

# Academia and storytelling are not incompatible – how to reduce the risks and gain control of your research narrative.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/08/27/academic-storytelling-risk-reduction/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/08/27/academic-storytelling-risk-reduction/)

8/27/2014

*Rigorous research and attention-grabbing storytelling are very different trades and it is clear there are professional and personal risks for academics looking to translate complex data into bite-size stories. But **Cheryl Brumley** argues the narrative arc and rigorous research are not inherently incompatible and steps can be taken to minimise the associated risks. By focusing on new audiences and by maintaining control of media relationships, academics will be better placed to mitigate these risks.*



Is storytelling a risky venture? In academia, where reductionism is the dirtiest word of them all, the answer is a resounding yes. In my job for the LSE Public Policy Group blogs, I take weighty academic subjects and distill them through consumable mediums like [podcasts and videos](#). As someone who must find that narrative arc in academic research through a process of interviewing, scripting, editing, and sound design, I am a primary witness to an academic's post-interview trepidation as they consider how a single misstep could affect their career. Before I've even had time to wrap-up my microphone leads, I am hit with a barrage of anxious questioning:

- *How will you edit this? I mean like bring me through the steps. One. By. One.*
- *When you do the narration could you steer clear of superlatives: best, better, ever, first, only? In fact, could you ban them from your lexicon altogether? Thanks.*
- *Could I re-record that bit where a problematic term fell from my mouth in a nervous stupor before I'm publicly shamed and ridiculed? Please? Please?*

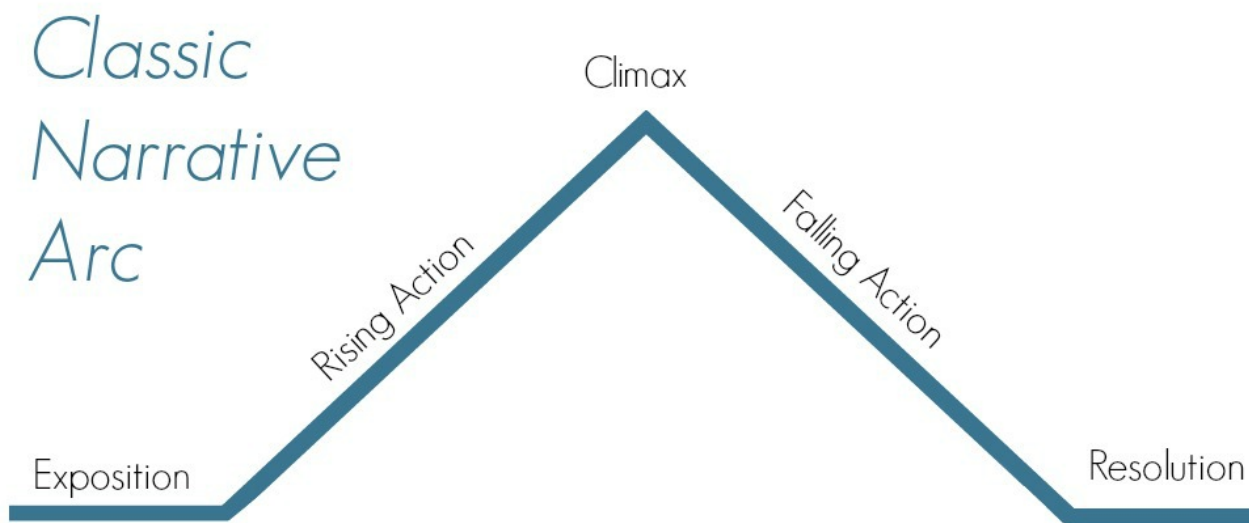
So what's going on here? Why does any sort of media involvement strike at the heart of an academic's worst fears? Is it that these two worlds – the attention-grabbing, high-impact world of stories and the non-linear, complex haze that is academic research – are in fact, diametrically opposed? Certainly not, but it's important to recognise that their differences are stark enough to warrant the lip quiver of any tight-lipped academic. Mistakes made when communicating research to the wider world make one vulnerable to undue critique or worse, opprobrium.



**Conflict Narrative. Image credit: N.C. Wyeth – The Boy's King Arthur (Wikimedia, Public Domain)**

Why should anyone bother turning their research into a pithy narrative if the risks to their reputation are so great? Well, quite simply because it's too risky not to. Silo-ing the great work that academics do within the hallowed, inherently exclusive institutions is a disservice to the public and also, to one's own research. With the world of academia becoming increasingly digital, it is now more important than ever that these very different methods of communication, find a happy meeting place.

