June episode

[00:00:00] **Jim Phelan:** This is Jim Phelan, director of Project Narrative at the Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative Podcast. In a typical episode, a narrative theorist selects a short story to read and discuss with me or another host. Today's episode will be a little different because my guest, Paul Dawson, wants to engage in a meta discussion about the term narrative itself with special attention to the multiple ways.

[00:00:28] **Jim Phelan:** It has come to be used in public discourse, especially but not exclusively in public discourse about politics. Paul will soon give us a few short narratives to consider, but these narratives will function for us more as illustrations of what he sees happening with the term than as aesthetic objects whose craft is worthy of close study and analysis.

[00:00:52] **Jim Phelan:** Paul Dawson is Associate Professor in the School of the Arts and Media at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. Paul currently serves as President of the International Society for the Study of Narrative. A poet, as well as a narrative theorist, Paul is the author of five books: *Creative Writing in the New Humanities* (2005), *Imagining Winter*, which is his first book of poems (2006). *The Return of Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-first Century Fiction* (2013), and the recently released *The Story of Fictional Truth: Realism from the Death to the Rise of the Novel* (2023). In 2024, his new book of poetry will appear. In addition, Paul and Maria Mäkelä have co-edited the Rutledge Companion to Narrative Theory, which just came out last year.

[00:01:51] **Jim Phelan:** Paul's second poetry collection, I should mention, the title is *Lines of Desire*. So welcome Paul to the Project Narrative podcast. Paul, I suggest we begin by telling by you, you're telling our listeners about some of your research on the proliferation of the term narrative and public discourse.

[00:02:10] **Jim Phelan:** And of course, feel free to make any other opening remarks you'd like over to you.

[00:02:15] **Paul Dawson:** Thanks for inviting me, Jim. Uh, this is a great venture. What I thought I'd do is start by just giving you three or four quotes from newspapers as a way to kind of frame what I wanted to discuss and give you a bit of a sense of what I've been researching before we launch into things.

[00:02:28] **Paul Dawson:** So the first quote is from Politico, November, 2021. “President Joe Biden has spent months watching his poll numbers sink as the economy appear to be losing altitude throughout the fall. That narrative may have changed Friday.” Okay. Here's a quote from the Sydney Morning Herald, December, 2021. “But despite a persistent narrative that omicron may be milder than previous strains, scientists say they don't actually know this yet.”

[00:02:58] **Paul Dawson:** Here's one for the New York Times, February, 2020, “Asked whether Mr. Trump had been emboldened since his acquittal, Mr. Conen dismissed the idea as ‘a narrative.’ Declining to elaborate as he disappeared into a committee room.” And one final brief quote from New York Times, also February 2020. “Beijing is doing everything it can to take back the narrative.”

[00:03:23] **Paul Dawson:** Okay, so, when I read these quotes in newspapers, I asked myself, where is the narrative? How is that a narrative? What even is a narrative? And what is the narrative? So last couple of years I've got a bit of funding from my university and with, with the help of two fantastic research assistants Eva, Kelly, and Zepi must, I've basically been trying to track usage of the word narrative itself in news media.

[00:03:45] **Paul Dawson:** Okay. Through the fact database in particular, I've been focusing on five major US daily newspapers, New York Times, the Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, and the New York Post. But there's a few little things to point out before we start to kinda set the scene. It's clear there's been a massive increase in the use of the word narrative in news media from around 2010.

[00:04:10] **Paul Dawson:** If you look at the trajectory, say from the year 2000 to now, it's about a 5000% increase in the percentage of you used the word narrative. From 2010, if we focus on just domestic politics and international relations, 0.02% of articles use the word narrative. By 2022, 2% of articles use the word narrative.

[00:04:33] **Paul Dawson:** This is huge. So there's clearly, there's a, there's an increase in use. What I find striking that I don't quite have a reason, to explain it, is that overwhelmingly though the word is used most frequently of these five major dailies by two of the newspapers. That's New York Times and Washington Post.

[00:04:50] **Paul Dawson:** What happened to me, the two newspapers that according to all sides, media, media bias rating lean left what others might call the liberal media. So for instance, in the year 2020,

[00:05:01] **Jim Phelan:** you don't think, you don't think this means that these, newspapers are hiring narratologists though.

[00:05:06] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah, no. I know they have quoted narratologists.

[00:05:08] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Sorry, I couldn't resist. But yeah, keep, keep going.

[00:05:12] **Paul Dawson:** I think it's certain journalists. I have a ponant for the word as well, which may increase it. Ok. It's usage. So 2020, for instance, you know about nine and half thousand. The word narrative used about nine times and seven times of those were from two newspapers, sorry, Washington Post, New York Times, and only.

[00:05:34] **Paul Dawson:** So then you go to the other end of the spectrum, so to speak, New York Post only 179 times. That's huge.

