



Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

Persuading with Stories with Melanie Green

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Andy Luttrell:

We just finished watching the HBO docuseries, *The Vow*. Before that, we watched *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*. Before that, it was *McMillions*. Before that, it was *Tiger King*, and it's not just pandemic-era binge watching. Years ago, we got talked into *Making a Murderer* and *Wild, Wild Country*. We've listened to so many podcasts/documentaries that I've lost count. Modern documentaries are not the dry educational films you may have grown up with. They're gripping stories about real people and they can get us to rethink some things. Is the justice system flawed? Do we treat animals ethically? Do we allow dubious behavior from some types of people more than others? We're drawn in by the story, but maybe it's our opinions that are forever changed.

While people can definitely be persuasive by giving facts and figures, you know, explaining exactly the reasons why investing in a retirement account pays dividends later, for example, is it any more persuasive to tell a story about a person whose financial decisions led to ruin or riches? Or is this all just wishful thinking and at the end of the day stories are just entertainment? You're listening to *Opinion Science*, the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell and this week I talk to Melanie Green. She's a professor in the Department of Communication at University of Buffalo, and she has spent her career studying narrative persuasion, or the ability for stories to change people's minds. She's edited books on narratives and on persuasion, and she's published all sorts of research on how people can be transported when reading a story. She shares the results of her own research and that of many others, and we talk about when and why stories can be so powerful.

So, yeah, so like I said, I've been interested in persuasion obviously for a long time and have been aware of the idea that stories can be persuasive, that narratives can carry persuasion power. But I'm curious to talk to you to get more of that background. And even if we just start at the very beginning, I mean this has been something that's really characterized your career, right?

Melanie Green:

Right.

Andy Luttrell:

I think sort of if you were to nominate the thing that you study, this narrative persuasion-

Melanie Green:

That would be it.

Andy Luttrell:

Or just narrative processing. Yeah. So, I'm curious, was that always like... There's a version of the story where your nose was always buried in a book, you were always interested in stories, and then you went to grad school at a place that studies persuasion and you went, "Oh, I guess I'll put those two together." Or the story is something totally different, so I'm curious just in general, what sparked this path for you to look at narratives as a way to convey some sort of persuasive point?

Melanie Green:

Yeah. Well, your version of the story is somewhat accurate, because I have always loved stories. You know, from the time I was a kid, I was always a big reader and those kinds of things. And then as an undergraduate, I was actually a double major in psychology and literature, and when I went to grad school, I kind of thought, "Well, okay. Now I'm putting aside literature and I'm gonna be studying psychology, and okay, I have to make this choice," or whatever. But I think I got extremely lucky, actually, because when I showed up at grad school, I was assigned to Tim Brock as my advisor, and had my first meeting with him, go into my office, he hands me this book by Richard Gerrig called *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, and he said, "Hey, I've been reading this recently. It looks interesting. Why don't you read it too and we'll see what we can do?"

And I was so excited, because I really didn't think that I would be able to combine the two, because at the time, I mean persuasion research was very focused on specific arguments, and it was very geared around kind of explicit persuasive messages, and obviously there still is quite a bit of that in persuasion research, but it just seemed like something that people weren't doing, so it hadn't occurred to me that I could do it until Tim sort of said, "Hey, let's do this together." So, yeah, that's how it started out.

Andy Luttrell:

Was there much in the way of like when you then went, "Okay, I guess persuasion and narrative, is there a connection here?" Was there anything? Like you said, yeah, the dominant view was sort of arguments and processing information cognitively but was there anything to sort of draw on to be like, "No, there's a seed of something here that stories might be persuasive." Or was that really uncharted territory at the time?

Melanie Green:

Right. Well, so one answer to that is if you look back at the really early persuasion research, a lot of that was actually story based, so kind of the *Why We Fight* videos back from Hovland and stuff like that. They didn't talk about it in terms of stories, like they didn't say, "Oh, we're studying narrative persuasion or story-based persuasion." But if you look at the kind of materials that they were using, it was story based. So, I mean that was one kind of thing, that it was like, "Okay, it's going back to kind of the early strands of persuasion research and social psychology." And then of course from another perspective, I mean just kind of intuitively you think about how people have learned and been persuaded by things over time, and so much of that is stories. From religion, to civic life, to all of these things, to cultures before we had writing, what were people doing? They were telling stories.

