INTRODUCTION

Beauty is found in the eyes of the beholder, and sometimes the most beautiful stories are told through the eyes of those who originally beheld the events people read about in the news.

One of the things journalists must consider when deciding which events to cover is the amount of impact they anticipate the information will have on readers. Practitioners of the craft also have to decide how to best relay that information so the public can understand and potentially act upon it, in accordance with journalism's purpose of aiding in a functional democratic society. For example, in covering natural disasters journalists often inform the public of what the people on the ground are experiencing. In dire straits, these disaster victims could be greatly helped by the outreach of other members of the public.

With this in mind, journalists could benefit from having insight into how news stories impact the reader in a way that inspires them to get involved in the news and become socially active. Does greater emotional connection to a certain type of news story increase the social activity, and does a particular type of news story correspond to a particular degree of social action? According to a series of interviews with ten news consumers, feature stories may be
more likely to prompt social activism in readers, as long as the story also provides the information necessary for them to help.

Telling the news through a narrative can allow the reader to experience the story through characters’ eyes using tools such as descriptive details, unique characters and dialogue. Narrative theory, which is regularly implemented in feature news stories, states that this causes people to more deeply empathize with the characters in a story. Research shows that this sense of empathy can increase a reader’s desire to aid in disastrous situations covered by news outlets.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My three research questions:

1. Does an emotional connection to a news story trigger social action?
2. Does greater emotional connection to a type of news story increase the degree of personal involvement in a social action?
3. Does a particular type of news story correspond to a particular degree of social action?

METHODOLOGY

This research implemented semi-structured interviews as the method of obtaining information about how readers react to a feature story, institutional story and an economic story, all covering the Joplin Tornado of 2011. This was used to garner the full emotional responses of the reader, in words, cadence and body language.
An effort was made to represent the level of diversity in the population. The participants of this study ranged from ages 25-91 and all lived in the area of Downeast, Maine, but grew up in a variety of locations. Only three of the participants grew up in the state. Maine is 77 percent white, according to the Census data, and 80 percent of the research participants were white. Two of these participants were of Jewish descent, and one participant was partially Native American. Another member of the study was of Indian descent. One participant identified as Hispanic. The Hispanic population makes up 18 percent of Maine’s population.

**Names, Ages and Origin of Participants**


April Canavan: 25-year-old from Needles, California.

Bonnie Stewart: 45-year-old from Baileyville, Maine.

Eleanor Murphy: 91-year-old from Mount Desert Island, Maine.

Joseph Huber: 60-year-old from Jersey Shore, New Jersey.


Steven Fuller: 34-year-old from Stockton Springs, Maine.


Teresa Montague: 64-year-old from Mexico City, Mexico.

Tim Suellentrop: 26-year-old from St. Peters, Missouri.

The research participants were asked to read three stories: a feature story, an economic story and an institutional story. After reading each story, they were asked to order a list of nine social actions from most to least likely to engage in after reading the story. Each response
required a different level of social action from the participant. The more likely the participant was to have a highly active response, the more social action the individual story was deemed to have prompted.

THE LIST OF POSSIBLE RESPONSES

1. I would do nothing.

2. I would seek out more information on the topic.

3. I would share this story on social media.

4. I would recommend this story directly to a friend.

5. I would attempt to persuade others to get involved in this issue.

6. I would contact one of my local representatives to encourage increasing governmental support for this issue.

7. I would charitably contribute to this issue.

8. I would participate in a support event.

9. I would volunteer in relief efforts.

The list of responses was adapted from The Participant Index’s Social Actions Scale developed by Participant Media to quantify the social impact of documentaries, television programs on viral videos.

All of the stories were included the *Joplin Globe* coverage of the May 2011 Joplin EF5 tornado, which killed 161 and flattened about 8,400 homes, 18,000 cars, a high school, hospital and about 450 businesses. The Missouri Press Association’s Better Newspaper Contest recognized the newspaper’s coverage with 22 awards in
The feature story centered on the experiences of a young mother whose home was destroyed by the tornado. It was written through her experience, describing what it was like to ride out the tornado in her bathroom and emerge to find a devastated community.

The economic story covered the damage done to small businesses. It made heavy use of numbers and data, though it did include coverage of a small business owner and his situation.

The institutional article centered on the Joplin school system struggling to resume classes after the storm. It had scenic elements such as descriptive detail and dialogue. It was more informational than the feature story and did not focus specifically on a core character. The participants read the stories in a randomized order to remove the order of stories as a variable in the research results.

Each interview took about 45 minutes and was held in the setting of the participant’s choice. Some of the interviews took place in their homes, while others occurred at cafes and restaurants. The interviewees were asked to read each story and then list their responses in order of likely social action on a separate sheet.