[00:05:41] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Wow. Yeah,

[00:05:42] **Paul Dawson:** yeah, yeah. Another thing I noticed, which is worth pointing out is that, Certain common phrases become attached to particular ongoing stories. So in 2020, which I've been focusing on “control the narrative,” which we'll talk about later was used most frequently in reportage of Covid-19 and particularly China's response to it.

[00:06:00] **Paul Dawson:** Uh, whereas “false narrative” was used most frequently in relation to Trump's assertion that the election was stolen. Yeah. one brief thing I point before we start also, is that. There's such a huge semantic range attached to the word narrative. Okay. Right. Have little, little to do with storytelling per se, more to do with say, referential claims and epistemological assumptions.

[00:06:24] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:06:25] **Paul Dawson:** So really what I'm interested in, in thinking about why we are relying on narrative rhetoric so much and in particular when it comes to politics and international relations, why it has dominated both political campaigning and news media reportage.

[00:06:39] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Okay. Terrific. And you could see some of that semantic range in those quotes, I think that, that you started with.

[00:06:46] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, exactly. Yeah. No. Yeah. So, yeah. Okay. All right. Well, maybe we could, at least start out with a particular case study. There's a, a short, well-known statement that, you know, lots of people have labeled a narrative. On November 8th, 2020, the election the night of the presidential election, Donald Trump, uh, or the descendants quote, “frankly, we did win this election.”

[00:07:10] **Jim Phelan:** I. Right. So let's, let's talk about that as a narrative. In what sense would we say that's a narrative? Any reason why we might wanna contest that label?

[00:07:21] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah. Well that's very interesting. I mean, for instance, I personally would go, well, that's an assertion. That's a statement. Yeah. But if, if we as narratologists would wanna say, “what makes it a narrative?” we would say, it refers to an event, and we can mobilize a range of narratological definitions to justify that.

[00:07:38] **Paul Dawson:** Right.

[00:07:39] **Jim Phelan:** So the representation of a single event, that's an narrative or one or more events, right? That constitutes a, a narrative representation and eventhood somehow is seen as core to the idea of, of, of a narrative. Okay. Yeah. Yeah. But then the, we have this “frankly” thing, right, that opening.

[00:07:58] **Jim Phelan:** Right. Which maybe is behind your saying, well less of a narrative and more of a statement or a claim. Is that Yes, it's

[00:08:07] **Paul Dawson:** very interesting. ‘Cause the sentence that precedes that is, I think it was something like, we were about to win this election. Frankly, we did win this election. Yeah. So, you know, his whole story was, I was just watching the numbers coming in.

[00:08:19] **Paul Dawson:** Clearly we had to win and all of a sudden those pesky mailin ballots started be counted and something happened. Yeah. But really he did win. So that I think is really kind, fascinating. Because when when this was reported over the next couple months the most common phrase attached to this was,

[00:08:38] **Paul Dawson:** “false narrative.” Right? Right. So, if you look at the number of times “false narrative” is used over the years there's quite a spike from around 2019 to 2020 in the terms number of times used. Mm-hmm. And in 2020 very, very often. There's a spike in August. Which is around, you know, time that there was concern about mailing ballast being raised by Republicans.

[00:09:01] **Paul Dawson:** Right, right. And november 2020, there's the biggest spike, which is clearly when, you know, the election was held and every time New York Times, New York Times or Washington Post would report on the, the election results and the outcome, they would refer to Trump’s “false narrative.” Right. That, that phrase, which has become so common and familiar now- “frankly, we did when this election” -was considered a false narrative. What I find interesting is that like the, what one, one thing interesting about the way that were narrative used in news media is that there's always a synonym that you can find in a, a sentence before or after it. And the most common synonym you could find with this is “conspiracy theory.”

[00:09:43] **Paul Dawson:** Okay. Yeah. So November 9th, New York Times, yeah, sorry. New York Times reported about Republicans “declining to challenge the false narrative that it was stolen from him.” December 14, they say “Trump's false narrative was stolen election.” And, and each time they, they then would talk about his conspiracy theory.

[00:10:03] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah. So the false narrative there then is not so much A narrative in the way that we understand it. Right. We should say representation of events, but more in sense like what we master plot or cultural narrative where the stolen election becomes a kinda shorthand for this whole interpretive framework.

[00:10:20] **Paul Dawson:** Right. Right. The elaboration of conspiracy theory, which conspiracy theories are typically defined as counter narratives as well. Yeah.

[00:10:28] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. So there's a couple lines to go from there. I think one, one is the one that you've nicely articulated there. So we go the idea of, okay, false narrative. And then to conspiracy theory.

[00:10:43] **Jim Phelan:** The other line though, would be go back to the idea of “we did win the election,” right? Which is, and we could say, okay, the representation of an event and then what's being negotiated is the truth-status of that narrative, right? So, So the question of to some degree we give up, we don't have to sort of fret over it.

