

Facts and stories: Great stories undermine strong facts

August 19 2019

Some research shows facts are better received when presented on their own. Other studies show facts are more accepted when interwoven with stories; stories can help bridge emotional connections. If someone is trying to persuade or influence others, should they use a story or stick to the facts? According to research from social psychologists at Northwestern University, stories can increase the persuasiveness of weak facts, but actually decrease the persuasiveness of strong facts.

"Stories persuade, at least in part, by disrupting the ability to evaluate facts, rather than just biasing a person to think positively," says Rebecca Krause, who coauthored the paper with Derek Rucker.

The research appears in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, a publication of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology.

Prior psychological research on storytelling and persuasion demonstrated that stories led to more persuasion.

However, why stories were more persuasive was less clear. It could be that stories focused people on good aspects of a message and away from the negative ones. Alternatively, stories might have disrupted people's ability to process information in an elaborated manner. This distinction is important because these two accounts imply different predictions for when stories will be more or less persuasive.

To test this interplay between facts, stories, and persuasion, Krause and

Rucker had 397 U.S. adults evaluate a set of either all strong or all weak facts about a fictitious brand of cell phone called Moonstone. Half of the people read only facts about the phone, while the other half read a story about the phone that had the facts embedded within it. For a strong fact, they used "The phone can withstand a fall of up to 30 feet." For a weak fact, they used "The phone can withstand a fall of up to 3 feet."

Krause and Rucker found that when facts were weak, a story with the facts embedded within it led to greater persuasion than facts alone. But when facts were strong, the opposite effect occurred: facts alone led to more persuasion than a story with the facts embedded within it. This result suggests that stories don't just direct people away from weak information; they reduce people's general processing of information. As a consequence, stories help persuasion when facts are weak, but they hurt persuasion when facts are strong.

Krause replicated the first study, this time with 389 U.S. adults, and observed similar results.

A third study occurred in a lab setting, and changed the content. In the third experiment, 293 people read about a fictitious flu medicine, either on its own or embedded within a story, and were asked whether they would provide their email to receive more information. While people are generally protective of sharing their email, people's willingness to share that information varied in a manner similar to the first two studies.

Specifically, stories once again undermined the persuasive appeal of strong facts. In the absence of a story, 34% of participants agreed to provide their [email address](#) in response to strong facts. However, when these same strong facts were included in a story, only 18% of participants agreed to provide their email address.

Krause notes that avoiding stories isn't the message they are trying to

send.

"Knowing that stories may provide the most persuasive benefit to those with the least compelling arguments could be important given concerns about 'fake news.'" suggests Krause. "But this does not mean a story is indicative of weak facts. Rather, when you feel especially compelled by a great [story](#) you might want to give more thought and consideration to the facts to determine how good they are."

More information: Rebecca J. Krause et al, Strategic Storytelling: When Narratives Help Versus Hurt the Persuasive Power of Facts, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167219853845](#)

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

Citation: Facts and stories: Great stories undermine strong facts (2019, August 19) retrieved 23 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-08-facts-stories-great-undermine-strong.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.