Issue-relevant thinking and identification as mechanisms of narrative persuasion

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ABSTRACT

Fictional narratives can have strong effects on people's real world opinions, attitudes, and behavior. Given the far-reaching implications these effects may have, understanding when and how narratives can have such effects is important. One frequent claim about narrative impact is that stories can disable people's ability to critically evaluate the issue. In an experiment, optimal conditions were created to assess whether readers came up with issue-relevant thoughts and to what extent such thoughts influenced the participants' attitude. The impact of issue-relevant thoughts was compared to that of another mechanism of narrative persuasion: identification. Participants ($N=138$) read a story including a discussion scene on a personally relevant issue. The manipulation consisted of the main character being in favor of or against a certain issue. Participants identified more strongly with the main character than with the antagonist. A mediation analysis revealed that identifying with the character being in favor of the issue yielded a more positive attitude toward the issue. A considerable number of participants generated issue-relevant thoughts that proved predictive of the attitude. The experiment provides further evidence for the identification mechanism while revealing insights into how integration of explicit argumentative content into a narrative can influence issue-relevant thinking.

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1. Introduction

On November 23, 1983, approximately one hundred million Americans watched the movie *The Day After* on ABC. The movie depicted the consequences of a nuclear war between the US and the Soviet Union for the citizens of Lawrence, Kansas. The images of dying people in a nuclear winter, cockroaches being the sole survivors in the end, had a huge impact. One of the viewers was Ronald Reagan, then president of the US, who wrote that he was "very depressed" after watching the movie. He also lost his faith in the concept of a "winnable nuclear war" and started negotiations with the Soviets about nuclear disarmament. When, in 1987, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty was signed, Reagan had his staff send a telegram to the director of *The Day After*, Nicholas Meyer, who reported the gist of it being "Don't think your movie got nothing to do with this, because it did" (Bunch, 2009, p. 75). *The Day After* is but one example of how fiction can influence what people hold to be true, believe to be good, and what actions they should take. The influence of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on the public's attitude toward slavery is another, well-documented one (Brock et al., 2002, p. 3). More recently, the influence of the television series *24* on people's beliefs that torture will yield accurate information has received much attention.

The examples above can be considered anecdotal evidence for the impact that fictional narratives can have on people's beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. More solid evidence for the existence of narrative impact has been provided by a number of experiments. Green and Brock (2000) had participants read the story, *Murder at the Mall*, about a girl whose younger sister is brutally murdered by a psychiatric patient on leave in a shopping mall. Participants held less favorable attitudes toward the rights of psychiatric patients on leaves after reading the story. De Graaf et al. (2009) showed that reading a story published by Amnesty International about a female asylum seeker had a negative impact on the attitude toward asylum seeking procedures. Hoeken and Hustinx (2007) had participants read one of two short stories about a man with AIDS that differed only in the way in which this man acquired AIDS: either because he had had unprotected sex with different girl friends or because his wife had had a secret affaire. This influenced the perception of whether people with AIDS in general were held responsible for contracting AIDS or not. Diekman et al. (2000) manipulated Harlequin novels with respect to the heroine using condoms or not when having sexual intercourse. When she used condoms, participants were more inclined to use condoms themselves compared to participants who had read the version in which she did not use condoms. The intention to have safe sex also proved susceptible to high quality television drama. Participants watched an episode of *The OC* in which high school students were confronted with the problems of an unplanned pregnancy, in a study by Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010). Female participants were more inclined to have safe (rather than unprotected) sex after watching this episode. Appel and Richter (2007) have shown that such effects are not short-lived but may even increase over time.

Both real world cases and experimental studies show that narratives can have far reaching consequences for people's opinions and actions. These changes in beliefs, attitudes, and intentions could be the result of a systematic evaluation of the "pros" and "cons" of the issues raised by fictional narratives. If that were to be the case, narratives serve as signals to people that there is an issue that warrants consideration. However, various models that aim to describe how narratives influence people (Transportation Imagery Model: Green and Brock, 2002; the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model: Slater and Rouner, 2002; the Entertainment Overcoming Resistance Model: Moyer-Gusé, 2008) agree upon the contrasting claim that narratives do not invite people to systematically consider the issue, but rather the opposite: Narratives prohibit people in generating thoughts relevant to the issue, and their persuasive impact may even depend on this capacity to suppress such thoughts. According to these models, fictional narratives, which are often sought out for entertainment purposes, can have far reaching consequences with people giving the issue little thought, or even no thought at all.

However, the empirical evidence for the thought suppressing capacity of narratives is rather mixed. This is partly the result of the use of different measures that have been employed to measure issue-relevant thinking and partly the result of the narratives that have been used in these studies. In our study, we aim to assess whether issue-relevant thinking can influence the persuasive outcome of a narrative. From a theoretical perspective, this study thereby contributes to our understanding of the mechanisms involved in narrative persuasion. Now that it has been clearly established that narratives can have