[00:11:08] **Jim Phelan:** Well, is it a narrative or not? And the attention is that, well, what's its truth-status? And then we have the Post and the Times. Continually saying it's, it's true status is that it's false. Right? And then we'd have Trump on the other side saying that it's true. I wonder the two about you have any thoughts on just sort of the, the.

[00:11:34] **Jim Phelan:** Phrasing, right? So we say “the false narrative of the stolen election,” right? Then the stolen election becomes a shorthand, right? But it's a shorthand, which again, maybe can go, you know, either way as far as true status, right? So reiterating the stolen election as a shorthand also perpetuates the idea that, well, maybe the election was stolen even by people who are trying to say it wasn't, right.

[00:12:06] **Jim Phelan:** So there's something about the formulation of one's position in relationship to this shorthand that, yeah. It's fascinating. Yeah. Maybe works against the idea that it's false. Yeah.

[00:12:19] **Paul Dawson:** Because I, I think, I think it's a good point. When you say, rather than talking what you know, is it a narrative or what makes it a narrative?

[00:12:26] **Paul Dawson:** What's its truth-status? And I think that's the most relevant approach to the way the term is used in news media. ‘Cause it's less about storytelling than is about Yes. What, what is the status of a claim. Exactly. Um, and as we know, a narrative can be a fictional narrative or nonfictional narrative.

[00:12:42] **Paul Dawson:** So the very fact that this claim, this assertion we did when the election is referred to as a narrative interesting in and of itself, right. But to then say, it also has to be called a “false narrative.” Just so everyone knows, it actually is not true. The election is not stolen. I think you're right that the false narrative becomes a much larger thing than simply an assertion made on the night.

[00:13:04] **Paul Dawson:** It becomes Yes, this kinda shorthand which becomes a kinda framework For thinking about a whole range of activities and assumptions about the election itself. Yeah, right. What

[00:13:16] **Jim Phelan:** encompasses a lot. Yeah, go ahead.

[00:13:18] **Paul Dawson:** It does. Yeah, yeah, yeah. For instance, as early as June the Washington Post for instance, was reporting on a Republican party video.

[00:13:27] **Paul Dawson:** Here's a quote from June 24, Washington Post where it says, “the video taught us the facts to create a narrative of an election stolen.” They also quoted Joe Biden the Washington Post did the middle of the year saying he's afraid that Trump is gonna claim that, the election's about be stolen. But this is a very prescient, line from Washington Post in November the 10th, where the writer is saying that Trump's claims about election fraud are less about winning the 2020 election.

[00:13:56] **Paul Dawson:** Mm-hmm. Than about “creating a narrative that the presidency was stolen and setting up a campaign to reclaim it in four years.” Yeah. So what's going on there is to say, okay, Trump makes his assertion. Yeah. It's called a false narrative, but what it's doing is setting up essentially a campaign narrative.

[00:14:16] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah. Right. And yeah, there's that resonance of stolen election, as you said, it keeps getting repeated. It gets to attached, it gets attached to the phrase false narrative. It's called a conspiracy theory, but at the same time, yeah, it just seeps into public discourse, as you said, as something that encapsulates all these ways of thinking about.

[00:14:35] **Paul Dawson:** Voting habits, voting systems, partisan politics, so on and so forth,

[00:14:39] **Jim Phelan:** right? So as a strategy, whether it's consciously thought out or not, it, it has this, this kind of effect of, on the one hand, the, overt claim is: okay, 2020 was stolen from me. But even if that, he is not gonna go anywhere with that as far as overturning.

[00:15:00] **Jim Phelan:** It still is seeding and contributing to a kind of ongoing narrative that he's gonna use in 2024.

[00:15:09] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah, exactly. Becomes a, becomes a narrative, not simply an assertion by virtue of the fact that it can accommodate ongoing events. Yeah. And be reported as such.

[00:15:19] **Jim Phelan:** Exactly, yeah. And news, false

[00:15:20] **Paul Dawson:** A false narrative is not simply a statement.

[00:15:22] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Right. Okay. Yeah. So I think you know, one of the things that, that you quoted was this phrase, “the narrative,” and I think we want to talk a little bit more about that. But maybe before we get to that, pick up on what you were saying about sort of the range of meanings that the term seems to have accrued in, in these usages in the you know, popular press.

[00:15:47] **Jim Phelan:** So Do you want, what, what are some of the things on the list? Yeah, yeah,

[00:15:53] **Paul Dawson:** yeah, yeah. I mean, what is interesting, so like what I would do is, you know, I would just track the number of times the word is used and then, you know, look at the articles and there's always what I call a synonym chain, where you find the word in the article.

[00:16:07] **Paul Dawson:** When you read the article. At some point there's always substitute for the word narrative. So in another sentence and some of those would be “opinion,” “assertion,” “viewpoint,” “message,” “perspective,” “discourse,” “argument,” “agenda,” “fiction,” “lie,” “falsehood,” “conspiracy theory.” There's such a huge range Yeah. That reallys isn’t much to do with storytelling.