After all of the interviews were completed, I compiled the data into an Excel file and scored the social action of each participant based on the top three responses. The top three responses were added together to show which participants were the likely to be the most socially active for each story. The story that received the highest scores on each participant’s top three responses was judged to be the one that caused the greatest social action response.

The feature story received the highest scores on six out of the 10 participants’ top three responses and prompted the highest level of activism.
The institutional story caused the second most social action in research participants, and it also used the second most narrative tools, such as detail, plot and dialogue, throughout the story. Many participants felt connected to the school children in the story, which positively affected their social action responses.

The participants gave the economic story the lowest social action scores. It was deemed the most straight-forward and informative of the three. It offered the most information about the overall damage and how readers could help in disaster relief efforts.

“It was good that it gave information about where people go to get assistance, and that’s all good stuff,” said Sheila Unvala, who scored the economic and feature stories equally on creating social action.

April Canavan said during the interview that she really appreciated the economic story for it’s hard news-style writing. “I am 100 percent a numbers type of person, so I want all of the facts and figures,” she said. “They gave me just enough emotionally to keep me interested, and then they would give me the numbers on it. And they would bring up another — not emotional — but situational aspect and then it would give you the numbers on it to support it. It was very give and take, and I think it was well put together for such a long article.”

Despite the high praise, Canavan scored the feature story the highest in creating social action and the economic second.

The economic story failed to create an emotional response in most of the readers. Participants did not feel a need to be socially active to help businesses, especially the large corporations cited in the article.
“When I think about the charity, I think about the jar that goes up on the counter at the gas station here,” Joseph Huber said. “When someone gets burned out or something like that, there’s a jar on the counter. The [feature and institutional] stories, if there’s a jar sitting there on the counter saying, help rebuild Joplin schools, I’m putting something in there. Help rebuild Joplin residents’ homes. Help rebuild Joplin’s businesses doesn’t have me reaching much to put something in the jar.”

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Feature stories can cause a sense of empathy, which can in turn increases a desire to be socially active.

Feature stories caused more empathy in participants for the characters in a story, and that sense of empathy can likely increase their desire to be socially active in getting involved with the characters’ situations. Research participants scored the feature story highest in promoting social activism 60 percent of the time, and ranked it most impactful 70 percent of the time. Participants ages 25-73 of multiple races and educational backgrounds selected more socially active options as their top three responses after reading the feature story in their top three responses.

“It was moving,” sports reporter Taylor Vortherms said about the feature story. “I thought that it of the three stories that was the one that would be the most influential one, just because of the personal angle there.” Vortherms’ top three responses scored the feature story 58 percent more effective in prompting social action than her next highest, the institutional story.
This was the largest difference between stories in all of the participants’ social action responses.

Bonnie Stewart, who scored equally on her social action responses to the feature and economic story, said it was the empathy she felt to the characters that would prompt social activism. “I’m one of those people that like to know all of the people’s stories,” said Stewart, an unemployed pixie house artist. “I like the individual people’s stories.”

Music therapist Alan Wittenberg said he was impacted by the empathy he felt for the main character’s emotional scarring. “It gives me a little bump, you know. I mean we are talking about feelings, emotions.”

2. Narrative elements within feature stories can add to the sense of empathy.

Narrative elements in feature stories can be used to increase this sense of empathy and social action, because they give the reader a sense of being part of the situations included.

Four of the five research participants who scored the feature story indisputably highest in prompting social activism said they felt emotionally connected to the story’s main character, because the scenic description, details and dialogue allowed them to have a better sense of what she experienced.

Tim Suellentrop, a web designer, said the most impactful part of the feature story was the use of action and detail during a scene of the tornado, when the doors were blown off the house. He said these elements allowed him to mentally establish himself in the situation. “After reading that story, I can picture her standing there with her dogs in just this rubble, and how this has affected this singular person, and knowing that there is so many people affected just like her,” he said.
3. Social activity can also be affected by preexisting relationships and opinions.

Outside factors can also increase a sense of empathy and therefore increase a desire to be socially active. The three participants who scored the institutional story the highest in prompting social action said they felt connected to the young students in the story due to emotional connections they have with other children.

Steven Fuller said he felt emotionally connected to the character because the background information provided in the story allowed him to relate to her life as a young working person trying to obtain a foundation in her life. “I thought it really resonated with me,” the news reporter said. “Right off the bat, you feel like you’re connected with this person. You are getting a sense of who this person is.”

Distaste for certain subjects can have a similar effect. Bonnie Stewart and several other participants said they did not feel as great a desire to be socially active after reading the economic story because it dealt with businesses, and they don’t feel any desire to help big corporations like Walmart, even though small businesses were also included in the story.

