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ON NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF TELEVISION NEWS

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Abstract: *Individual phenomena of reality are by post-modern theorists analysed as texts that are produced and can be perceived, that are used and consumed. They interpret texts in order to reflect them and the reflection is not homogenous. They try to avoid classifications in order to allow plurality of possible interpretations claiming that one text may carry various meanings for various users. To their terminology they introduce categories adopted mainly from linguistics and semiotics. Media discourse researchers of the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century deal with language as well as with non-lingual modes of communication. They follow the tradition of semiotic schools that try to apply semiotic theories functioning in the study of language on other domains such as cinema, visual art, music, and costume/dress. The paper attempts to summarise main theoretical approaches to media narrative discourses and comments on some of the ways narrative of television news is constructed.*

Keywords: *television, news, narrative, discourse, semiosis.*

1. Introduction

The complex semiotic analysis of television news narrative has to deal with the variety of modes of representation created by spoken and written lingual signs, still and moving images, graphics and music. Television news is a mediator between the audiences and the reality constructed by signs, just as audiences are decoders of signs in real social contexts (Bignell, 2002, pp. 105-106).

For Marie-Laure Ryan (2004) "on one hand, narrative is a textual act of representation - a text that encodes a particular type of meaning... On the other hand, narrative is a mental image – a cognitive construct – built by the interpreter as a response to the text" (Ryan, 2004, p. 9). Her discussion of the relationship of narrative and language concludes by the stating that "verbal language is the native tongue of narrative, its proper semiotic support" (ibid., p. 11). However it does not mean that "media based on sensory channels cannot make unique contributions to the formation of narrative meaning. There are, quite simply, meanings that are better expressed visually or musically than verbally, and these meanings should not be declared a priori irrelevant to the narrative experience" (ibid., p.12). Her approach to narrative is clearly post-modern.

Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996) stress the need for the study of a complex human semiosis in all modes and apply Michael Halliday's (1978) theory of social semiotics to visual discourse by trying to describe the grammar of visual

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design through elements of colour, perspective, framing and composition. They use the material of children's drawings, photography, advertising, fine art and architecture. They claim that not only language, but also visual design can fulfil the two functions defined by Michael Halliday (1978) as ideational and interpersonal. The ideational function means representation of the surrounding world and the world inside an individual; the interpersonal function enacts social interactions. A third, textual function can only be fulfilled if the two other functions together participate in the creation of a coherent text. Their ideas clearly conflict with those of Roland Barthes (1977) who states, as was mentioned above, that visual material itself cannot function as a semiosis and requires the participation of elements of language (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 13-16). Their work also contradicts statements by Arthur Asa Berger (1997) who characterises narrative as a story that take place in time and who states that drawings, paintings and photographs or visuals in one frame are not considered to be narratives (Berger, 1997, p. 6).

While a visual mode of television news discourse is considered to be less important than spoken one in the 1980s, in the 1990s the need for serious research into the visual elements arises. Works of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1998) and of David Graddol (1994) prove that both factuality and entertainment (emotions including) are embedded not only in the audio mode, but also - and often in a greater extent - in a visual mode. They also identify that diversity, multiculturalism, globalisation, and electronic media create new area for the study of semiotics, because they primarily influence the sphere of public communication.

Language becomes only one of the media of communication and, especially in the 1990s, the visual mode becomes a dominant semiotic mode of communication providing more space for entertainment elements than the audio mode (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 34-38). Nicholas Mirzoeff (1998) supports the above-indicated idea that post-modern culture is a visual culture. He claims that people live in visual culture in which the new media play the most important role of the creator-producer and distributor of visual elements.

2. Post-modern Media Semiotics

Theorists and researchers claim that post-modern society and its products are deficient in structure, order and clarity, and very often in sense as well. Post-industrial society is saturated by visual images and knowledge and culture are created in the media. Post-modern media texts are typified by the fragmentary nature of signs that participate in their construction. From the signs and with the help of codes, however, audiences decode the meaning. The meaning is identified at the level of denotation (first order signs with reference to primary meaning: icons, indexes, symbols) and at the level of connotation (second order signs with reference to secondary meaning: evaluations, feelings). The more complex representation of the second order sign is a myth that carries reference to generally accepted notions. Code can be described as a system of mutually related or organized signs and of the rules for their usage agreed upon by their users.