[00:16:33] **Paul Dawson:** Right, right. That, that's why, goes back to what you were saying, Jim, about is it, is it or is it not a narrative? Can we think more about truth-claims? I think those very things from message to assertion opinion or the way to conspiracy theory are all about what is the truth-status.

[00:16:49] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right. And the idea, yeah. that one quote you have, well, “that's a narrative” that becomes a way to dismiss it. Right? It's like, yeah, exactly. You know, that's, we don't have to pay attention to that. It's just. You know, some something made up or whatever. It doesn't know.

[00:17:07] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah, and if you go back to the quote, it says he, John Cornyn the US Senator, and it says he dismissed the idea as a narrative.

[00:17:12] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah. Yeah. So the reporter is saying, what's, whatever the idea that Trump has been emboldened, that is a narrative. Yeah. So suddenly an idea becomes a narrative, but also, as you said, it becomes dismissed because it's only a narrative. Right. It doesn't have truth-status. Right, *right, right. Um,*

[00:17:28] **Jim Phelan:** right.

[00:17:29] **Jim Phelan:** So then me, no, you're going then I'll go.

[00:17:33] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah. Just to me, just cuz I keep going to my asking myself why. Why use narrative when you can just say opinion, assertion, argument, viewpoint, whatever. Yeah. Right. But I think it cause truth is so contested in public discourse at the moment, right? Yeah. Right. That narrative enables somehow it's very range.

[00:17:53] **Paul Dawson:** Is what enables the, the kinda referential uncertainty and epistemological doubt. Yeah. Uh, that is attached to so much public debate at the moment. Right. So one sense, cause it's a little bit loose cause it can refer to so many other things. But another sense I think that's why it is used so often Cause it can Right.

[00:18:10] **Paul Dawson:** Is not attached to something.

[00:18:12] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, right. It, it provides a purchase for just about everybody with their different epistemological assumptions and so on. Yeah, yeah, exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So, from maybe a narrative theory kind of perspective, I mean, the question is once we see these phenomena, These phenomena that you've nicely laid out.

[00:18:29] **Jim Phelan:** The question arises, well, what's a narratologist to do in, in the face of all this? Right? You know, should we step in and try to police this and say, no, no. We know what narrative is and here's the definition and everybody should quote it and salute, or do we just step back and say, well, This is what's happening.

[00:18:48] **Jim Phelan:** We're just gonna describe it and sort of try to stay out of the fray as we give our account of it. Or is there some way in which we can sort of bring to bear things we know about narrative and discourse and the way these things work, and maybe, you know, at least educate others of who are observing this or maybe even have some kind of intervention.

[00:19:14] **Jim Phelan:** So I mean, in a way, you, you've got a great problem and you've, you've described it really well, and it's multifaceted, and now the question is, all right, well, what do we do? What is, a narratologist to do? What are your thoughts? It's very interesting.

[00:19:25] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, yeah, I mean, I guess, what is a narratologist?

[00:19:30] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah,

[00:19:31] **Paul Dawson:** it is true that my initial response when I read these is be annoyed mm-hmm. To say that's not a narrative. Why using the word that way? Yeah. And I think we can fall into the trap of being territorial and saying, well, look, we're the experts, we're the ivory tower. We know these meetings. We have these definitions. There's not the definitions. That, to me, is probably the least productive line to take because it's, it's not really gonna achieve anything.

[00:19:57] **Paul Dawson:** Okay. Yeah.

[00:19:58] **Jim Phelan:** End. Exactly. We'll end up talking to ourselves.

[00:20:01] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah. Okay. Another approach to say, well, okay, here's an opportunity. We are experts because, we do study narrative and we kinda research it and publish it and publish on it. So maybe we can see ourselves not as ivory tower academics, but as participants in public discourse.

[00:20:18] **Paul Dawson:** Mm-hmm. And that we can bring to be our expertise as public intellectuals. So that is certainly a line of inquiry that my colleague Maria Mäkelä takes

[00:20:25] **Paul Dawson:** Where she wants to kind of show that if you draw on narrative theory mm-hmm. she'll drop on anything from, concept of experientiality, from Fludernik and David Herman. Mm-hmm. Uh, through to contemporary theories about virality to engage with this. And I think that that's also really interesting to say that we can engage with this range of meetings and try to kind of Understand and bring to bear our expertise.

[00:20:51] **Paul Dawson:** Another sense, to me, that's also a way of just saying, oh look, you know we, we, we are there to kind of show how people need to understand things better. And I go, that's, that's fine. But by the same token, What is interesting is that why do we have any authority whatsoever of the term narrative, you know, if it's being used that way, fine.

[00:21:12] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah. Yeah. You know? Yeah. And I think that I first of all just wanna know the range of ways it's being used and I'm thinking about why it is being used. Yeah. Okay. And if we go, why is it being used in this way? That might be some way. Providing some context rather than saying, we should be using it this way or that way.

