

From Reader to Mediated Witness: The Engaging Effects of Journalistic Crime Narratives

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Kobie van Krieken¹, Hans Hoeken¹, and José Sanders¹

Abstract

This study tests the claim that news narratives about shocking criminal acts enable readers to become mediated witnesses, which implies that readers identify with actual eyewitnesses to a crime and vicariously experience the crime from up close. In an experiment ($n = 128$), participants read an original narrative newspaper article about a mass shooting or an original non-narrative article about the same event. Results provided evidence for a mediated witness experience: Readers of the narrative identified more strongly with eyewitnesses of the crime and had a stronger sense of being present at the shooting than readers of the non-narrative article.

Keywords

news narratives, mediated witness, engagement, crime news

Although research on the engaging and persuasive effects of fictional narratives has accumulated over the past years (e.g., Appel, 2011, 2008; De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012; Murphy, Frank, Chatterjee, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2013; Vaughn, Hesse, Petkova, & Trudeau, 2009), studies about the effects of journalistic narratives remain scarce. Such studies are, however, called for by observations of the increasing narrativization of journalism (Hartsock, 2007; Kitch, 2009; Singer, 2010). The use of narrative techniques appears to be a particularly attractive means to report on criminal

¹Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:

Kobie van Krieken, Centre for Language Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen, P.O. Box 9103, NL-6500 HD, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

Email: k.vankrieken@let.ru.nl

events (Johnston & Graham, 2012). Consider, for example, the following excerpt, which is the opening scene of a newspaper article about a mass murder at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut:

Excerpt 1

Sandy Hook Elementary School nurse Sarah Cox was on the phone with her daughter, Bonnie, when she heard the strange, loud popping noise coming from outside.

“What’s that?” Cox asked. . . .

Within seconds, the popping sounds stopped as quickly as they had started, and Cox held her breath when she heard someone open her office door. Through the openings of the desk, she saw a pair of legs from the knees down wearing dark clothing and boots. (Klein & Vincent, 2012)

The anecdotal lead in Excerpt 1 is a key characteristic of journalistic narratives. Contrary to traditional summary leads, anecdotal leads do not provide newsworthy information about what happened but draw the attention of the reader by setting a scene and describing the experiences of people involved in the news events (Johnston & Graham, 2012; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). In the coverage of disturbing news events, journalistic narratives are often argued to fulfill an important function: They help society to cope with these events by offering interpretations in archetypal frames of “good and evil” or “hero and villain” (Berkowitz, 2010, 2005; Lule, 2002). Note that in Excerpt 1, the school nurse impersonates the “good,” while the “evil” is represented by the dark clothes belonging to the shooter.

On the level of individual readers, it is claimed that journalistic crime narratives “invite” the reader to experience the events as a *mediated witness* (Peelo, 2006). As Peelo (2006) argues, the function of a mediated witness experience is twofold. First, it allows readers to align themselves emotionally with the victims and witnesses to a crime and, in a broader sense, to redefine their position in society in terms of moral values. Second, it allows readers to experience the criminal event from up close without having to deal with the recovery that real victims and witnesses have to deal with. A mediated witness experience thus helps readers to “make sense” of shocking news events by substituting their lack of personal experience with vicarious experience. In Excerpt 1, for instance, the chronological ordering of events as they are observed by the school nurse encourages readers to virtually place themselves in the position of this eyewitness during the attack.

In sum, journalistic narratives about disturbing news events are thought to fulfill functions related to society as a whole and functions related to individuals belonging to that society. However, while scholars have described these functions in meticulous detail, and while journalists have formulated the intuitive suggestion that narratives engage readers, there have been few attempts to test these contentions (Johnston & Graham, 2012, p. 530). The present study aims to fill part of this gap. It focuses on the impact of a narrative newspaper article about a shocking criminal event on the reader’s

experience of being a mediated witness to this event. As such, this study extends research on fictional narratives to journalistic narratives, thus advancing our knowledge about the effects of narratives we encounter in our day-to-day lives.