Denotation and connotation operate in the narrative of television news discourse at various levels. Jonathan Bignell (2002) comments on news construction processes at the end of the 20th century. He claims that international news agencies, since the existence of satellite technology, provide both raw footage and complete news

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packages. But most of it is visual with very little audio mode and that mostly being of a denotative character. Broadcasters then add connotations mostly in the spoken form of the voice-over to construct the meaning of the narrative for the audiences (Bignell, 2002, pp. 126-130).

Myth represents an important element of any post-modern discourse. Through myth a society sells its ideology and social order. The myth is supposed to make particular meanings seem natural and acceptable and it is inevitably linked to ideology. Myth's role in the television news narrative is linked to the genre and its format. Myth can either be a message itself or it can be part of a more complex statement. Semiotics defines myth as a second order discourse, or secondary semiotic system, which is a result of a primary semiotic chain. According to Roland Barthes (2004) signified and signifier create the first order sign that denotes, that labels something in the process of signification. This sign not only represents something, but also connotes other meanings. If connotations are based on a social context, social experience, a result of social consensus, they are called a second order sign or myth. Myth fulfils the function of commentary, providing connotation, on the basis of which the receiver understands the denoted meaning. Myth uses an existing sign composed of signified and signifier and makes it a signifier at the second level (Barthes, 2004, p. 113).

The post-structuralist theory moves away from the denotation/connotation scheme. One signified can become the signifier of another sign, but this operates as a chain of signification and there is no denotation; only connotations exist. Thus in the post-modern discourse the Barthesian myth can be reformulated as narrativised ideology, expression and justification of values and beliefs that are mediated through narratives in media discourse (Fulton, 2005, p. 7). One of the elementary functions of the myth is to deform. Intention of the myth is present in the myth itself and results in the fact that myth has an imperative character. Myth deforms reality into something that is natural. And for the consumer the meaning is turned/deformed into a form. The form then is a reduced version of possible meanings and becomes a closed system.

3. Myths and Television News Discourse

Television news in its narrative carries myths, the archetype stories of a given culture by which it presents the ideals, values and ideologies of the society. Myth serves as a stabilizing element securing that the unpredictable and changing elements of reality are presented in a known way. Behind individual narrated stories there are more general frameworks into which the individual facts and events are placed (Trampota, 2004, p. 69).

Significant myths of immediacy and authority are found in the discourse of television news programmes when semiotic analysis is performed. Immediacy is viewed as an elementary mythic meaning of television news. Instantaneity is allowed by satellite links and digital technology and an example of its implementation is the use of live interviews in a 'package'. Authority is marked by a title sequence with loud music of dramatic nature and fast moving computer composition stressing an advanced technological background and other means (Bignell, 2002, p. 112-114).

Helen Fulton (2005) discusses myths operating in television news narrative building on the theory of binary oppositions by Claude Lévi-Strauss. These myths explain contradictions that she names 'natural oppositions' and which include man/woman, us/them, good/bad. The creators of these myths expect that the audiences perceive them as natural,

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legitimate, true, reflecting reality. By reinforcing such categories "media narratives tell us stories about who we think we are…" (Fulton, 2005, p. 7). By doing so they limit possibilities for audiences' interpretations of the narrative. They are often related to each other and create more myths. For instance, the myth of town versus country is further developed by binary oppositions of polluted versus clean, exciting versus boring, dangerous versus safe, etc. (Lacey, 1998, p. 69). The author exemplifies the myth of good us (West) and bad them (Iraq) that underlies the basis of the oppositions used in the narratives of news items during the Gulf War of 1991.

One of the ways the media mediate the world to their users is through the codes and conventions of narrative into which events and characters are embedded. Representation in news narrative is performed by codes used by television. Codes are groups of signs that construct meaning through conventions. Acoustic and visual codes of television are used in television news simultaneously. John Fiske (1987) defines code as "a rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared amongst members of culture, and which is used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture" (Fiske, 1987, p. 4). According to the author the codes of television operate in a hierarchical structure and work at three levels:

An event to be televised is already encoded by 'social codes' such as those of

Level 1: Reality: appearance, dress, make-up, environment, behaviour, speech, gesture, expression, sound, etc.