[00:21:28] **Paul Dawson:** Right. At least that's what I'm thinking at the moment anyway.

[00:21:30] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. And then it can go in two directions. Right. So on one hand it can inform the way we think about narrative. We should say, well maybe, given that it's being used all this way, we need to maybe reconceive things rather than sort of say, we already know what it is and we're gonna stick to it and try to impose that.

[00:21:46] **Jim Phelan:** And, but then also, as you were saying, Bring what we know, the kind of expertise to these new uses and this sort of range that it has and, and these different kinds of discourses. So, yeah. Well, well, that makes a lot of sense. I mean, the only other, one

[00:22:03] **Paul Dawson:** of things interesting though, Jim, that Yeah.

[00:22:04] **Paul Dawson:** there's the rule, high degree reflexivity. About the way the word narrative is used in news media. So I mean, it's not like they don't have theoretical assumptions themselves. Exactly. So this is part of what, you know, Maria will call the contemporary boom and instrumental storytelling. Mm-hmm. Where, you the narrative turn in the academy used a whole range of different theories way beyond narratology and literary theory.

[00:22:26] **Paul Dawson:** Right. Right. About narrative that has become popularized and instrumentalized in public discourse from politics through to advertising. And so when people do use the word narrative it is backed up by hmm. You know, maybe kind of populous and demonic, but there's still theories, narrative. Mm-hmm. Which in some way came from the academy as well.

[00:22:44] **Paul Dawson:** So again, there's that kind of territorial aspect to it. You know, do we say, oh, no. We unleash this, now we need to reign it.

[00:22:52] **Jim Phelan:** Reign it in or something. Exactly. Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. I just, one quick co comment when you said well, what's a narratologist? I was saying, oh, now our, our, your, your work is sort of gonna raise an identity crisis for all of us.

[00:23:06] **Jim Phelan:** What's but well, presumably we'll get over that. I want to pick up on something that, a thread that we, started to weave before, which is the idea of the, the, the phrase, “the narrative.” And I, I think you've, you noticed the difference between the definite articles. So “the narrative” is one thing and “a narrative” is another.

[00:23:31] **Jim Phelan:** Maybe you could expand on, those, uh, observations. Yeah.

[00:23:36] **Paul Dawson:** It is fascinating. Well, here's a quote. This is from Kevin Roost in the New York Times 26th, September 2019. Okay. “If Democrats want their impeachment narratives to stick, they will need to do a better job of controlling the online battleground, where partisan opportunists jockey to set the narrative in real time and undermine the opposing side.”

[00:24:00] **Paul Dawson:** So something about our narrative and their narrative, which is a kinda dynamic, which I find fascinating. So I get the sense that when, when the phrase the narrative is used in news media, it's not attached to a particular teller or it is not a a textual artifact. It's not a perspective associated with a particular agent, it's almost a pseudonym for the, for the daily news cycle.

[00:24:25] **Paul Dawson:** Mm-hmm. Which becomes in itself almost a metonym for public opinion. The idea is that the narrative is kinda rolling tide of opinion. Yeah. Uh, that just emerges outta news, media, social media, online discussion. Mm-hmm. And it becomes in some sense a prevailing consensus. Right. But “a narrative” then is something far more strategic and designed and associated with particular agents.

[00:24:50] **Paul Dawson:** Okay. So if you look at, say, some of the verbs used that would say Trump or the Republicans or Democrats would create/spin/craft *a* narrative. Okay. Yeah. And it's designed to say, okay, this is our perspective on events. If we get that out there in the public sphere, That might eventually assume the status of *the* narrative, which is not attached to a tiller.

[00:25:14] **Paul Dawson:** That's what I find fascinating. So in this quote about the Democrats have their impeachment narrative, so that's how, yeah. They wanna frame our perspective on Trump's impeachment. But that narrative, a democrat narrative, will get nowhere unless it becomes *the* narrative in the online battleground. Right.

[00:25:34] **Paul Dawson:** And the fact that used the phrase “controlling the online battleground” goes back to this recurring phrase, “control the narrative.” Yeah. What is the narrative? It's not a thing, it's not definite articles, not not an object, it's just this. Consensus opinion that somehow no one has any control over. Right? Yeah.

[00:25:52] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah.

[00:25:52] **Jim Phelan:** So there, there was an interesting paradox there, I think in the sense that as you say, it's, it's a kind of consensus opinion. And in that sense it's sort of like the product, right? So, And in that quote, right, the Democrats wanting to control the impeachment narrative, they want that product to stick right, to, to be a fixed kind of thing, right?

[00:26:15] **Jim Phelan:** That's what controlling means, right? And yet as you point out, it changes. I mean, that is, The, the idea of control suggests that this won't stay still. Right? It's, as you say, the ongoing, unrolling tide of public opinion, which suggests process. So there's that interesting paradox between, on the one hand, “the narrative” as this fixed thing and the actual processes by which, people try to control it, acknowledging that it's not fixed.