Literature Review

Effects of Journalistic Narratives

Several studies have examined the effects of journalistic narratives on the audience. In print journalism, narrativity in news stories—established by the use of narrative structures such as a chronological ordering of events and the representation of characters' inner perspectives (cf. Fleischman, 1985)—increases suspense, curiosity, and reading enjoyment (Knobloch, Patzig, Mende, & Hastall, 2004; Sanders & Redeker, 1993). In broadcast journalism, narrative structures increase viewers' comprehension and retention of news items (Machill, Köhler, & Waldhauser, 2007). These findings indicate that journalistic narratives are processed and evaluated differently than traditional, non-narrative news reports. More specifically, they suggest that journalistic narratives resemble fictional narratives in their ability to communicate information in a way that is both entertaining and educating (cf. Slater & Rouner, 2002). This raises the question whether journalistic narratives, like fictional narratives, can also engage their readers cognitively and emotionally.

Two different approaches have been undertaken to examine the engaging effects of journalistic narratives. In the first approach, the genre expectations were manipulated (Green & Brock, 2000, Experiments 1-3; Appel & Malečkar, 2012, Study 2). In these experiments, participants read a narrative that was introduced either as a fictional story or as a newspaper article. Their engagement with the narrative was assessed after reading either one of the genre introductions and the subsequent narrative. The results revealed that journalistic narratives are just as engaging as fictional narratives.¹ In the second approach, a comparison was made between a narrative newspaper article and a non-narrative, informative newspaper article (Oliver, Dillard, Bae, & Tamul, 2012; Shen, Ahern, & Baker, 2014). These studies have demonstrated that narrative news articles are more engaging than non-narrative news articles.

The findings of these previous studies thus seem to indicate that the use of a narrative format in journalism is an effective route to engage readers. There are, however, two issues that complicate these findings and make general assertions about the engaging effects of journalistic narratives premature. The first issue concerns the representativeness of the narrative used in previous studies. In the studies by Shen et al. (2014) and Oliver et al. (2012), experimental texts were developed with the help of professional journalists to increase the authenticity of the materials. The studies that manipulated genre expectations (Appel & Malečkar, 2012; Green & Brock, 2000), however, used Sherwin Nuland's non-journalistic story "Murder at the Mall" and presented it as a journalistic narrative. The question is to what degree this story is representative of real journalistic articles. To illustrate this issue, the following excerpt provides a portion of "Murder at the Mall" (Nuland, 1994, p. 125).

Excerpt 2

People were scattering in all directions, trying to get away from a large, disheveled man who stood over a fallen little girl, his outstretched right arm pummeling furiously away at her. Even through the haze of her frozen incomprehension, Joan knew instantly that the child lying on her side at the crazed man's feet was Katie. At first, she saw only the arm, then realized all at once that in its hand was clutched a long bloody object. It was a hunting knife, about seven inches long. Using all his strength, up and down, up and down, in rapid piston-like motions, the assailant was hacking away at Katie's face and neck.

Excerpt 2 is illustrative of the highly graphic and detailed style in which "Murder at the Mall" is written. Journalistic narratives are often less vivid because journalists have to reconstruct what has happened in reality without having witnessed this themselves, and they are not allowed to invent any details either. Indeed, as Green and Brock state, "Murder at the Mall" displays "a rich descriptive style that would not be typical of a straight journalistic account" (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 705).

Another stylistic difference between "Murder at the Mall" and journalistic narratives lies in the use of source attributions. Journalists, as opposed to non-journalistic writers, have to attribute information to their sources to guarantee the truthfulness of the narrative. Consider Excerpt 3 below, taken from the *New York Post* narrative about the Newtown elementary shooting.

Excerpt 3

Cox, known as Sally to friends and co-workers, took no chances. "I just dove under my computer desk," she told the Post in an interview at her home in Newtown, a day after Adam Lanza stormed into her school and gunned down 20 children and six staffers. (Klein & Vincent, 2012)

In this excerpt, the journalist uses a direct quotation as a "grounding" device (Vis, Sanders, & Spooren, 2015): It demonstrates that the journalist has spoken to the eyewitness and thus affirms the trustworthiness of the narrative. This trustworthiness is even further enhanced by the details provided about the time and location of the conversation between journalist and eyewitness. Such source attributions interrupt the flow of the narrative and force readers to temporarily step out of the narrative world, thereby hindering their engagement (Craig, 2006; Lorenz, 2005). Crucially, these attributions are mandatory in journalistic narratives but absent in "Murder at the Mall."