These are encoded electronically by 'technical codes' such as those of:

Level 2: Representation: the camera, lighting, editing, music, sound which transmit the 'conventional representation codes' which shape the representation of narrative, conflict, character, actor, dialogue, setting, casting, etc.

Level 3: Ideology: aspects which are organised into a coherent and socially acceptable form by such 'ideological codes' as individuality, patriarchy, class, race, materialism, capitalism, etc. (Fiske, 1987, p. 6)

The signs and codes in television news narrative find their signifying function in both visual and aural modes. For instance, a title sequence signifies the boundaries of a news bulletin within other elements of the programme. Newsreaders are coded as professional, serious, and authoritative evident from their formal, business dress code as well as from their verbal performance. Their speech carries impersonal linguistic codes and typically lacks accompanying gestures. Actuality film with voice-over signifies observation, evidence and actuality and connotes drama. Captions connote the denotative meaning of visual images. Sophisticated graphics connote the progressive approach of the producer to technological innovations, etc. In these ways, television discourse uses the textual devices of heteroglossia, polysemy, contradictions, excess (hyperbole), among other signifying practices, in its complex mode of representation.

4. Coding and Decoding Television News Narrative

Decoding of the meanings of television news narrative depends on involvement of viewers in the process of the mediated communication. Audiences do not perceive codes intentionally, they only recognize them when the codes are somehow disrupted. Television news programmes are also watched in the context of other kinds of television programmes.

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Marie-Laure Ryan (2004) also introduces a useful typology of media affecting narrativity discussing how the medium configures the particular realisation of narrativity.

Narrative in television news is spatio-temporal in its nature and its representation is implemented via multiple channels. Modes of construction of the narrative are linguistic, acoustic and visual. The last is primarily kinetic, but can also combine both static and kinetic elements. Obviously placement and description of this type of narrative ranks it among the most complex ones.

Modes of construction described by John Corner (1995) can be placed into the framework of journalistic storytelling discussed by Ian Connell (1980) who states that the narrative begins with establishing the information stage (framing) by providing information about the topic and its basis in reality (sometimes done in headline, mostly in lead). Then the transitional stage (focusing) follows, during which the development of the event is formulated. The core of the news item (realizing) follows and its authenticity is provided. Finally, story ends (closing) with a suggestion about its meaning. At these four stages the following modes are used:

1. **Studio modes:**
- Live studio report with a presenter's speech to a camera
- Live studio report with a presenter voice-over with stills, film or graphics
- Live studio interview with interviewee present, or via link-up
- Live studio with an archive film and presenter voice-over or an original sound

2. **Location modes:**
- Actuality film sequence, no reporter, no voice-over
- Actuality film sequence with commentary over
- Actuality film sequence with captions superimposed
- Actuality with reporter's speech to a camera
- Actuality report with reporter's speech and actuality sound in action
- Actuality interview by reporter with interviewee present
- Actuality film with interviewee's voice-over
- Graphics with voice-over commentary by reporter
- Stills with voice/captions over
- Credits/titles with music over.

These modes can be further specified and combined in the process of construction of news narrative.

Television news narrative involves numerous communicative roles that can be grouped into the following general categories: a newsreader (presenter), reporter/ correspondent, chairperson, interviewer, interviewee, expert, protagonist in debate, vox-pop. Jaromír Volek (2001) and Tomáš Trampota (2004) define three ways of presentation used in the news construction:

1. Newsreader (presenter, anchor person) frames, introduces the news and links its individual parts. Very often he/she closes the item.
2. Correspondent, reporter or commentator places the report to the context and specifies its meaning.
3. Actuality film itself brings information from the spot.

Visual presentation of the event, additionally, can be materialized through four types of techniques.

1. The first one is the 'talking head' of the newsreader in the studio or the correspondent on the spot. The latter is nominated verbally or by graphics.