[00:26:47] **Jim Phelan:** So that's, you know, yeah,

[00:26:48] **Paul Dawson:** I agree. Fascinating. Just, yeah, the quote, easy note, sit the narrative in real time, which gives us a, a sense of that temporality. Right, right. And another common phrase is of course, change. Change the narrative. In the 24 hour news cycle, this is always opinions and something's gonna emerge as the, the, the thing that sticks.

[00:27:10] **Paul Dawson:** Right, right, right. Said it has to be set, but it's ongoing. Right. Whereas a narrative is designed specifically to, to kind of seed. Public opinion to become *the* narrative

[00:27:21] **Jim Phelan:** right, but a narrative or in a traditional sense as opposed to the narrative, right? We think about that as a process. The beginning, middle, and end, whereas *the* narrative is all about the end or the conclusion or you know, the summary or whatever it is, right?

[00:27:38] **Jim Phelan:** So that, that's also, I mean, the, the definite articles are doing a lot of, a lot of work to differentiate.

[00:27:44] **Paul Dawson:** They're doing some weird stuff that, that true *the* narrative has to be a particular thing. But it's not. Whereas *a* narrative could be anything but this end, it means something specific. It means that design. Framework. So yeah, it, it's doing a lot of weird stuff.

[00:27:58] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah.

[00:27:58] **Jim Phelan:** And your, sometimes it, your, your point about the difference too between *the* narrative as sort of floating sort of above individual agents and *a* narrative as very much, involved with agents, actors, tellers, and you know, who's telling it about whom and to whom, and all that. I mean, that's, that's also another significant difference in terms of the way in which these two terms that look so close, *the* narrative and *a* narrative, are actually capturing very different concepts.

[00:28:33] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah, definitely different. like I said, I think they, they operate in tandem to try to I mean, I dunno if they do this intentionally. Yeah. But they do operate in tandem to, in some way describe a dynamic. Okay, so I wrote, there's a fascinating book by Andrew Chadwick called *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (2017).

[00:28:51] **Paul Dawson:** Ok. And he, he has this idea that the hybrid media system today is essentially you know, this legacy broadcast media and contemporary, you know mm-hmm. Social media that are kind of combined, but he has his term, which he calls “the political information cycle.” Okay. And this is his definition.

[00:29:08] **Paul Dawson:** He says, “Political communication now occurs in complex hybrid assemblages of older and newer media as a diverse array of actors ranging from large professional news organizations to elite politicians to engage citizens, participate in an incessant struggle to shape public discourse and define the political agenda.”

[00:29:30] **Paul Dawson:** Mm-hmm. To me, that incessant struggle to shape public discourse is what the news media calls Controlling the narrative. The narrative. Exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So in other words, there's a kind of, it's not just that the term narratives become fashionable and they'll keep using it, and that we think about public debate about competing narratives.

[00:29:47] **Paul Dawson:** This is that structurally the, these hybrid media system, yeah. Almost forces us to operate in this way, and that narrative way to make sense of that struggle. Have to control the narrative.

[00:30:03] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, that's, that's nice. And I think it, yeah, his description sort of nicely compliments or, elaborates on the kinds of things that you've been saying.

[00:30:12] **Jim Phelan:** So, so that's very helpful.

[00:30:13] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah. He doesn't talk about narrative, but to me, I can say that's what news media kind of means when I talk about it.

[00:30:17] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, exactly. Right, right. And then I think too, everything you've said, also helps understand like this, Just go back to the point that controlling the narrative and changing the narrative are you know, so important, right?

[00:30:32] **Jim Phelan:** So the struggle, struggle to have the control the narrative, make it stay fixed, or struggle to control the narrative by changing it, and then have the new thing be, be fixed. And then that process just continues, as events unfold and people respond and so on. So there's another, another element of this I think that's worth trying to, tease out a little bit, which is that you know, the, the commentary ed, all these news organizations that you're tracking and the journalists and so on, they're, they're not simply sort of neutral reporters, right?

[00:31:09] **Jim Phelan:** But they're, they're to some degree actors in this whole. You know, the, what's happening to determine the concept and what's happening to what gets controlled and, you know, the struggle itself. So, what are your thoughts on that? About the activity or the influence, the, the consequence of the commentariat on sort of the struggle for controlling or changing the narrative.

[00:31:40] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah, I mean, I think, like I said, I mean, one thing that's striking about the use the word narrative news media is that it's so self-reflexive. Mm-hmm. what is interesting is that yes, so journalists will keep saying there are these politicians and, you know, they operate by having narratives and so on so forth.

[00:31:56] **Paul Dawson:** And so like journalists are aware that narrative has different, different meanings and usages, but at the same time they are themselves perpetuating. Yeah. This discourse by using these phrases as to control the narrative themselves. So yeah, I agree. They, they, they're definitely actors in this process.