So, I mean obviously this was not new in the grand scheme of things. And then people in other disciplines, so in communication there were people studying something called cultivation theory, which is basically like how the world is shown on television can affect your real life views, and entertainment education was all story based. So, there were strands of it other places, but as far as psychology, it was somewhat new at that time.

Andy Luttrell:

And maybe it's worth also just defining narrative. What I've loved is it does sort of strike you that like, "Oh yeah, narrative persuasion, it makes sense." And then every time I read a paper on it, it's like, "Okay, guys. We have to be very clear about what we mean." Because it is, I think, kind of a slippery concept in a way that has... I see the definition morphs a little bit from one paper to the other. Do you sort of settle on... What exactly do we mean by this? So, if you were to sort of isolate like here's what we mean by an example of a narrative that could convey a persuasive point, how would you define that?

Melanie Green:

Yeah. That's a great question, and it's a good one because if you look at different authors, or different disciplines, you sometimes get these kind of different definitions of it. The one that I like a lot right now is a definition that was actually proposed by Michael Dahlstrom, who's a communication researcher, and what he suggests is that the key elements of narratives is that they have three features. And so, the first one is character, so a narrative is about someone or a group of someones, and someone here is really broadly defined, right? So, the toys in Toy Story count. All those kinds of things. So, it's about someone.

Second thing is what he calls temporality, and that's the idea that the events and the narrative take place over time, and the contrast here is in other types of messages or communications you can just make an abstract claim. This car has good gas mileage or that kind of thing. Doesn't matter, there's nothing happening, but in narrative, things are happening. You have events occurring.

And then the third feature is causality, so those events aren't just random occurrences, but they're happening in a cause and effect sequence. So, this is happening because this other thing happened. So, I think that's one of the definitions that captures it. I mean, other kinds of definitions are things like a connected series of events, or sometimes it focuses on the motivation, so it's like there's a character with intentions and they try to achieve their goals, and sometimes they encounter obstacles, so you kind of have a little bit of a range of definitions, but I think centering it around those things is helpful.

And I think one of the things that makes it both interesting and tricky is that you can have really, really short narratives, right? Like the six word story contest. People can capture a lot, up to entire miniseries, and massive novels, and things like that. And so, it's like, "Okay, what's the core of getting at all of these things?"

Andy Luttrell:

And the persuasion side of it, I mean one of the things that seems... that I've had a little bit of trouble grasping in the narrative part is sort of like how do we know exactly what point the

narrative is trying to make? Because in a classic message you go, “I think this car is great.” Like you said, it’s because the mileage is this, and it drives... blah, blah, blah. And you come away, you go, “Okay, you’re trying to persuade me. I’m evaluating your arguments.” Whereas a story, you go like, “Well, does it have to be the point that was intended? Like people can read into stories?” Authors love to say, “I don’t know why they did that. That’s for the reader to decide.” And so, some of that seems to make it a little slipperier to be like how can these things be persuasive, right?

So, if we jump from narrative as just a sort of a manner of conveying information to a manner of being persuasive, what are the elements that can make a story persuasive?

Melanie Green:

Yeah. I think that’s a great question, because that is definitely one of the challenges of using and studying narratives, is that they are more open to individual interpretation and so on. And so, for instance in our studies, a lot of times what we try to do is intentionally pick stories that are going to imply the same attitudes for, we hope, most people. So, okay, if it’s a story about someone like going through difficulties and succeeding when they immigrate to a new country, we think that that will maybe evoke sympathy for immigrants or things like that.

So, we often try to pick ones where we think the main message is going to be relatively clear and accepted. But you know, you don’t always know, so a lot of times in our studies we look at thought listings, which as you know are basically just asking people to list what are the thoughts that you had when you read this story. And you know, there’s often a handful of people sometimes that got something totally different from it, and in some cases this is just okay, you weren’t paying enough attention, but in other cases it’s like okay, maybe they’ve had unique personal experiences that this reminded them of that kind of sent them off in a different direction, or some other interpretation, so it’s certainly true that people can bring their unique perspectives to it.