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2. Graphics, the second one, in the form of animation, computerized composition, or photograph, accompany the talking head or they cover the whole screen.
3. The third one, nomination, can be spoken or visual and is created by subtitles. Its main function is to legitimise the talking heads as participants of communication.
4. The crucial, fourth element is an actuality film that may appear either in the form of recorded visual material, or as a stand-up done with a correspondent as on the spot reporting about the event or with a vox-pop representing an element of authenticity and identification for audiences (Volek, 2001).

Arthur Asa Berger (1997) discusses many of the devices the author of narrative texts uses to convey information. Among them one finds descriptions, thoughts of characters, dialogue, summaries, characterisation, stereotypes, overheard conversations, letters, telegrams, and other correspondence, articles from publications, phone calls and confessions (Berger, 1997, p. 113).

The individual modes of construction and ways of presentation participate differently not only in individual parts of narrative in television news items, but also in the construction of television news bulletin as a complex whole. Even if the individual news items, segments of the news bulletin, constitute fragments, or episodes, their placement in the sequence of news bulletin implies a connection between them and makes the audiences watch the narrative of individual items within the whole narrative of the bulletin.

The opening, functioning as framing, seems to be the most important part of both the macro-narrative of the overall television news programme as well as of the narratives of individual news items. It is supposed to attract the attention of the receivers/audiences and to provide enough reason to keep their attention through the rest of the narrative. Nick Lacey (2000) characterises an opening as a part that orientates audiences to the text and provides information about who the hero and villain are, what the setting is, recognisable style and conventional narrative structure with cause-effect motivation (Lacey, 2000, p. 10).

The dominance of the visual (pictorial) mode over the audio mode is obvious not only in opening sequences, but also in the proportion of their representation in other individual sequences of narrative. The spoken mode of the newsreader or voice-over sections are minimized and the space is provided to elaborated reports with a dominant visual mode. This is related to the assertion discussed above that narrative technique of 'inverted pyramid' is often replaced by a linear model. The movement from the information centred 'lead-and-body' narrative technique towards televisual structure brings more visuals and an elaborated assemblage of image and sound. It is also accompanied by movement from iconic towards indexical and symbolic representation which may lead to lower credibility and a lessening of the authority of the news.

David Graddol (1994a) claims that television news has to secure its knowledge system, keep the distinctiveness of its genre and achieve high modality in its presentation in order to accomplish factuality. All three of these can be done via the visual mode which uses the dominant narrative technique of realism, camera techniques and nonverbal communication. The author argues that a realist narrative technique lies at the centre of television news discourse (realist studio setting). The editing of actuality film leads to the creation of a coherent story. For

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obvious reasons (camera crew arriving to the scene when the action is in progress) the visual mode usually deals with effects and consequences while the audio mode presents causes and reasons (Graddol, 1994a, pp. 136-146).

For Marie-Laure Ryan (2004) visuals, especially still pictures belong to the illustrative mode of narration. They do not have a power to express strong causality, but they may evoke meaning on the basis of previously existing narrative experience, and they blend with the verbal elements of narrative in one image. They either offer the story in one scene and allow the receiver to enter into narrative in medias res or provide several smaller frames or segments of a possible storyline (Ryan, 2004, pp. 139-141).

Arthur Asa Berger (1997) also discusses television narrativity, stating that a shot is a minimum, elementary televisual unit, defined as "a segment of action in a televised narrative that exists between cuts, dissolves, or other editorial decisions that ends one shot and lead to a new one" (Berger, 1997, p. 113).

Extensive participation of the visual mode in the construction of television news narrative can be justified by the following reasons. The diegetic character of narrative typical for complicated construction requires the portrayal of reporters on spots that provide evidential qualities to their reporting. Visuals have revelatory and dramatic character and easily carry emotions, which coincides with the main goal of narrative in television news discourse, to attract and keep audiences. Fabricated computer images and compositions replace information that cannot be presented by photographs or actuality film for any of a variety of reasons. They do not represent facts, but rather predict. Their speculation involves audiences in the process of communication. The tendency to have higher numbers of news items from a variety of places portrayed in visual mode, quicker film sequences with more pictures, and frequent cuts, all lead to the interrupted and fragmentary nature of visuals that demands the constant attention of audiences.