4. The level of social action decreased when not enough information was given to prompt a direct response.

Lacking information was the major setback of the feature story. “I would seek out more information on the issue” was the number one response to the feature story with 50 percent of the participants. Many research participants said they wanted to help the people who experienced the tornado, but they didn’t know how to best do so. “There’s nothing said about what’s being done for anyone in her place,” said Teresa Montague, a Maine House of
Representatives candidate. “Without that in place, there’s a lot left of that story untold. What are the resources for her? Where can she go? What are the local charities?

It is important that news story include where assistance is most needed, which organizations are working in those areas and how people can best offer aid. “If I donated to a charity, I would want to know where the money was going, like what it was going to,” nurse Sheila Unvala said.

4. Proximity affects the level of social action.

A few research participants said they would have been more likely to be socially active if the new stories used in the research weren’t based in Joplin, Missouri, far away from Downeast, Maine. They may have cared about the tornado victims but were too far away to help. Wittenberg felt disabled by the distance, despite the ability to donate money and other methods of assisting from elsewhere. “I’m not going to go there,” Wittenberg said. “I’m not going to leave Maine and volunteer.”

5. Those who preferred economic and institutional stories disliked the emotional or patronizing nature of the feature story.

Teresa Montague, who said she likes concise informational delivery in the news, said the number of businesses lost was the most important detail in the story. “This [economic] story was a little more clear, a little more obvious,” she said. “You know, it said exactly that it estimated about 300 businesses, from big box to small mom and pop and all that, how many employees and that sort of thing. It was more clear to me what had been lost.”

Montague said she likes personal, emotional stories, as long as the necessary information is readily available, but other participants generally disliked emotional appeal in their news.
April Canavan, a young Hispanic advertising support coordinator, said she thinks attempts at emotional appeal in the news are distracting at best and patronizing at worst. “I don’t like narratives in news, because a third-party narrative in a news article is not going to make you feel engaged,” she said. It may be worth noting that Canavan also felt inclined to dislike the feature story, because, as a single mother, she didn’t like some of the parenting skills displayed by the main character in the story.

CONCLUSION

1. Does an emotional connection to a news story trigger social action?

The findings of this research indicate that an emotional connection to a news story does trigger social action. Participants with a greater emotional connection to stories with relatable characters and descriptive writing, such as the feature story, increased their degree of personal involvement in social action. When speaking of the feature story, most participants displayed more emotion than the other two stories, feeling empathetic to the plight of the main character. The feature story increased the degree of personal involvement in most of the participants’ social action responses. More participants were willing to volunteer, participate in a support event or give to charity with the feature story than the economic or institutional stories.
2. Does greater emotional connection to a type of news story increase the degree of personal involvement in a social action?

Feature stories that use narrative tools can increase the sense of impact and empathy a reader feels toward characters in the news and increase the degree of personal involvement. Telling a story using narrative elements can give the reader a sense of being within the story and more easily place themselves within the lives of those who are going through the situations being covered in the news. This sense of identification and empathy can increase the likelihood that a reader will be socially active after reading the story, because they are able to see themselves within the characters. Most people participating in this research reacted positively to the narrative elements in stories — particularly the quotes and personal outlooks on the disastrous situations described — and were less or even negatively affected by data-driven aspects of the stories. However, two people out of the 10 participating in the study said they preferred the figures and other factual information, and one expressed a dislike of emotionally driven, narrative elements in any news story.

3. Does a particular type of news story correspond to a particular degree of social action?

Not all participants reacted the same way to the three stories. Two of the research participants preferred to be given the information in a direct and orderly fashion to save time and increase the sense of objectivity they get from the news stories. Therefore, journalists could benefit from offering information in a more concise way, as well. Perhaps, both feature
and hard news elements can be obtained through a putting a hard news-style sidebar in a feature story.

Like most things in life, people’s personal life experiences affect the way they empathize with the experiences of others, which has little to do with the type of news stories being read. It’s not just the way in which the story is told that makes it impactful, but what or who it is being reported on that can make people more socially active. For example, people who are emotionally connected with children in their own lives can feel strongly impacted by news stories, simply because they include information regarding children.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research with many more participants will be necessary to statistically confirm the validity of this study’s findings. This study was limited to interviews with people from only one small portion of the United States that is largely populated by white people. Additional research should include a wider variety of participants from different locations and ethnicities.

Future research should include different stories of the same respective news genres to establish whether or not the findings of this study were dependent on these three specific news stories. Several participants said they were largely affected by personal connections they felt with character types used in the stories of this research, such as children, mothers and young struggling adults. It is possible that if different types of people were characterized in the story that results could have differed. It will be interesting to see how research participant’s responses would differ if the news covered less relatable characters to the participants.