And there’s also... So, we come at narrative persuasion from a social psychological communication perspective, and there’s a lot of work on narratives from those disciplines, but there’s also a group of people from what’s sort of broadly called empirical literary studies, and they look at often people’s reactions to more complex or literary texts, and there it’s interesting because the goal isn’t necessarily persuasion. It’s there’s maybe gonna be some kind of change from reading it, but that change isn’t necessarily gonna be the same for everyone, and that’s much more sort of okay in those studies, because they’re not trying to use it as a tool for, “Okay, let me change your attitude.” It’s more, “Okay, let me see how this author’s use of language affected you,” or those kinds of things.

Andy Luttrell:

Can you think of an example of like a... just of narrative persuasion in the world? Like of a story that was sort of... Either we suppose, or we know was able to change the way people see something, right? So, you gave examples from sort of things you concoct for research purposes, but if we look to the world, can we see examples where it’s like, “No, this is like a story that’s operating in a way that’s changing the way people see something or believe something.”

Melanie Green:

Yeah. So, some of the big historical examples are things like the novel Uncle Tom's Cabin that came out and was really sort of broadly attributed at the time of sort of changing people's attitudes about slavery. So, it was sort of a sympathetic portrayal of people in slavery that at least reports suggest kind of opened people's eyes a little bit more to that situation and kind of increased sentiment for abolishing slavery, things like that.

Another historical example that gets frequently cited is... and now I'm blanking on the name of the book, but it was the one about the meatpacking factories.

Andy Luttrell:

Oh, the Upton Sinclair one? What is it? The-

Melanie Green:

Upton Sinclair. Yeah. Exactly.

Andy Luttrell:

What's it called?

Melanie Green:

I should know this, but it's just slipping my mind at the moment.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah.

Melanie Green:

The Jungle, I think maybe.

Andy Luttrell:

The Jungle. Yeah, that's right. Yeah. I think you're right.

Melanie Green:

Yeah. I think it's The Jungle. But yeah, so again kind of like raising awareness about this real world thing. And then as a... This is not actually all that recent anymore, but I sometimes in my classes, I ask my students, I'm like, "Hey, is there a story that's changed your beliefs? Has it changed the way you look at something?" And a really common one that comes up actually is that documentary, Super Size Me, where the filmmaker just ate McDonald's food every day for a month and had these horrible health consequences. Bad things happened to his liver, and he gained weight. And so, a number of students over the years kind of cite that as like, "Yeah, that really made me think about fast food differently."

And then another one that comes up with some frequency is things like... So, there's certain entertainment shows that also kind of do their research and present accurate information. So, the medical drama ER is one of those, and so sometimes people say, "Oh, well, I learned about this illness from this show." And then, "Oh, that helped me recognize that this relative of mine had this illness." You know, things like that. Yeah, so there's a variety of examples.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah. No shortage of stories in the world.

Melanie Green:

No. Exactly.

Andy Luttrell:

So, the science then, to sort of get into the science of it, can we say that narratives are especially potent persuaders? Can we say that they're better at persuading than these kinds of like facts and figures approaches? Or like what can we say about whether stories are effective tools for persuasion?

Melanie Green:

Yeah. So, that's a question that obviously there's been a ton of interest in, and that people have tried to answer, and the meta-analysis of the work on narratives versus non narratives, and a meta-analysis is a type of paper that tries to statistically bring together the results of previous studies. These reviews and kind of overviews of the individual studies that have been done actually suggest that it's kind of a mixed bag, that sometimes narratives are gonna be more persuasive, sometimes non narratives, and non narratives are things like more explicit persuasive appeals, or often a lot of this has been done in health, so a lot of this is comparing with statistics. So, do you give people statistics about skin cancer or do you tell somebody's story about their experience with skin cancer, things like that.

So, yeah, it seems like as with many things in social psychology, the answer is it depends. And the things that it seems to depend on are the quality of the story, for instance. I mean, we all know that not all stories are as good as every other story. Some of it seems to be the type of change that you're trying to create, so there's at least a little evidence. I wouldn't necessarily say this is the last word on it, but that some things are better at creating behavioral intentions, some things might be better at changing affective attitudes, so there seems to be a lot of potential complexity there that people have made some steps toward working out, but obviously there's still more progress to be made there.

