1. Title of the project

(Dis)Trust in Stories: An empirical-narratological study of readers' response to unreliable narrators

2. Coordinators

Inge van de Ven (DCU)
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3. Project description

When we are reading or viewing stories, how do we know what sources, characters, and voices to trust? How do we know when we should be vigilant for the possibility of being misled? How do we determine when to read, listen, or view *with*, and when *against* the grain? And how could we use this knowledge to improve media literacy in the public sphere?

Stories are everywhere: not just in books of fiction, popular Netflix series, and newer forms of writing like fan fiction and Instagram captions, but also in politics and advertisements. Politicians 'spin' their stories to appeal to the public, on social media, people tell stories about their lives, and in literature, popular genres like autofiction and fan fiction blur the boundaries between literary fiction and memoir. Stories are important tools for making sense of our personal lives and the world we live in. Yet, because of this proliferation of often contradicting narratives across different media, deciding what sources and voices to trust and pay attention to, becomes an increasingly pressing matter. Especially since the last decades, we have seen a decrease in trust when it comes to former sources of authority such as mainstream journalistic media, scientists, and experts (Oreskes & Conway 2010). The question of truth seems to increasingly be replaced by the question 'who tells the most compelling story?'

Narrative fiction trains our capacity for the attribution of meaning and value, and for modularization: our capacity to discern nuances, degrees, and shades of verisimilitude and fictionality in information. Doubts concerning the reliability of narrative communications, or concerning the sincerity and competence of a narrator, are effective for triggering such reflections (Korthals Altes, 2015). Narratology, the study of narrative fiction across different media, offers an elaborate toolkit for analyzing discordant or conflicting narrative voices, unreliable narrators, ambiguity and irony, and 'conspiratorial' storylines. The attribution of trust is part of the dynamics of communication or of the distribution of information throughout a story.

In fiction, a narrator is generally considered unreliable when they deviate from the norms posed by the text or held by the author (Booth, 1961) or the reader (Nünning, 1999). The unreliability of a narrator can be detected based on textual (grammatical, stylistic, or historical mistakes; internal discrepancies) and paratextual elements. The reliability of a narrator can remain ambiguous (think of the governess in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*) or a narrator can go from reliable to unreliable and vice versa. Narrators further differ in terms of intentionality: some set out to deceive and manipulate; others aim to tell the truth, yet are deluded or misinformed themselves (for instance child narrators or narrators who are non-neurotypical, like in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*). Of course, no narrator can be *fully* reliable: any act of communication attributes meaning to events, selection, perspectivism, moral positioning, and genre conventions. We rather speak of scales of reliability, or a spectrum between the two extremes (Olson, 2003).

What remains to be researched is how actual readers/viewers respond to unreliability and reliability in narrative fiction. This knowledge could not only be valuable to increase our understanding of how trust in a narrator is

established, but also to better comprehend how people engage with narrative outside of fiction (think of fake news websites or podcasts that spread misinformation), and therefore be of use in media literacy education. Our project reviews and synthesizes narratological theories on reliability and unreliability, using them as the basis for an experiment where we will test how readers and viewers respond to different forms of narration by inducing them to adopt trusting and distrusting stances, and corresponding strategies of reading and viewing. Using eye-tracking, we will also research the role that attention plays in this process. The goal of our project is to determine which elements in narratives in different media inspire trusting and distrusting reading attitudes and procedures, and how these attitudes in turn affect attentional modulation, processing and interpretation.

RQ: How do readers and viewers of narrative fiction calibrate between trusting and distrusting attitudes in regard to narrative, and how do these affect their reading/viewing strategies and interpretations?

Sub-questions:

	Domain	Question	Method
S1	Media/textual characteristics	What affordances of the respective **media** under study inspire trust or distrust; what **textual and narrative** devices make a reader vigilant or trusting?	Literature review & Narratological analysis of text and image
S2	Personality	Which **individual traits** are likely to influence whether or not narratives/narrative voices will be perceived as credible? (E.g., age, education level, openness, socio-demographic profiles).	Literature review & Questionnaires
S3	Cognition	How do readers/viewers/listeners calibrate trusting and distrusting reading **attitudes** in reading (listening to/watching) narratives, what are the **modes of reading** (viewing etc.) corresponding to these attitudes?	Eye-tracking studies, interviews

Method

First, a literature review will be conducted, with a focus on narrative theories on (un)reliability (T1) and cognitive mechanisms that underlie vigilant, trusting, and distrusting reading/viewing (T2). The literature review will form the basis for the theoretical framework of a joint article that will result from this project.