Narrative in television news is multimodal, so that the visual mode rarely if ever functions alone in the process of the narrative construction. It is accompanied by audio (spoken and musical) mode of construction. Visual signs are conveyed by voice-over, interviews are part of both audio and visual modes. The narrative carries characteristics of factuality and entertainment. Factuality is mostly presented in a spoken mode and it is combined with dramatic and entertaining visual elements. The spoken mode of television news narrative usually carries the answers to the factual questions of five Ws (who, what, when, where, why) and one H (how) in the story. These so-called facts and figures fulfil the role of narrative linked to the idea of realism and accuracy. Television news narrative does not display ambiguities or uncertainties, and this makes television news appear both authoritative and omniscient.

Four types of sound are identified in the audio portion of television news discourse:

1. dialogue/monologue: what characters say onscreen (part of the narrative space);
2. sound effects: non-verbal sounds created within the onscreen space, the sources of which are visible (opening doors as part of the narrative space);
3. ambient sounds: background sounds adding to the atmosphere of the scene, sources of which are not visible (sounds of insects, birds, traffic as part of the narrative space);
4. non-diegetic sounds not created in the onscreen space, they are not part of the narrative space (a voice-over, sound-track music (Lacey, 1998, pp. 52-53).

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Andrew Tolson (2006) defines three key concepts for the study of media text, especially for its spoken mode. First is its interactivity, the direct address to audiences as active listeners/viewers (e.g. a greeting at the beginning of a programme), the goal of which is to establish a place for potential interaction. The second concept is performativity. Communication has to be effective and respect the lack of immediate feedback from potential audiences. For instance, in an interview the interviewee's answers are much longer than in natural dialogue, because the interviewee is supposed to elaborate and provide more complex answers, not for the interviewer, but for audiences. The third aspect, liveliness, reflects the need for acted spontaneity and potential unpredictability (Tolson, 2006, pp. 9-14). His concepts find their implementation firstly in the analysis of interaction types found in the television news narrative and discussed by John Thompson (1995), secondly in the study of the specificity of television news interviews by Andrew Tolson (2006), and finally in the presence of live inserts in the narrative of television news discourse.

As already asserted above narrative of the television news programme represents a macro-narrative, a main narrative frame, within which individual narratives of news items find their place. Participation of audience in the communication processes of macro-narrative and individual narratives varies. All three primary types of interaction participate in the formation of narrative in television news discourse. Narrative of a television news programme represents mediated quasi-interaction of narrators (authors, encoders, presenters, newsreaders) with narratees (audiences). Two intratext types of communication contribute to a more complete portrayal of an event, issue, or problem, and also a larger complex of information can be communicated to the audience. The first, a face-to-face interaction, both participants in which are present in time and space (the contact is direct, not mediated), occurs in cases of interviews done by a correspondent with third parties. The second type of interaction, mediated by telephone or transmission, is usually performed by a newsreader and a reporter/correspondent who share a temporal, but not a spatial, system (they are linked by telephone or via two way satellite links of television transmission networks). The television audiences function as observers of them (Thompson, 1995, pp. 82-118). As a result television news narrative becomes a mixture of interviews, reportages and commentaries and in television news narrative there are several narrators some of whom function as narrators-characters within individual stories.

Newsreaders as narrators contribute to the stable narrative scheme. Although the newsreader is presented as a neutral presenter, the audiences follow his/her 'direction' that is authoritative, reliable and friendly. Newsreaders are persons of great importance, but at the same time are perceived as family friends, those who can share emotions and feelings with their audiences. On the other hand, reporters/correspondents are supposed to be unrelated to the matters they report on and should show/provide no personal points of view. The roles of a newsreader and a correspondent/reporter as representatives of an institution to elicit information in an interview lead very often to some strange practices, such as chasing a politician interviewee, invasion of privacy, etc. The majority of stories are narrated by reporters/correspondents. Correspondents provide comments rather than report from the actual scenes. Factual details are provided by reporters, and commentaries usually follow, when they are asked by newsreaders to express their own opinions. Narrators constantly include parts of other speeches into their stories,

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quotes from participants, experts and witnesses.