But yeah, the overall answer in my read of the literature is that for sure they can be very effective. There's a lot of studies that show that hey, narratives work. But do they work better than other forms of communication? That's a lot more murky.

Andy Luttrell:

I'm sorry, these meta-analysis show that narratives tend to be better than like control, like they can move the needle?

Melanie Green:

Exactly.

Andy Luttrell:

But it's unclear whether they always do that better than other methods.

Melanie Green:

Correct. I think that's a good summary.

Andy Luttrell:

Got it. So, if someone's trying to decide, do I go with a story or do I go with some other method, right? You said that it depends? It depends on the quality of the story, which that is kind of elusive, too. Like that's a little... It strikes me... Maybe it's not this way, but it strikes me as a little post hoc, to be like, "Well, this story is a story that people like." But if I go, "I want to make a story that changes people's beliefs." Do I have anything at my disposal that I can say, "Here are the qualities that I would want to convey that make my story compelling." Or is more of this on the audience's side that there are some audiences who are open to stories and others who are more closed to them? Or is it something about the topic, right? Like I can just... I will never be able to tell a convincing story that gets you to believe X, right? But this other domain of Y, like you said health communication stories might be really potent there, but there are just some domains where you go, "Don't bother trying to force a story into this, because that's not what people care about."

Melanie Green:

Right, right. Well, you've got a lot of things going on in that question.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah, I know. Sorry. Take them in whatever order you want.

Melanie Green:

Yeah, so one thing is that the audience does matter, so there do seem to be individual differences where some people just like and very easily get immersed in stories, and we call that being high in transportability. They're easily transported into or taken into the world of the story. So, those people tend to respond better to stories than to other forms of communication, all else equal. There's also differences in just the types of stories that people prefer, right? Somebody who's a science fiction fan is probably gonna enjoy that sci-fi movie a lot more than somebody who thinks sci-fi is dumb or those kinds of things, so we have both individual tendencies towards stories and our own preferences about what kinds of stories we like.

Beyond that, there are some general features in terms of quality, so like a coherent plot is a big one. We want things to flow logically from one step to the next and if we have some character that suddenly does something wildly unexpected, that can bounce us out of being immersed in the story and kind of reduce the effectiveness of it. And then just general things like avoiding kind of clunky writing, or grammatical errors, or those kinds of things, things that are sort of... In essence disrupt the process of people being able to imagine that story. To have a good story, you want things to flow smoothly, and anything that kind of knocks people off that track of being able to mentally simulate is going to decrease your effectiveness.

But one of the interesting things that I think about narrative quality is that there are things that can mess it up. You know, this totally unrealistic thing. If we have time for a small example, so there's a story, classic short story called Goodbye, Columbus, and it's set in Ohio, at Ohio State, and you know, it's this perfectly, again, reasonable story, literary classic. They get to the end of this story and they say something about the OSU school colors. They say, "Oh, they were wearing the school

colors. It was red and white.” Okay, you see the problem here, right? It was like it was not scarlet and grey, and that instantly, just as an Ohio State grad, that destroyed the story for me. I’m like... This is not realistic at all. I don’t want anything more to do with this story.

So, sometimes things can bump you out of the story. But also, like there’s a lot of different ways to get to the end point of an engaging story. So, if you think about an action adventure movie, you’d have a thrilling plot, or maybe you’d have great special effects, and that gets people really into the movie. On the other hand, maybe you have a more literary text, and so oh, it’s the rich character development, and the insights into human nature, and even though nothing really happens in the story... So, I think there’s one of the things that makes it a little tricky is that there’s a lot of different pathways to having a good story, but then there’s also things that are gonna mess up your story.

Andy Luttrell:

I was wondering if you could talk about the idea of transportation, right? So, you mentioned transportability as this thing that some people are better at than others, or more capable of accomplishing than others, but I think probably one of the main contributions you’ve made in your research to the world of narrative persuasion is this notion of transportation. So, could you give a little insight on what that means and why it’s some clue as to why stories can be so persuasive under the right conditions?