We will then design an eye-tracking experiment, for which 40-50 participants will be recruited from the student pool of TSHD. They will be asked to fill out a questionnaire with general items for self-reporting their disposition from the General Trust Scale (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). Then, we will ask them to perform a reading and viewing task. For the experiment, we will select a short story and a film fragment that both contain elements of unreliable narration. Selection of the story and clip will be part of the tasks of the trainees, and will

be guided by the literature review. We will divide participants into two groups, one of which will be prompted to be vigilant and the other to be trusting. We will then track their eye-movements during reading and viewing, and subsequently use a questionnaire to test comprehension, recall, and interpretation.

We hypothesize that the readers who were prompted to maintain a vigilant, rather than a trusting attitude will have longer reading times, higher recall and recognition of textual elements, and better reproduction/reconstruction. Similar hypotheses hold for eye movements during video viewing. For both media, increased vigilance which causes narrative engagement is expected to elicit longer and fewer fixations (cf. Bruijs, 2013; Hasson, Landesman, Knappmeyer et al, 2008)

The trainees will have a chance to carry out original research in a multidisciplinary team, consisting of an expert in eye-tracking, a philosopher/psychologist, and a literary scholar with a background in narratology and attention in reading. The project will result in a joint publication by trainees and supervisors, in an interdisciplinary journal such as *New Media & Society*. The experiment will also serve as a pilot study for further research (e.g., Inge van de Ven's NWO VIDI proposal).

4. Project timeline

The focus of the project will be an empirical study in which participants will be presented with a literary short story and short video featuring unreliable narration. The methods employed to measure how readers calibrate trust and distrust and adopt reading strategies accordingly will include questionnaire instruments, textual and visual analysis, behavioral measures of cognitive processes (eye movements), and interviews.

The trainees conduct a literature review, set up an experimental study, and collect empirical data. They will also be asked to write a blog post reporting on their collaboration and findings, to be published on the website of the International Cognition and Culture Institute. They will report on the outcome of the project in an article, to be co-authored by the whole group.

Month	Trainee 1	Trainee 2	Milestone
Oct 2022	Literature review & theoretical framework: narrative theories on (un)reliability	Literature review & theoretical framework: cognitive science theories on mechanisms of vigilant, trusting, and distrusting reading/viewing	Literature review
	Applying approval from the ethics board		
Nov – Dec 2022	Experiment preparation: Selection of short stories	Experiment preparation	Set-up for eye-tracking experiment & interview questions
Jan 2022	Write a blog post for *Cognition & Culture* Recruit participants under student population		Blog post (publication 1)
Jan – Feb 2023	Conduct experiments, data collection		

Feb – April 2023	Data analysis	Processed and analyzed dataset
April – Aug 2023	Co-write an article presenting the results of the project, together with supervisors	Joint article (publication 2), to be submitted to *New Media & Society*

5. Research Trainee profile

We are looking for two trainees, both MA-level: one candidate from DCU/DFI, another from DCC/DCA. We especially invite candidates who enjoy working in collaboration with researchers from other fields, and who are interested in receiving multidisciplinary training.

The DCU/DFI candidate is expected to conduct a literature review and construct a theoretical framework synthesizing scholarly work on reliability in narrative media (both textual and visual). Based on this literature review, they select appropriate textual and audiovisual materials for the experiment. They assist trainee 2 in setting up and conducting the experiment. The ideal candidate has an interest in narratology, literary studies, new media, and/or social epistemology and philosophy of psychology. Experience with qualitative approaches like close reading and discourse analysis is required.

The DCA/DCC candidate is expected to take the lead with respect to the experimental part of the study (setting up the experiment, collecting and analyzing data). With trainee 1, they draft a literature review and formulate the theoretical framework, primarily focusing on studies in cognitive science on cognitive mechanisms that underlie vigilant, trusting, and distrusting reading/viewing attitudes. As a requirement, the candidate should show interest in cognitive science and a drive to become acquainted with lab techniques necessary to collect behavioral data. They should be proficient in performing statistical analyses using R.

In collaboration with the rest of the team, both trainees will write an article reporting on the outcome of this study and make it ready for publication.

Applications, including a motivation letter and a CV, should be sent to:
Inge van de Ven i.g.m.vdven@tilburguniversity.edu

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