In sum, the journalistic requirements of truthfulness and source attribution have implications for the style of news narratives and supposedly the engagement of the reader. The narrative used in the studies by Green and Brock (2000) and Appel and Malečkar (2012) does not meet these requirements to the degree that they are met in real news narratives. In essence, then, the results of these studies leave much to guess about the engaging effects of *actual* narratives as they are being published in newspapers. To overcome this issue, the present study examines the effects of an original newspaper narrative.

The second issue concerns the way engagement was measured in previous studies, which has not provided a clear view on the exact nature of the engaging effects of news narratives. The studies by Shen et al. (2014) and Oliver et al. (2012) used engagement and empathy as distinct measures, while conceptualizations of engagement often include empathy as a specific dimension of engagement (e.g., Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Furthermore, all four previous studies on engagement with journalistic narratives (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Green & Brock, 2000; Oliver et al., 2012; Shen et al., 2014) used the unidimensional *transportation scale* (Green & Brock, 2000) to measure readers' engagement. However, it is commonly agreed that engagement with a narrative is a multidimensional experience, and many analyses show that the transportation scale is in fact not unidimensional (e.g., Oliver et al., 2012; Slater, Rouner, & Long, 2006). Using the transportation scale may therefore not provide us with a thorough understanding of the engaging effects of journalistic narratives.

In describing different reading experiences, Oatley (1999) makes a meaningful distinction between spectatorship (i.e., the reader is present in the story world as an unobserved observer) and identification (i.e., the reader takes on the perspective of a character and observes the story events from this character's perspective). In examining the effects of journalistic narratives on the reader's experience of being a mediated witness, it is important to determine not only whether these narratives can cause the reader to feel "present" at news events but also whether the reader then observes these events as a spectator or—through identification—from the perspective of a real eyewitness. As a result of using the transportation scale, previous studies have been incapable of distinguishing between these different types of reading experiences. To overcome this issue, the present study uses the multidimensional concept of narrative engagement to operationalize and assess the reader's experience of being a mediated witness to a shocking crime.

Narrative Engagement

Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) have introduced the concept of *narrative engagement* to capture the different sensations people can experience while reading a narrative. They identify four distinct dimensions of narrative engagement. The first dimension is labeled *narrative presence* and refers to the reader's phenomenological experience of leaving the actual world and entering the narrative world. This sense of going to an alternative world provided by the narrative is similar to the notion of *transportation* as it was first described by Gerrig (1993, pp.10-11), namely, as a journey undertaken by the reader to "some distance from his or her world of origin, which makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible."

The second dimension, *emotional engagement*, refers to both the emotional alignment with a narrative's character and the emotions evoked by that narrative. This dimension shares similarities with Oatley's (1999) notion of identification. Through identification, readers come to feel emotions for and share emotions with narrative characters.

Attentional focus is the third dimension, which denotes an intense concentration on the narrative. This dimension refers to a state in which readers forget about their physical surroundings and are undistracted by events occurring in the real world. As Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) argue, this state of intense focus remains unnoticed until the reader becomes distracted and needs to refocus.

The fourth dimension, *narrative understanding*, refers to the reader's understanding of the narrative. According to Busselle and Bilandzic (2009), narrative understanding does not contribute to narrative engagement; it is rather that a lack of narrative understanding has a negative effect on narrative engagement. If readers fail to understand, for instance, how events are related to each other, engagement will be disrupted.

As stated above, a mediated witness experience is believed to consist of two components: the virtual experience of a crime from up close and the emotional alignment with eyewitnesses to that crime. These components appear to correspond to the narrative presence and emotional engagement dimensions of narrative engagement. These two dimensions are therefore used in this study to measure readers' experience of being a mediated witness to shocking criminal acts. Based on previous studies on the engaging effects of narratives (Appel & Malečkar, 2012; Green & Brock, 2000; Oliver et al., 2012; Shen et al., 2014), the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1a: A journalistic narrative about a shocking criminal news event evokes a stronger sense of narrative presence than a non-narrative news report about the same event.

H1b: A journalistic narrative about a shocking criminal news event evokes a stronger emotional engagement than a non-narrative news report about the same event.

In addition, as this study aims to advance our knowledge of the engaging effects of journalistic narratives, a third hypothesis is formulated with respect to attentional focus, the third dimension of narrative engagement:

H1c: A journalistic narrative about a shocking criminal news event evokes a stronger attentional focus on the text than a non-narrative news report about the same event.