Melanie Green:

Yeah, so transportation is the mental state that we get into when we really step into the world of a story. So, it’s the kind of thing where we’re super immersed in a great book and maybe we don’t even notice someone coming into the room, right? And then we’re startled when they’re right behind us, or you don’t notice the time passing because you’re just so engaged in it. That’s the kind of experience that we’re talking about. And what we think happens in transportation is that basically you have your cognitive focus is on the story, so you’re thinking about it, but then it also brings in an emotional engagement, right? Things happen to the characters and we’re happy for them or we’re sad for them, and then we started out this research looking at written text, so also the idea of mental imagery. Are you creating pictures in your mind of what’s going on?

And then since then, obviously we’ve extended it to other kinds of media, so obviously it’s with something like a movie or a television show, the images are right out in front of you. They’re provided for you. But transportation is a state that sort of brings all these things together to really make you feel immersed, to make you feel like you’re there in the action of the story. And the kind of contrast that we draw is that if you’re really engaged in something that’s not a story, so maybe you’re looking at an ad, or you’re reading a nonfiction book about something... Let me take the ad example. A lot of times, you’re maybe engaging more critical thinking kinds of things, so you’re looking at the arguments, you’re saying is this good, is this bad, do I believe this, do I want to accept this? Evaluating it in that way.

Whereas with transportation, you’re just kind of going along with where the author is taking you. You’re just accepting events in a story. And so, one thing that transportation does is it kind of potentially creates this openness to change because it’s kind of feeling like experience, you’re learning new things, maybe shifting how you look at the world and so on.

Andy Luttrell:

And my impression is that that is really a driver of the persuasion... Like you said, there are reasons to think that, but statistically also, like it's the case that if people are not transported by a story, that fundamentally that's where things break down. I mean, would you say that that's like the central thing? Like when the story's not very high quality, when you can't relate to the characters, when you're distracted, the reason why all of that stuff breaks the effect of narrative persuasion is because it pulls people out and sort of untransports them, detransports them?

Melanie Green:

Right.

Andy Luttrell:

And then so long as you can achieve that crucial feeling of being transported, that's enough to create persuasion.

Melanie Green:

Yeah. Yeah. I think that's a good summary of it, that the more people are transported, the more they're potentially persuaded. I think the one exception to that is that... So, most of the time when we're studying this, the kinds of things that we're persuading about are things that are often implied by the story rather than directly stated. So, instead of saying like, "Okay, smoking's bad." It's like, "Okay, here's this post on a person that smoked, and ooh, look at the health problems that developed." So, it's kind of an implication of the event. And occasionally, people will have stories where they try to persuade where there's like, "Okay, a story." But then the things you're trying to persuade about are just a character tells you something, like, "Oh, by the way..." And then it's interesting, because that seems to actually kind of get people in this other mindset, this maybe more elaborative mindset or whatever, and so the persuasion is less related to transportation in that specific instance.

But otherwise, in sort of regular stories, transportation does seem to be the driving factor. Occasionally related mental processes, like identification, where you are putting yourself in the place of the character. Identification and transportation are often really tightly related to each other but seems like sometimes it's the general immersion or sometimes it's that link with a character that seems to be driving the persuasive effects.

Andy Luttrell:

You mentioned the emotional part of it, and one of the things... I always sort of see this connection, but I never know if it's made super deliberately, is like when you look at, there's all this research in opinion psychology of like there are more emotion-based opinions and there are more rational opinions, where sometimes people form their preferences on the basis of how they feel, sometimes they form them more on the basis of what they believe to be true. And a lot of times when researchers try to create more emotion-based opinions, they do it by telling a story that's very engaging or by giving people the sort of visceral experience, all of which seem to map onto these ideas of like stories, and experience, and being transported, and identifying with a person, and so that... It's this weird thing where it's like yes, the way that you're trying to create emotion-based opinions is with story, but the studies are not about story. They're about emotion. And vice versa

in the narrative persuasion world. We go, “Well, we’re interested in what stories do to opinions and outcomes, but not talking as much about whether those results are more affective feeling based or more cognitive.”