[00:32:16] **Paul Dawson:** So this is what I call “journalistic emplotment,” That journalists themselves, news media agents themselves, are attempting to emplot current events mm-hmm. In the way that, and white may use the term right in the deli news cycle. And they do this kind of consciously. But what I, and I think this is because, in the way that Andrew Chadwick describes this political information cycle.

[00:32:38] **Paul Dawson:** Yes. News Media, are agents themselves. And I think that what they tend to do is they are competing amongst themselves for the moral and epistemological authority. Mm-hmm. To establish what is the narrative, right? Yeah. Find that when, when outlets such as Wall Street Journal, um, and New York Post use “narrative,” like, so for instance, 2020, you know, I said false narrative was typically related to the stolen election.

[00:33:06] **Paul Dawson:** Those newspapers, if they used the term false narrative, it was to talk about democrats, liberal elites, and the liberal media. In other words, they're saying, “the media.” By which they mean New York Times, Washington Post, you know, have these false narratives, blah blah. So the word does become used in different ways amongst themselves, and I find that associate news associations, always are constructing and other, whether it's social media, right, with information, information, which is challenging the whole business model of news media or whether it's foreign state run media, which you'll find in reportage on China.

[00:33:43] **Paul Dawson:** So, for instance Whether or not they lean left or lean right according to all sides, media buyers ratings. You know, if if news media reporting on the way that China tries to control the narrative, they're pitting themselves against foreign state-run media, right. Saying we're the independent press, right?

[00:33:58] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah. Or, it’s each other, yes. You know, Fox News is responsible, whatever. Right? Right. So I agree that the self-reflexive use of narrative is being deployed as part of this struggle. Which sets up an other in, in those particular forms.

[00:34:10] **Jim Phelan:** Right. And that connection, I mean, It's a commonplace now that there's this polarization in the United States.

[00:34:18] **Jim Phelan:** And then that polarization is reflected in organizations like, MSNBC on the one hand and Fox News on the other. And one question that arises and as you say right, the. They are positioning themselves in relationship to each other you know, and both making claims about truth and, you know, better journalism and, and that kind of thing.

[00:34:44] **Jim Phelan:** But does, would, does your analysis have any implications for The possibility of moving beyond this kind of polarization and you know, there's a lot of talk about echo chambers and, you know, people living in bubbles of MSNBC or Fox News or anything like that.

[00:35:05] **Paul Dawson:** well that might be beyond the purview of a narratologist. I don’t know, at this state, what I’m doing is I’m interested in how the word narrative is being used. Right. And I can see that, if I track and then read the article that use the word narrative, I can see it, it is being used to further this dynamic right of this, this polarized struggle over the, over the truth-status of interpretation of events.

[00:35:31] **Paul Dawson:** I'm not sure at this stage. That's my atomization the term narrative. Could lead to any solution to this. I do think it’s fascinating that they don’t hide. They don't hide this polarization. Right? Yeah, no. You know, it's, it's right out there. It's just like, yes, what I do find interesting is how they talk about the media. They go, but hang on, you're the media.

[00:35:53] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah, exactly. They say, the media does this, right? Right. They have the perpetuate these false narratives. So the media somehow, is not you. yeah. Well,

[00:36:02] **Jim Phelan:** I, it goes back to your point about they need an opposition and, and so Yeah, exactly. They'll just create, they'll create “the media” as their opposition. Yeah, yeah,

[00:36:10] **Paul Dawson:** yeah, yeah.

[00:36:10] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah. They wanna The media. The media, but then a social media and then as foreign-state-run right. Media is always comparing themselves so they can say who does have the authority? Cause I think it's what I find fascinating. My, my broader, claim here would be that this proliferation of the term “narrative” mm-hmm.

[00:36:28] **Paul Dawson:** Is essentially a symptom of, and a response to just an epistemological crisis. Yeah. That's in what we were gonna call, what we'll call post-truth, right? Yeah. Which is emerges from information overload,. A fragmented media system, rise of social media, decline of traditional news media, and it, it, in a sense, it's a holding pattern.

[00:36:48] **Paul Dawson:** It's trying to fill the gap by saying, we can't make these assertions. There's too much information out there. We're competing amongst each other. We dunno what to do. The narrow narrative, which is huge semantic range, is in some way trying to accommodate all this partial doubt and referential uncertainty.

[00:37:04] **Jim Phelan:** All that exacerbated by an actor like Trump, who has no particular interest in you know, having his statements be tested against, extra textual, evidence and stuff.

[00:37:17] **Paul Dawson:** Well, you have two good quotes. So, both from Politico in 2020, “and Trump had doused yet another media cycle with his own narrative. Rinse repeat.”

[00:37:28] **Paul Dawson:** Also from the same newspaper, “but the president,” this is still Trump, “is nothing if not a master of reframing the narrative in any way he deems helpful.” Right. So again, right. You know, it's kinda like Trump understands the dynamic, obviously. Right. Uh, but again, it's reported as a struggle over the narrative.