To test these hypotheses, an experiment was conducted of which the details are discussed in the following section.

Method

Stimulus Materials

The experimental materials consisted of two original newspaper articles, published in different Dutch broadsheet newspapers, about a spree killing that took place in the Netherlands on April 9, 2011. On that day, a young man entered a crowded shopping

mall and killed 6 persons and wounded another 17 before he took his own life. It was the deadliest shooting caused by an individual in the history of the Netherlands. Both articles were published on Monday, April 11, 2011. As the shooting took place on a Saturday and no newspapers are issued in the Netherlands on Sunday, they were both among the first newspaper articles about the event to be published.

The first article (Funnekotter & Mat, 2011), published in quality newspaper NRC Handelsblad, can be characterized as a narrative reconstruction of the events. This article was selected because it relates the spree killing to a large degree through the perspectives of eyewitnesses, which should enable the reader to identify with these persons (De Graaf et al., 2012) and thus facilitate a mediated witness experience. In addition, the narrative provides a chronological account of the event and includes much information about the spatiotemporal setting (e.g., the route of the perpetrator through the mall and the different shops he encounters at different points in time), which should stimulate the reader's sense of being present inside the mall during the events. The article is narrated in the present tense and consists of 1,238 words.

The second article (Huisman, 2011), published in quality newspaper *De Volkskrant*, can be characterized as a traditional news report. This non-narrative article covers the event itself and a number of consequences, such as the number of deaths and wounded, the police investigation, and a commemoration in presence of the prime minister. In this article, the facts are presented from the impersonal perspective of a detached observer, that is, the journalist. The events are non-chronologically ordered in a classical "inverted pyramid" structure: The most recent information is given first, followed by the elaboration of less recent information (see, for example, Pöttker, 2003). The article is written in the past tense and consists of 402 words. Table 1 provides excerpts of the two articles.

Because of the considerable difference in number of words between the articles, a third article was created to control for possible effects of length. In this article, the news report from *De Volkskrant* (Huisman, 2011) was supplemented with (parts of) seven other original news reports that all provided additional information about the spree killing and its aftermath (e.g., commemorations, church services, hospitalized victims). Like the short news report, the extended report was presented entirely from an impersonal, detached perspective, and the events were ordered in a non-chronological fashion. Minimal adjustments were made to ensure smooth transitions between the different parts of the report. The extended article consisted of 1,215 words. As such, this third version matched the style of the short news report and the length of the narrative and could thus be used to control for length effects. In accordance with the hypotheses, it was expected that readers of the extended news report would be equally engaged as readers of the short news report but less engaged than readers of the narrative.

Importantly, basic facts about the shooting were given in all three conditions. All texts contained the same information about the time, date, and place of the shooting; the identity of the shooter; the number of people who died; and the number of people who got injured. Thus, information about the most important aspects of the shooting was equal across the stimuli.

Table 1. Excerpts of the Two Different Newspaper Articles About the Spree Killing.

News narrative (Funnekotter & Mat, 2011)	News report (Huisman, 2011)
<p>The indoor shopping mall is crowded. Van der V. calmly passes het Kruidvat, de Zeeman, de Hubo. Shooting. Glass flies around. People fall, run away, duck away. He walks on.</p> <p>An older man escapes in front of him and ducks into the Hubo. He was just with his granddaughter, but he has lost her. Quickly he gets up again. He sees a man and a woman lying on the ground, bathed in blood. He sees fear, panic. He finds his granddaughter again. She is unharmed. She had walked along with other people.</p> <p>In the C1000 magazine, on the second floor, Lennart Schellinghout is working. He hears cracks. "At first I thought something fell on the floor." . . .</p>	<p>The 24-year-old man from Alphen aan den Rijn, who caused a massacre Saturday around noon in shopping mall De Ridderhof in his hometown, had a psychiatric past and was "clearly suicidal."</p> <p>That is what public prosecutor Kitty Nooy said on Sunday. A motive for his act is not known yet. It is investigated how someone with psychiatric problems can get a weapon license.</p> <p>The young man, Tristan van der V., killed six persons with an automatic firearm during his rampage through the shopping mall: three men (80, 49, and 42 years old) and three women (91, 68, and 45 years old), all from Alphen aan den Rijn. Among them is a political refugee from Syria. . . .</p>

Participants and Procedure

A total of 131 persons participated in the study. The results for three participants were excluded from the study because Dutch was not their native language. The final sample consisted of 128 participants (62.5% female, 38.5% male). Age varied between 15 and 74, with an average of 32.9 ($SD = 16.3$). Level of education varied between participants: 11.7% received secondary education, 17.2% received middle-level vocational training (Dutch MBO), 38.3% received a higher professional education (Dutch HBO), and 32.8% received a scientific education.