Let's consider the classic narrative arc:

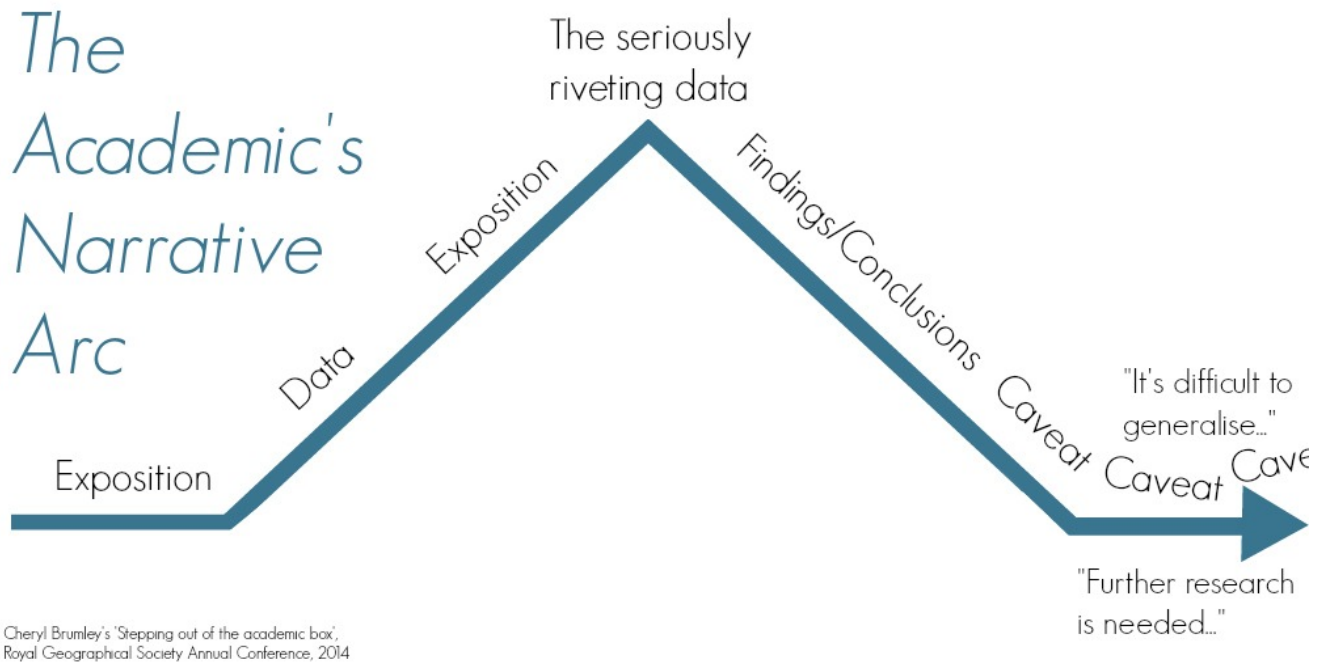


Cheryl Brumley's 'Stepping out of the academic box'  
Geographical Society Annual Conference, 2014

Have you ever been so engrossed in a story that you forgot about your pasta sitting on the hob, that's now well past al dente? You can thank the classic narrative arc for that. It may be an overused formula and you may think it's

simplistic, but you've been so engrossed in that boxed-set to fully intellectualise those concerns.

What might that arc look like in the non-linear world of academia then?



As expected it reads like the "Tales of the Caveat". Academic work is far less linear, and accounts for every conceivable variable which may disprove one's thesis. This becomes a problem as academic works move into the public sphere: by accounting for and recognising all the various complexities of human existence, you can overwhelm and lose your audience.

As an academic work moves from its traditional forms to a snappier, shorter, blog post, podcast, or news item, how does one mitigate the risk of reductionism?

### Focus on the smaller picture

You must accept that details important to you, and to your colleagues, may not resonate with other people. Is there anything in your research which may though? When considering this question, be honest with yourself, and try to embody someone else who hasn't spent years toiling over your niche subject area. You know, someone like any one of those other 7 billion people on the planet. Once you find that potential point of connection, use it to hammer home a specific and illustrative point.