So, I’m curious if you have any sense of are stories better at sort of nudging people to create a more feelings-based, emotion-based opinion or response to something? Or is it actually stories can do more than that, like stories can create like a more rational, informed opinion, even if part of that story process is emotional?

Melanie Green:

That’s a great question and I think your sense of the research, where stories are often used to create affective or emotional attitudes, is right, even though people aren’t talking about that necessarily as story persuasion. And I think I would say that my sense is that stories probably are best at creating attitudes that do have this more emotional or affective quality to them, but there’s certainly evidence that stories can also create more knowledge, cognitive, other types of attitudes, as well. But I suspect one area where stories kind of maybe have special potency would be this affective type, because the emotion really does seem to be a key element there. So yeah, even though it can do both, maybe a little better the affectively-based ones.

But no, it’s an interesting question too because differentiating those hasn’t been a main focus in a lot of the narrative persuasion research, so yeah, maybe a direction to pursue for the future.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah, there’s some hint that... In one of the meta-analysis of how statistical information might be especially good at driving people’s beliefs in more rational approaches to things, whereas stories are really good at sort of motivating people to take action in some way, and so that’s the only sort of seed of it, but again, that’s only when you look... You kind of have to assume something about the measures at the end of those individual studies rather than look very specifically at like is this really creating this more emotional reaction, or are we just kind of assuming that as researchers when we look at what happens?

Melanie Green:

Yeah. Yeah, exactly. And this is a little bit of a different issue, but it also kind of reminds me that one thing stories can be used for is the direct persuasion, but I think another area where stories can be really important is if you look at like health communication or health persuasion. So, it’s one thing to kind of have the information. The doctor says, “Okay, we need to choose between these two treatments. Which one are you gonna do?” And they can say, “All right, there’s an 80% risk of this side effect if you do this treatment,” or whatever. But then that kind of like, “Well, okay. Well, what does it really feel like to go through this?”

That’s an area where stories can be super helpful, right? This is why people jump on the internet and go on the support groups to look up the stories of people who have had that. It kind of fills in some of those things that aren’t just sort of pure persuasion, but it’s information that people want, like, “Okay, what have other people experienced? How can I understand or make meaning from this experience?”

Andy Luttrell:

I wonder, it sort of raises this other question that I had, which was whether really the optimal communication tool is to do both in the same message. For sure, that has to be in one of these persuasion studies. Maybe, but maybe not. Where I just sort of imagine your stereotypical TED Talk, where it's some expert who tells a gripping story, and then balances it out with data and some other thing. And as a person you go... Either of those on their own have their own downsides, right? I can't really connect and engage with data in the same way, and at the same time a story is only one data point and I'm sort of skeptical that that is representative of the issue. But put them together and it seems like dynamite, so I'm wondering. A lot of the studies we're talking about are like I either give you a very argument-based written message or I sort of tell this story that aims to convey this point. Is there any suggestion that doing both in the same message offers any advantage? Or are there reasons to think it would? Or would it just be that the story turns off half your audience and the statistics turn off the other half and then you have nothing?

Melanie Green:

Right. Yeah. There is some evidence that that can work, and in fact, one of my former students just published a Health paper that suggests that putting them both together can be a good strategy. And we have some work that we never ended up getting published, but basically the idea was like, "Okay, if you can have a story up front, that might help engage people and sort of create a mental framework that makes it easier to get the information later."

So, I think there's reason to believe that the combination certainly can be effective. And if you look at a lot of journalism, a lot of news stories kind of take that approach, like, "Oh, here's one person's story that we interviewed." But then, "Okay, let's give you the big picture, as well." So, you know, is that always gonna be the right approach? Maybe, maybe not, for again exactly the reasons that you mentioned, that you might sort of dilute the power of both or kind of lose or reduce different audiences with one or the other, but certainly in some circumstances I think you can get the best of both worlds by combining them.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah, the Super Size Me example, and this sort of new wave of amazing narrative documentary reminds me of this, where it's like that movie was not only this one guy getting sick.

Melanie Green:

Right.

Andy Luttrell:

That would be sort of an incomplete movie.

