy sigh I’ll log that. I need that. I break my track up a lot so I need those little nuances. ‘Takes a look at his watch.’ That will be a note. I might need that some place. ‘Rolls his eyes at something a student says.’ I might need that somewhere. So I log everything.

Even though reporters may have more control over story topics in features, Vanderveen said features are some of the hardest narratives to do. He said:

It’s easy to make someone care about death or make somebody empathize with someone losing a house in a fire or losing a child to an accident. That’s easy. But when you’re talking about a dog with a weird thing going on, it’s not as easy to make the viewer empathize or care about that story and that’s why the words are so critical and the story structure is so critical because if you don’t give the viewer a reason to care... it’s going to be like what am I doing? Why am I wasting my time with this?

Ferrugia was the only investigative reporter to participate in my research. He said the narrative is a crucial part of almost all of his investigations, however he did say the narrative doesn’t usually work for the “You Paid for it” or budget stories. He said, “If you said to me for the next month you cannot tell a story using a character or using the narrative I’d say, ‘OK, why are we putting it on TV? Why does anyone
care about it?” Ferrugia also said a broader context is what separates a narrative feature from a narrative investigation.

A lot of people will use narrative to tell an individual story. But what’s the broader context of this story? What’s the broader lesson? What’s the broader public policy issue? What’s the broader implication? You can do great storytelling but that, I think, is what separates features, or daily stories from investigations.
Objectivity in Narrative

In the literature review for this project I outline some of the arguments for and against the use of narrative style in news stories and historical writings. Both scholars and journalists have argued how objective and truthful the story structure is in comparison to fact telling or the inverted pyramid style. Because of this, it was no surprise that the journalists who participated in this research had differing opinions about the style.

Before we answer the second research question regarding the objectivity of narrative style in comparison to the inverted pyramid style, we must first have a working definition of objectivity in journalism. For this research, I will refer to Ralph E. Hanson, a journalism professor at West Virginia University, who defined objectivity as a normative idea in which reporters should be fair, balanced and impartial. (Hanson 1997, p. 387). Hanson said Americans have held the idea that news outlets should relay information by giving objective accounts of events. Hanson said there is a growing trend of reporters turning away from an “objective” or “neutral” tone by using narrative story structure. The reporters and photographers I interviewed for this research said they believe this is true. Many respondents said narrative is not completely objective. Many stories are not completely fair, balanced or impartial and respondents said they believe that’s OK.

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel address this point in their book Elements of Journalism. Their ninth element explains journalism’s “practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.” They explain, every journalist must have a sense of his or her own ethics and morals. It’s also extremely important for
journalists to be in touch with their own biases and beliefs. No matter how objective a journalist aims to be, their own ethics, morals, personal beliefs, political biases and world experiences will affect how they cover a story. Not only is this fact unavoidable, Kovach and Rosenstiel argue that it’s a good thing. They write:

Each of us must be willing, if fairness and accuracy require, to voice differences with our colleagues, whether in the newsroom or the executive suite. News organizations do well to nurture this independence by encouraging individuals to speak their minds. This stimulates the intellectual diversity necessary to understand and accurately cover an increasingly diverse society. It is this diversity of minds and voices, not just numbers, that matters (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2007, p. 187).

Many respondents argued that no matter what story structure you’re using, whether it be the inverted pyramid, the hourglass or the pregnant eye, you are making decisions about what to emphasize, what the message should be, what’s most important for the viewer to take away etc. Wetherbee said:

By just writing it, putting it in any kind of form changes it. If you pyramid it, you are saying this is the most important thing because I’m telling it first…

We choose our words carefully. Nobody is absolutely flat on their view of things, everyone is biased some way.

Vanderveen agreed by saying:

The idea that a journalist can be unbiased to me is BS. Every person has a bias. The goal of the journalist is to not let that bias come out and to know
what your bias is and to sort of acknowledge it and make sure people don’t know.

Huppert and Pittman said they believe the narrative structure can be more objective if the reporter uses the style correctly. Huppert said his job is to be the interpreter. Instead of creating a story, he said he’s always interpreting what’s going on so he can relay that experience to the viewer. “As a storyteller, and as a narrative storyteller, I’m just trying to do a better job at interpreting and helping put this into a context for the viewer that wasn’t there.” Rose argued the role of the journalist isn’t actually to interpret, but rather to be a vocal platform for the characters in the story. He said, “the truth is you’re allowing them to tell their own story. That’s the trick.” Pittman agreed saying there are certain editing and writing techniques you can do to help bring the viewer to the scene. He said, “our job is to bring them there and if I’m covering a house fire and I can create an urgency and if I can show people that’s what’s happening that’s a lot more responsible than showing it as humdrum.”

All of the journalists in this study mentioned that being completely objective isn’t possible in any story structure, however some respondents said the narrative does open the door to taking more liberties. “It certainly opens the window for less objectivity,” said Vanderveen. “And that’s why I said with more controversial stories you have to be careful with how you word it.” Respondents who talked about less objectivity in the narrative also talked about story topic. Many reporters and photographers mentioned giving more time to one side is ok when you’re doing a feature story, however some topics are too delicate, controversial or political to use narrative. Shortal said:
I think a lot of people would say it’s biased or it’s soft. And that’s another reason why you need to be really careful. When I feel strongly about something I could be accused of that... But that’s a dangerous place and I guess it depends on the subject matter.

Matheny said incorporating certain elements of the narrative like emotion and characters can be dangerous when you’re covering contentious issues. “If you’re attaching something emotional to one side of the story, and usually it’s a central character, I can see how someone would say well they were totally sympathetic to one person.”