Experimenters randomly approached people who were shopping in the center of a large town in the Eastern Netherlands. People who agreed to participate were taken to a quiet and private location. There they were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions and read the article in a home-like environment. The participants also completed a second (unrelated) study and received a gift voucher of €10 afterward.

Design

The study used a between-subjects design with three conditions. One group ($n = 42$) read the narrative, one group ($n = 44$) read the short news report, and one group ($n = 42$) read the extended news report. All participants answered all questions after reading the article.

Measures

A questionnaire was designed to measure three dimensions of participants' engagement with the narrative. For all items, participants were asked to indicate their agreement on a 7-point Likert-type scale. The dimensions of narrative presence and emotional engagement were used to assess readers' experience of being a mediated witness to the shooting. In addition, the dimension of attentional focus was included to test whether journalistic narratives can cause readers to become completely focused on the story.² These three dimensions were measured with 21 items, adapted from De Graaf et al. (2012). Furthermore, four items were included to measure the perceived representativeness of the articles and participants' individual consumption of news about the shooting. These measures were used to control for possible effects caused by the difference between the original articles, on one hand, and the extended article, on the other, or participants' pre-exposure to news related to the shooting.

Narrative engagement. Narrative presence was measured with seven items such as "During reading, I had the feeling as if I was present at the events in the news article" and "When I was reading the news article, it seemed as if I was there in my thoughts."

Emotional engagement was measured with 10 items, for instance, "The article affected me" and "During reading, I empathized with the people (eyewitnesses and victims) who were inside the shopping mall."

Attentional focus was measured with four items, for example, "During reading, I was fully concentrated on the news article" and "I did not really notice things that happened around me."

A Principal Axis Factor analysis with oblimin rotation was run on all items to determine whether the items loaded on the expected dimensions of narrative engagement (see appendix). The analysis showed a solution in five factors, with the dimension of emotional engagement being disassembled into three different factors. The total variance explained was 64.53%.

Factor 1 contained all seven items of narrative presence and was therefore called Narrative Presence ($\alpha = .89$). Factor 2 contained four items about emotional engagement ("The article affected me," "I found the article moving," "Because of the article, feelings arose in me," and "The article stirred emotions in me"). Since these items are about emotions toward the article and emotions elicited by the article, this dimension was labeled Emotions ($\alpha = .89$). Factor 3 contained two items about emotional engagement ("During reading, I had the feeling I went through what the people inside the shopping mall went through" and "In my imagination, it was as if I was one of them"; $r = .63^{**}$). These items are about vicarious experience. This factor was therefore called Identification With Eyewitnesses. Factor 4, Attentional Focus, contained all four items about attentional focus ($\alpha = .82$). Factor 5 contained the four remaining items of emotional engagement ("During reading, I empathized with the people inside the shopping mall"; "During reading, I imagined what it would be like to be in the position of one of them"; "While reading, I felt for them"; and "During reading, I sympathized with them"; $\alpha = .88$). As these items mostly reflect feelings of empathy with the eyewitnesses, this dimension was labeled Empathy With Eyewitnesses.

Control items. Two items were included to control for participants' individual consumption of news about the spree killing: "I paid close attention to news about this event" and "I read a lot of newspaper articles about this event" ($r = .69^{**}$). In addition, two items were included to rule out the possibility that effects were caused by differences between the two original articles, on one hand, and the extended article, on the other: "I find this a representative example of a newspaper article" and "I find it plausible that this newspaper article has actually been published in a newspaper" ($r = .70^{**}$).