[00:37:46] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah, yeah. Trump's and can see the narrative understood as the media cycle as well. Yeah. Right,

[00:37:51] **Jim Phelan:** right. And that also goes back to your point about emplotment, which I think maybe is. You know, and as you say, we may be getting beyond our expertise and you know, what we can legitimately make claims about.

[00:38:07] **Jim Phelan:** But it may, it may be a, an avenue in this sense that. Emplotment does involve taking the raw materials of events and shaping them into a story. And there is, I think that one can make an appeal to events, and therefore that the emplotment, that appeal to the events may be that the emplotment can be tested against what actually happened, right?

[00:38:44] **Jim Phelan:** So to some degree this is what's at stake in the current indictment of Trump right there. What did he do with the documents? Right. And, and so therefore and in the accord, it's, that's gonna, we're gonna have two different emplotments, right. And there'll be, uh, some decision rendered about that.

[00:39:07] **Jim Phelan:** So maybe there was a little bit of hope with that, but at the same time, your your point about describing what Trump is doing as reframing. You know, the narrative of being successful and so on. If it stays at that level without making an appeal to, well, what is, what are the events underlying it, it's actually perpetuating the problem.

[00:39:32] **Jim Phelan:** Or, or at least it seems to me that that's what's happening. Yeah. Yeah. I don't know if you would agree.

[00:39:37] **Paul Dawson:** yeah. I mean, what is interesting is, is that For political strategists and the scholars of narrative warfare. The idea is that, there are facts and narrative is about, framing the facts, right?

[00:39:49] **Paul Dawson:** Right. They’re at leased based Upon an assumption, there is something that happened. And then narrative is about attaching meaning to the facts. Yes. And then maybe about mobilizing and weaponizing and blah, blah, blah. There still is assumption there, there is a difference. Right. Okay. The problem is of course, that do people care or not?

[00:40:05] **Paul Dawson:** And that's the claim being made now that, people know the facts. They just don't care. Yeah. They know what Trump did, they big deal, you know? Yeah. Then they might make up reason for why he did it. So I think that, that, that is the problem. But I do agree that The, the word narrative, even though it, it's, it, it encapsulates this referential uncertainty, epistemological doubt,

[00:40:27] **Paul Dawson:** It's still nonetheless different from fact. Yeah. And the, we at least have to say that that might be something that as, as the kind, the basis from which we can try to negotiate this without a doubt. Right? Yeah. Yeah. But I do think that's one of the problems that, do people in fact care? Yeah.

[00:40:43] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right, right. And then that gets into whole lot of things about why or why not, and so on. And there, that's the subject for another podcast, I think. So, are there any kind of concluding remarks you wanna make or you know, things that we, you hope to get to that we didn't?

[00:41:00] **Paul Dawson:** Well, I do think that, yeah, the, the, the questions you're raising at the end here are very important because, At this stage what I've been trying to do is just try to anatomize and describe mm-hmm.

[00:41:12] **Paul Dawson:** And understand how the word is used, what's at stake, where it comes from. And I think it is what I've been doing is then trying to use it to try to understand how particular news stories are being described. Mm-hmm. So, for instance in previous articles I’ve looked at

[00:41:29] **Paul Dawson:** A little bit about the stolen election, a little bit about, the, the Wuhan lab leak, right?

[00:41:34] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Your, your article on the conspiracy theories is really That's right. Yeah. I'll recommend that to our audience. Yeah. It's very good. And in, in the, uh, Routledge companion to narrative theory that Paul and Maria have, uh, coedited.

[00:41:47] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. So I do

[00:41:49] **Paul Dawson:** think, yeah, if we can look at particular News events and the reporters of them. Mm-hmm. Drawing upon these ideas, this mode of analysis, these method might be a way to start thinking about okay, if we can track the way. Not that narrative is the only way to think about this, but if we can track the way the narrative is used when reporting in these events, that might give us a sense of what is at stake and therefore how we could try to get a better grasp on the way that narrativization of events is taking place. So it may be that I’m describing a method, which then when it comes to particular

[00:42:30] **Paul Dawson:** Ongoing news stories might be helpful in engaging with them in some way.

[00:42:34] **Jim Phelan:** Gotcha. Yeah. Okay. That makes a lot of sense. Yeah. thank you Paul. this was really quite stimulating and lots of food for thought so, so thank you very much.

[00:42:45] **Paul Dawson:** Thanks, Jim. Yeah, first ever podcast, so yeah. Ok. Alright.

[00:42:47] **Paul Dawson:** Yeah, it was great discussion as well. Yeah.

[00:42:49] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Good. All right, well, I, I also wanna thank our listeners and say that, we appreciate your feedback, which you can send to us at email projectnarrative@osu.edu. Or you can find us on Facebook or write to our Twitter account @pnOhioState. I also wanna say that you can find 19 additional episodes of the Project Narrative Podcast at the Project Narrative website at Ohio State or on Apple Podcasts.