Melanie Green:

Doctors, and charts-

Andy Luttrell:

Right. Exactly.

Melanie Green:

Yeah, exactly.

Andy Luttrell:

And so, both together, because anyone can look and be like, “Oh, well, this guy is just an unhealthy person. You’ve just sort of selected a person who was gonna get unhealthy anyway.” But if you go, “No, this person’s experience is sort of evocative in a way that is representative of a bigger issue.” Intuitively, that strikes me as really a useful way to sort of have all the elements working in your favor, but I wasn’t sure if we knew that for sure, so good to know.

Melanie Green:

Yeah. And I think it’s also... It can be complex, because Jeff Niederdeppe at Cornell has been doing a lot of work on narratives and sort of around people’s attributions of responsibility for things like obesity, and so there’s a lot of complexities of like who responds to stories versus statistics, and then you sort of have an overlay of political ideology and how that affects individual and collective, and does your story focus on an individual or does it focus on a group? So, for particular topics sometimes you can have sort of a general sense of like, “Okay, yeah. This can work.” But then when you get into the specifics, sometimes there’s a lot of complexities to be worked out, and then audience responses aren’t always what you would necessarily predict in advance.

And this has actually been one of the things that was interesting to me in working with narratives over the years, because I started out with training like, “Okay, experimental lab studies, control everything, quantitative.” But as I’ve worked on especially some more applied projects over the years and things like that, stuff like literally just getting the focus groups, or looking at the thought listings and just seeing what your target audience is saying, because sometimes what you as a persuader or communicator have in mind, you’re like, “Okay, we’re gonna do this.” And then the audience looks at it as like... No. We see something else here. You thought we were gonna love this character, but we actually hate them. Whatever.

So, I think especially for people developing larger-scale narrative persuasion efforts, that step of kind of checking in with the target audience and getting that type of feedback is really important. And I mean, I guess even in sort of more typical persuasion research. People are like, “Okay, you have to have strong arguments.” But then they sometimes skip that pre-testing step of like, “Okay, is this really inspiring positive thoughts in your audience at all?” Maybe it’s not. Maybe that’s why your study doesn’t work. So yeah, but that kind of piece can be important, too.

Andy Luttrell:

Just to wind up, I’m wondering are there kind of new directions? What’s on the frontier of narrative persuasion? What are the things we don’t know yet? What are the... Even new media. I know that people are looking at stories in new media, so I’m curious, kind of where is your work in this world going?

Melanie Green:

Yeah. I think there’s a lot of interesting new directions. So, one area that I think is currently kind of underexplored that we’ve taken some little baby steps towards starting to look at is what happens when you have multiple or competing stories, right? Because when we’re doing a lab experiment

or whatever, we can just give people the one story and look at their response. But you know, again, think of the political domain broadly. Okay, you're gonna have competing narratives, like what's the true, true story of this or whatever? And so, how do people respond when they have a story that implies one claim and then a little while later there's a story that implies something else? Like how do they manage those things? Is it which story is more transporting? Is it which one they saw first? Those kinds of things. So, I think that's an important new direction that we don't know quite enough about yet.

And then another thing, I mean obviously there's a ton of people studying video games, and VR, and things like that, and so I think the idea of interactive narratives, narratives where you can choose the direction of the story, which often is the case with games and things like that, the way that those can work and can they be especially effective ways if you want to persuade, because you're literally getting people involved in the action. I think that's an exciting direction, as well, that sees some promising results.

And then a final thing that is sort of a fun new direction that we've been looking at is the idea of does telling stories affect how you see the storyteller? So, does it reflect back on the source of the message? And we have at least some preliminary evidence that people who tell stories, one of the cool things that that can do is make the audience perceive them as more warm. So, basically if you're asking me a question and I respond with a story, you think, "Okay, this person is warm and trustworthy." If I respond with statistics then you might be more likely to think, "Okay, this person is competent. They know what they're talking about."

Those two things are obviously not mutually exclusive. They can go together. But just the idea that what form you choose to communicate with can then reflect back on you as a source and a speaker, and may sort of have this additional influence on how persuasive you can be, I think is kind of an exciting one, especially because if you think about like sometimes some messages are harder to get across than others. So, one example is scientists in the U.S. People think, "Okay, they're very competent. They're very respected." But there's also this sort of stereotype of like, "Okay, they're kind of cold and distant."