Results

First, an ANOVA was run to examine whether the extended article was perceived as less representative than the two original articles. An effect of text version on representativeness was found, $F(2, 124) = 7.08, p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$. Post hoc comparisons showed that the narrative ($M = 3.66, SD = 1.78$) was considered to be a less representative example of a journalistic text than the short news report ($M = 4.92, SD = 1.30; p < .001$) and the extended news report ($M = 4.60, SD = 1.71; p = .029$). The comparison between the short news report and the extended news report was not significant ($p = .133$). The extended news report was thus considered to be more representative than the narrative and equally representative as the short news report, which rules out the possibility that effects were caused by a difference in authenticity between the two original articles, on one hand, and the extended article, on the other.

Next, the hypotheses were tested using a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). To control for participants' pre-exposure to news about the shooting, the individual news consumption variable was included in the analysis as a covariate. The analysis revealed an effect of this covariate on participants' engagement with the news article (Wilks's $\lambda = .87$), $F(5, 120) = 3.48, p = .006$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$. The covariate was positively related to all five dimensions of narrative engagement: Narrative Presence, $F(1, 124) = 10.05, p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$; Emotions, $F(1, 124) = 7.28, p = .008$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$; Empathy With Eyewitnesses, $F(1, 124) = 8.30, p = .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$; Identification With Eyewitnesses, $F(1, 124) = 9.47, p = .003$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$; Attentional Focus, $F(1, 124) = 13.12, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$. Hence, the more news participants had consumed about the shooting, the higher their engagement with the article was.

Table 2 contains the mean scores and standard deviations for all dimensions of narrative engagement after controlling for participants' consumption of news about the shooting.

The multivariate analysis revealed a main effect of text version on narrative engagement (Wilks's $\lambda = .79$), $F(10, 240) = 2.94, p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$. Subsequent univariate analyses showed significant effects of text version for Narrative Presence, $F(2, 124) = 9.44, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$; Empathy With Eyewitnesses, $F(2, 124) = 4.86, p = .009$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$; and Emotions, $F(2, 124) = 4.21, p = .017$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. There were trends for the effects of text version on Identification With Eyewitnesses, $F(2, 124) = 2.83, p = .063$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$, and Attentional Focus, $F(2, 124) = 3.08, p = .050$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations (Between Brackets) for the Five Dimensions of Narrative Engagement by Condition (1 = Low Engagement, 7 = High Engagement).

Dependent Variables	Narrative (<i>N</i> = 42)	News Report (short, <i>N</i> = 44)	News Report (extended, <i>N</i> = 42)
Narrative Presence	5.11 (1.16) ^a	4.11 (1.11) ^b	4.47 (1.06) ^b
Identification With Eyewitnesses	3.35 (1.32) ^a	2.73 (1.52) ^b	2.75 (1.37) ^b
Empathy With Eyewitnesses	4.97 (1.23) ^a	4.18 (1.52) ^b	4.92 (1.26) ^a
Emotions	5.20 (1.25) ^a	4.45 (1.21) ^b	4.92 (1.25) ^{a,b}
Attentional Focus	4.74 (1.42) ^a	4.24 (1.11) ^{a,b}	4.15 (1.08) ^b

Note. Means are adjusted for individual news consumption. Different superscripts indicate significant differences between conditions.

Next, to test the hypotheses that the impact of the narrative version on narrative engagement differed from the news reports, planned comparisons were conducted. In support of **H1a**, participants who read the narrative reported a stronger feeling of being present at the shooting than participants who read either the short news report ($p < .001$) or the extended news report ($p = .008$). The comparison between the short news report and the extended news report was not significant ($p = .137$).

Partial support was found for **H1b**. Participants who read the narrative identified more strongly with eyewitnesses to the shooting than participants who read the short news report ($p = .037$) and participants who read the extended news report ($p = .048$). The comparison between the short news report and the extended news report was not significant ($p = .944$). In addition, participants who read the narrative and participants who read the extended news report empathized more strongly with eyewitnesses to the shooting than participants who read the short news report ($p = .006$ and $p = .011$, respectively). The comparison between the narrative and the extended news report was not significant ($p = .865$). Finally, participants who read the narrative were emotionally more affected by the text than participants who read the short news report ($p = .005$). Comparisons between other conditions were not significant ($ps > .08$).

H1c was also partially supported. Participants who read the narrative were more focused on the news article than participants who read the short news report ($p = .024$). Comparisons between other conditions were not significant ($ps > .05$).