This research question was harder to answer because each journalist had different opinions about objectivity, it’s role in journalism and the impact narrative has on “fair, balanced and impartial” coverage. However, I did notice respondents who said the narrative style could be used everyday for every story topic, also said the narrative is just as objective, if not more objective inverted pyramid style. I saw this in my interviews with Huppert, Pittman, Rose, and Wetherbee. Those respondents who said it’s hard to use the narrative everyday because it shouldn’t be used for every story topic also said the narrative opens the door to less objectivity. I saw this in the interviews with Choi, Vanderveen, Shortal, Matheny, and Torres. All of the respondents mentioned total objectivity is not the goal or job of a reporter, however respondents had varying opinions about how the narrative fits into daily coverage, especially with controversial or political issues.
Conclusions, Research Limitations and Future Research

In my project proposal, I predicted many reporters would say the narrative style is useful in the construction of daily stories and long-form features and investigations. However, the analysis of this data showed a divide between respondents. All of the respondents said you can strive to include some elements of the narrative in daily assignments; however, some believed there are factors limiting how well or when you can or should do that. Some respondents said journalists can theoretically use the narrative style every day, but sometimes reporters should decide against using the style because of a story assignment or a deadline. Other research participants said the style can be used every day, no matter what the story topic. The majority of respondents said you can use the narrative in long-form stories because you have more time to construct them and more control over the story topic.

Research participants also said the narrative is an effective tool in communicating information to the viewer. Many respondents mentioned the phrase, “Viewers remember what they feel longer than what they know.” Reporters and photographers said if you can incorporate some elements of the narrative like characters, emotion and focus, the viewer might remember the story longer. Kovach and Rosenstiel identify this concept as an element of journalism in their book. They say a journalist must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant. Respondents said incorporating elements of the narrative in daily work and long-form pieces can give the viewer a reason to care and remember the story longer.
In answering my second research question, I expected to find that total objectivity is unattainable when using narrative style. I believe that is what I found through the analysis of this data. Kovach and Rosensteil argue that this is actually OK for journalists. They say it’s more important to be transparent and practice a discipline of verification. They say a reporter must interpret facts; that is his or her job. When using the narrative style a journalist does that, but goes further to put the information into a storyline. This requires active participation of the narrator, however, so does the inverted pyramid style. A reporter decides what is most important and how to present it. In looking at it this way the narrative style is not that much different in principle than other story structures.

All of the research participants said total objectivity is unattainable because of a journalist’s own biases and worldly experiences. However, the data analysis showed there was a divide between respondents about using the style for pieces that are more controversial or political. There was a link here with research question one. Respondents who said the narrative style could be used everyday for every story topic, also said the narrative is just as objective, if not more objective than the inverted pyramid style. Respondents, who said it’s hard to use the narrative everyday because it shouldn’t be used for every story topic, also said the narrative opens the door to less objectivity.

Through my own experiences at KOMU and KETC and my own reflections of this research, I believe the narrative style is a useful communicator in daily and long-form pieces. I believe elements of the narrative like characters and emotion can help the viewer better understand a subject, however I do not believe it should be
used every day for every single story topic. I agree with the research respondents would said you should evaluate every story assignment on a case-by-case basis and decide whether or not the narrative story style is the best way to construct and tell that story. I believe what makes the narrative special is that it’s different from the way many stories are constructed; therefore it should not be used in every single story in a newscast. I also agree with research respondents who identified time as a limiting factor. Deadlines were often a challenge when I tried incorporating multiple elements of the narrative into one daily assignment. Some days you just don’t get what you thought you would. On other days just getting the facts right is a struggle. I think it’s important to try to incorporate elements of the narrative if you can. This provides you a daily challenge or goal. However, it’s important not to get discouraged on the days things don’t fall perfectly into place. I’ve found those days are bound to come and they’re just part of the business we’re in.

I also believe total objectivity is not attainable when using the narrative style or any other type of story structure. Our backgrounds, experiences, political and religious beliefs impact how we approach any story. What’s important is to cover each story as fairly as you can. If you’re showing a bias, I think it’s important to address that in the story. I believe transparency, rather than total objectivity is the goal. I believe narrative is less objective than a straight news piece because of the characters we chose to include, the emotion that’s there, and what we chose to focus on, however I believe that’s what makes the narrative more truthful to the events and stories we cover.
One of the limitations I put upon myself was deciding to interview all of the research participants in person. This limited the journalists I ended up talking to. In my original proposal I said I would conduct some interviews by phone or video chat. I decided it was important to do these interviews face-to-face because I believed I would get better answers. In my proposal I thought I might not get honest responses because “objectivity” and “truthfulness” are such important characteristics of good journalism. I believe my decision to conduct these interviews in person helped research respondents be honest when answering my questions.

Another limitation I put on myself while conducting this research was the decision to only include journalists who use storytelling in their work. I deviated from my original proposal here by not including anyone who was against using narrative in broadcast news. Because I didn’t include opponents of narrative style I think that could be an important topic of further research.

Other topics for future research could include the importance of narrative in the digital age. Many respondents commented on how important narrative is to broadcast news because people now get their news from the Internet and social media sites. Broadcast journalists now have to fight for their viewers and many said the narrative can help make their work different. Some respondents noted that their news stations assume their viewers already know 90% of the daily news. The question is how to advance the story and make it a valuable experience for the news consumer. Could narrative be the answer?

Other possible research regarding this topic could explore how objective audiences believe the narrative style is. Is the narrative more engaging? It would be
interesting to see whether or not news consumers find this style more or less credible than the traditional inverted pyramid news format. Research could be conducted through qualitative methods, (focus groups of viewers, textual analysis of online story comments) or quantitative methods (such as online surveys). This research could be extremely beneficial for both news generators and consumers. All of these studies aim to better understand the narrative style, how it can successfully be used in broadcast news, how well the form connects with audiences and whether or not it is objective and truthful.
Works Cited