And so, our thought is well, okay, maybe if you can get a little more storytelling into science communication, will that create a kind of human connection that will allow science communication to be more effective? Something like that.

Andy Luttrell:

Actually that... I know I said we were wrapping up, but it just reminded me of something, which is that forever in persuasion research, we've talked about source information. Like you said, is the source really credible? Are they really trustworthy? Are they biased? And has there been any work connecting that to narratives? Are people sensitive to who's producing these stories? Because you can sort of think like when a commercial comes on and it tells this really heart-wrenching story, and then it's from like a giant insurance company, you're kind of like, "Wait a minute." That sort of... Does that undo sort of that transportation? Maybe is that what it does? It takes people out of it. Versus if they go like, "Oh, I just... I trust this person. They're telling me a story." And it almost comes to the odd lack of difference between nonfiction and fiction stories in your work, so maybe

people just do not care about how factual or what the motivation of the story is, so long as they're invested in it they're along for the ride, and it's gonna sort of reframe the issue for them.

Do you have any sense of source information?

Melanie Green:

Yeah. That's a great question. So, I think it... This is not gonna be a satisfying answer. I think sometimes it matters and sometimes it doesn't. So, for instance, we did one set of studies where basically we had people read a story and then we told people afterwards like, "Oh, wait a second. This person was lying to you. They just made things up because they wanted to financially benefit from it." And you know, in that case people still... They still sympathized with the characters. It didn't seem to matter that much that the source was not telling them the truth and things like that. Which, as you said, kind of goes along with the really consistent finding that people just actually don't seem to care too much whether something's a fictional story or real story. As long as it's plausible, right? They can imagine that a real person did these things or had those experiences.

But kind of the counterexample to that is maybe a little more anecdotal. I'd suspect there's research on this, but I'm just not thinking of it off the top of my head, is again with political storytelling. So, if someone's a committed partisan on one side of the political spectrum, and then they hear a politician from the other side trying to tell a story, I think there's instantly gonna be this skepticism and so on, and so it's almost like kind of not being willing to step through that door, like okay, I know this person or I think this person's gonna try to manipulate me with this story, and so whatever the story is, I'm just not gonna allow myself to get engaged with it or those kinds of things.

So, I think there's gonna be some kinds of source effects. I think surprisingly, like probably to a greater extent than in more traditional more persuasive communications, people tend to ignore the external source because they're kind of focused on what you might call the internal sources. But like the characters and the events in the story are sort of more important than where that story came from, but I think there's certainly gonna be cases where that's not true, especially if it's a particularly disliked source or something like that.

But yeah, I think that's another area where additional research would be helpful.

Andy Luttrell:

Well, you can add that to your list.

Melanie Green:

Yeah, exactly.

Andy Luttrell:

Well, Melanie, thanks so much for taking the time to talk about this stuff. This was really interesting.

Melanie Green:

Oh, thanks so much for having me. This was a lot of fun.

Andy Luttrell:

All right, that'll do it for another episode of Opinion Science. Thank you so much to Dr. Melanie Green for sharing her work. To learn more about her and the research that we talked about, check out the show notes for all the links. To learn more about this podcast, open up your computer, fire up the web browser, and type OpinionSciencePodcast.com. You'll get taken right to it. It's the internet. It's amazing. Follow the show on Facebook or Twitter @OpinionSciPod and subscribe wherever you get podcasts. And wait for it. I'm gonna ask the thing I always ask. Log onto Apple Podcasts and leave a nice review of the show. It helps more people find out about it.

And as I mentioned earlier, you can learn more about the psychology of persuasion with a brand new audio course that I made for Knowable. It's more of my voice in your ears, but you'll get insight into all the ways social science has taught us about what sorts of messages actually change minds. You can go to Knowable, you know, like you're able to know something. Knowable.fyi. Or you know, just click on the link in the show notes. Okay, that's all for this time. See you back here in a couple weeks for more Opinion Science. Bye-bye.