Conclusion and Discussion

The increasing volume of narratives in newspapers has led to a variety of claims about their societal functions (e.g., Berkowitz, 2005; Lule, 2002). Despite this growing professional and academic interest in journalistic narratives, research on their impact on the audience is still in its infancy. The aim of the present study was to extend research on narratives and, in particular, to advance the literature on journalistic narratives by

empirically testing the claim that these narratives can turn readers into mediated witnesses to shocking news events (Peelo, 2006).

The experimental results showed that compared with a non-narrative news report, a journalistic narrative about a shocking news event causes readers indeed to feel more “present” at that event and to identify more strongly with eyewitnesses to that event. At the same time, participants did not consider the narrative to be a representative example of a newspaper article and judged it unlikely that this article had actually been published in a newspaper. Hence, despite (or perhaps because of) their suspicions about the actual genre of the narrative, readers allowed themselves to become close to the events and people described in it. The identification scores were, however, in all conditions below the neutral midpoint of the scale. A possible explanation could be that the participants were asked whether they identified with a group of eyewitnesses instead of one specific eyewitness, and people find it harder to feel similar to a group of narrative characters than to an individual character (Niederdeppe, Kim, Lundell, Fazili, & Frazier, 2012). Nevertheless, readers of the news narrative had a stronger sense of witnessing the shooting themselves than readers of the non-narrative news reports.

The results also showed that the narrative elicited a stronger attentional focus on the article compared with the extended news report but not compared to the short news report. It thus appears that reading a long news article is more captivating when it is written in a narrative style compared with a non-narrative, informative style. This finding is important in light of the current newspaper crisis. For journalists and editors who wish to distinguish their news coverage from the coverage of free online competitors by publishing longer, in-depth articles, a narrative format is preferable to a traditional format.

In addition, the narrative affected readers’ empathy with eyewitnesses and their emotions, but results for these two dimensions of emotional engagement were somewhat inconsistent. Compared with readers of the short news report, but not to readers of the extended news report, readers of the narrative reported stronger emotions evoked by the article. In addition, compared with readers of the short news report, readers of the narrative and readers of the extended news report empathized more strongly with eyewitnesses. The narrative and the extended news report thus evoked a similar degree of empathy. This result can either be explained as an effect of length or as an effect of the focus on human interest elements, which were frequent in both the narrative (i.e., experiences of people directly involved) and the extended news report (i.e., elaborate coverage of commemoration and church services as well as politicians’ sympathetic reactions) but not in the short news report.

Overall, these findings complement and extend the results of previous studies, which indicate that news narratives have the power to engage readers cognitively and emotionally (Appel & Malečkar, 2012; Green & Brock, 2000; Oliver et al., 2012; Shen et al., 2014). The present study makes three important contributions to these studies. First, by examining an original journalistic narrative, this study provides valid evidence for the engaging effects of journalistic narratives that people consume in their daily lives. Second, by measuring different dimensions of narrative engagement, this

study provides more insight into the exact nature of the engaging effects of journalistic narratives. Third, it replicates previous findings using news coverage of a different event in a different culture with a heterogeneous sample of participants, thereby lending support for the generality of the effects of journalistic narratives.

In particular, this study shows that the journalistic requirements of truthfulness and source attribution, which are often thought to interrupt the flow of journalistic narratives (Craig, 2006; Lorenz, 2005, pp. 60-68), do not necessarily have a negative effect on readers' engagement. The engaging force of narrative features apparently prevails over the disrupting force of source attributions. An important next step is to determine which exact narrative features are responsible for evoking this level of engagement. The narrative used in the present study displays various narrative features, each of which can be assumed to have a unique impact on the different dimensions of narrative engagement. Whereas the present tense and the chronological ordering are likely to affect readers' sense of being present at the news event, verbs of perception (*he sees, hears*) to describe this event from the perspectives of eyewitnesses are likely to affect their emotional engagement. Similarly, choices of referential expressions are thought to affect readers' sense of "being there," whereas choices of grammatical subject are thought to affect their empathetic responses (van Krieken, Sanders, & Hoeken, in press). Future studies can determine whether these expectations hold through manipulations of these individual features.