For example, I worked on [a podcast for the LSE Review of Books](#) with Professor History and Philosophy of Economics, Mary Morgan. Her book, *The World in a Model: How Economists' Work and Think* tracks how economics went from a discipline based on words to one based on mathematical models. Instead of trying to summarise her research in a ten minute podcast sequence, I honed in on a single story centring around the opera *Tosca*. This idea came from a paragraph in the book on how *Tosca* could be viewed in light of the prisoner's dilemma. Not only did I relate the story of two anonymous prisoners to a woman weighing options between sex and murder (two classic attention-grabbing subjects) but I used this smaller picture to make economic modelling more accessible and fun.

Resist the temptation of covering too much of your research. Don't get bogged down in the details. Find that central image that people can connect with.

### Talking to the media? Do your research first

When dealing with reporters and producers, academics often feel like the more vulnerable party. You say your piece and then you are at the whim of a rushed reporter and editor who then use *your* words to further their *own* ends. I have talked to several academics who told me that they were hesitant to cooperate with journalists because they've been wronged in the past. Being misquoted or misidentified is common (check out our [Audible Impact podcast](#) where numbers and digits specialist, Sarah Wiseman, was simplistically referred to as 'a scientist' by repeat offender *The Daily Mail*) and having your work stood alongside a rather dubious subject or guest is another bugbear.

Misrepresentation in broadcasts are especially personal. When a person's voice, through a series of edits, conveys a message they didn't intend, it becomes that much harder to put distance between yourself and those statements. Your voice is assumed to be a more authentic representation of yourself than the mere printed word. This misrepresentation can be a mental setback especially for early career researchers.

Trying to gain control of your narrative when it is effectively in the hands of someone else is a trickier exercise than if you were to be doing a podcast or blog post yourself. The first thing is to be clear about your message. Always ask if you can receive questions ahead of time so that you can give considered responses. Ask also who else the journalist is planning to speak to. You might then gain a clearer picture of how they are planning to shape a story around your soundbites.

Next, throw journalists a bone by being definitive about what can be found in your data. I was once in a training session for early career researchers looking to engage more with reporters, editors and producers. One editor of a newspaper's comment section said he couldn't possibly stomach another academic editorial ending in "It remains to be seen". When you only have preliminary research findings or don't have that publishing history behind you, this can seem a risky and daunting task. Definitive statements leave you vulnerable to critique, but they are necessary for media exposure.

### **The Exposure/Distortion Trade-Off**

Audiences dictate everything in journalism. *Who cares?* and *Why now?* are questions every journalist must have an answer for before pitching an idea. Do your background research first on the publication or the tv or radio show that has asked for your involvement. What aspect of your research would their audience care about and why now?

Chances are the wider the audience a publication or show has, and the more potential for exposure (something that could be essential for catapulting your career), the greater risk that your words and research will be distorted to further a more reductionist end. This a trade-off that becomes less stark with practice. If you're media-anxious, talk to smaller publications that have specialist audiences first and then work your way up to the media giants.

### **Could you give that to me in 140 characters or less?**

What about social media? How do you further reduce your research narrative to a handful of characters as is the case with Twitter? The speed, informality and lack of support offered by universities keeps many academics off the platform. With university press offices none-the-wiser about handling Twitter "storms", the reputational risks for using the platform may seem insurmountable.

Additionally, critiques of women online can easily [escalate into sexist and misogynistic abuse](#). Rosie Campbell and Sarah Childs, feminist academics active on Twitter, agree the risks are great, but [the potential to reach wider audiences has kept them engaged online](#). "We think social media can be risky for women and for feminists because the anonymity frequently permits hostile interventions," they told me. However, this is a risk they choose to take because as they said, "There are also significant opportunities for new voices to disrupt debates, and for disseminate [ideas] to those whom we normally don't speak to."

The risks that come with communicating your research to wide audiences are great. Rigorous researching and attention-grabbing storytelling are very different trades. However, by finding that point of connection in your research and by maintaining control of your media relationships, you will be better placed at mitigating those risks.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

## **About the Author**

**Cheryl Brumley** is Multimedia Editor for the LSE Public Policy Group blogs. Cheryl joined the PPG in January 2012 and is a graduate from the LSE with an MSc in Theory and History of International Relations. Cheryl is also a freelance radio reporter and producer and has worked for the BBC World Service radio programmes, *The Forum* and *The World*. She tweets [@cherylbrumley](#)

- Copyright © The Author (or The Authors) - Unless otherwise stated, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Unported 3.0 License.