Opinions presented in the narrative, whether the dominant ones of newsreaders and correspondents/reporters or not dominant ones of persons from outside the media institutions are either institutionalised or interposed. In the process of institutionalisation newsreaders, and reporters/correspondents, adopt the opinions of politicians or experts and present them as their own. The interposed opinions that supplement institutionalised ones are presented in the form of quotations, paraphrases, and direct interviews. They are stereotyped on the basis of opposites of us/them, majority/minority, good/bad, order/chaos, police/criminal, etc. (Volek, 2001).

Eungjun Min and Insung Hwang (1996) claim that narrators in television news narrative are coded as omniscient narrators. A newsreader especially acquires a high level of omniscience by showing that he/she knows the complex background of an event. The newsreader is usually detached from the event (extra-diegetic element) and presents the story from the position of institutional authority. Sometimes the newsreader becomes a participant, an intra-diegetic element, of the story.

The characters in news narrative are first selected and then controlled (through how much space and time is provided to them, etc.). The narrative roles are filled by character types (heroes, villains, victims, etc.) and/or by social types (unemployed, minorities, underclass, upper-class, etc.). John Fiske (1987) states that realism in television news is accompanied by radicalism. Interviewees are often radicals, spokespeople representing trade unions, demonstrators, environmentalists, etc. Their representation, however, is limited by the interviewers' choice.

According to Andrew Tolson (2006) interview within narrative represents a space for a dramatic reconstruction of the event, for comment, for additional facts; nevertheless it is second-hand information narrated by a correspondent and it replaces a first hand account of the event that would be more mimetic by diegetic means. It also strengthens the 'gossip' character of news narrative through use of phrases such as *I am told, they tell me*, etc. The author claims that news talk sometimes acquires the form of gossip, especially in interviews between journalists (Tolson, 2006, p. 64). This is a feature of conversationalisation of news discourse.

Andrew Tolson (2006) also identifies other elements of a conversational nature in news presentation. The interactive, dialogical character of news discourse is visible in interplay of newsreader and correspondents via live interview (diegetic) that covers a larger proportion of time compared to the speech of politicians or vox-pop which is greatly reduced (mimetic). It is also accompanied by a higher level of informality through first name addressing, colloquial language elements, possibilities for humour and addressing audiences using *we, us*, etc. (Tolson, 2006, pp. 68-69).

Martin Montgomery (2005) specifies features of conversationalisation of news discourse by contrasting characteristics of the news report and the live interview:

News report	**Live two-way**
Scripted	Unscripted
Formal	Informal
Unmarked modality	Marked modality
Statement of fact	Statement of possibility
Descriptive	Interpretative
Institutional voice	Personal voice
Monologue	Dialogue
Then (past)	Now (live)
Here (studio)	There (in the field)

Fig. 1. *Conversationalisation of news discourse (Montgomery, 2005, p. 243).*

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The changing practices of news reporting involving the use of live interviews, which includes the possibility of unprepared, unscripted verbal performances of newsreader and correspondent reporting a breaking story, fulfil the requirements of immediacy, recency, newness, closeness, and proximity. On the other hand the unedited, unpackaged material changes the role of journalist into the role of an observer, which is not very attractive for audiences. The lack of story, the lack of construction of the raw material, cannot hold attention in the same way the framed narrative news does.

5. Conclusion

The above described properties of the visual and audio modes in television news narrative prove that the consumer's authority reaches the news discourse. Conversationalisation of the public sphere reflects the discursive practices of everyday life that are incorporated in the process of narrative construction (for instance the use of colloquial vocabulary, simulated dialogue, elliptical forms, simulation of personal attitude and relations, etc.).

Instead of conclusion proper the quotation below may be used.

Stories need audiences. Stories need to be heard and read, as well as spoken and written. There is also a claim for community within the telling, a wish for participation, a drawing in, a suspension of disbelief, an invitation to move into and to share, however briefly, another world. And stories live beyond telling, in dreams and in talk, whispered, retold, time and time again. They are an essential part of social reality, a key to our humanity, a link to, and an expression of, experience. We cannot understand another culture if we do not understand its stories. We cannot understand our own culture of we do not know how, why and to whom our own storytellers tell their tales. (Silverstone, 1999, p. 40)

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