In addition, future studies that include a variety of journalistic narratives about different types of news events are necessary to gain a comprehensive view on their impact on the audience. Such studies should also control for possible confounding variables beyond article length. The present study examined the effects of original newspaper articles, which maximized the ecological validity of the study but might have introduced confounds in terms of variations in content and levels of described details. Experiments in which narrative characteristics are manipulated in a controlled way would ensure that any observed differences between narrative newspaper articles and non-narrative newspaper articles can be attributed exclusively to narrativity. Future studies should also examine the effects of narratives about fictional news events or adjust original narratives in such a way that the events they cover are unfamiliar to the readers. The news articles used in the present study covered a spree killing that, in the Netherlands, is a well-known event that has become part of the collective memory. The supposed familiarity of the participants with this event might have obscured the results as it precluded the elicitation—and hence the measurement—of primary emotional responses.

These limitations notwithstanding, this study provides empirical evidence for the claim that journalistic narratives can cause readers to vicariously experience distant news events from up close, as mediated witnesses (Peelo, 2006). As Peelo (2006) argues, the narrative devices journalists use to elicit a mediated witness experience ultimately transcend the individual and contribute to "public narratives within which societies make sense of crime." Understanding this process requires, besides analytical studies at a macro-level, empirical studies that assess the impact of journalistic crime narratives on groups of individual readers. The study presented in this article attempts to lay the groundwork for future research in this direction.

Appendix

Principal Axis Factor Analysis With Oblimin Rotation of Narrative Engagement Items.

	1	2	3	4	5
During reading, I had the feeling as if I was present at the events in the news article (PRES)	.470		.351		
While I was reading the news article, I was in the world of the news article in my imagination (PRES)	.807				
During reading, I had a vivid image of the events in the news article (PRES)	.524				
When I was reading the news article, it seemed as if I was there in my thoughts (PRES)	.606				
During reading, it was as if I were present in the spaces that were described (PRES)	.439		.355		
During reading, I pictured the described events (PRES)	.557				
During reading, I saw before me what was described in the news article (PRES)	.754				
The news article stirred emotions in me (EMO)		.871			
The news article affected me (EMO)		.827			
I found the news article moving (EMO)		.613			
Because of the news article, feelings arose in me (EMO)		.719			
During reading, I had the feeling I went through what the people inside the shopping mall went through (IDEN)			.722		
In my imagination, it was as if I was one of them (IDEN)			.511		
During reading, I was fully concentrated on the news article (ATT)				.562	
During reading, my attention was fully captured by the news article (ATT)	.318			.747	
When I read the news article, my thoughts were only with the article (ATT)				.645	
During reading, I did not really notice things that happened around me (ATT)				.701	
During reading, I empathized with the people inside the shopping mall (EMP)					.714
During reading, I imagined what it would be like to be in the position of one of them (EMP)					.540
While reading, I felt for them (EMP)					.549
During reading, I sympathized with them (EMP)					.820
% of variance explained (before rotation)	43.39	8.46	5.19	4.13	3.37
Sum of squared loadings	6.12	6.10	3.00	5.08	5.18

Note. Factor loadings < .30 are not reported. PRES = item about narrative presence; EMO = item about emotional engagement; IDEN = item about identification with eyewitnesses; ATT = item about attentional focus; EMP = item about empathy with eyewitnesses.

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Notes

1. In Appel and Malečkar (2012), a third condition was included in which the narrative was introduced as a fake story. Readers of the fake story were less engaged than readers of the fictional and non-fictional stories. In Green and Brock (2000), Experiment 3, a third condition was included in which the narrative was introduced as a dream. This condition evoked a degree of engagement similar to the fiction and non-fiction conditions.
2. Narrative understanding, the fourth dimension of narrative engagement, was left out of the study because this dimension does not contribute actively to the engagement of the reader; it is rather that a lack of narrative understanding disrupts readers' engagement. The experimental texts were cohesive and described concrete situations and actions, and it was therefore unlikely that participants would have a hard time understanding the texts and would consequently be obstructed in their engagement.

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Author Biographies

Kobie van Krieken is a PhD student at the Centre for Language Studies at the Radboud University Nijmegen. She is writing her doctoral dissertation on the form, function, and impact of journalistic narratives. Her research interests include journalistic discourse, narrative engagement and persuasion, and cognitive text linguistics.

Hans Hoeken is a professor of persuasive communication at the Centre for Language Studies at the Radboud University Nijmegen. His research interests include the role of narratives and argumentation in persuasion.

José Sanders is an associate professor at the Centre for Language Studies at the Radboud University Nijmegen. Her research areas include narratology, cognitive text linguistics, journalism studies, and health education.