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# Researching narratives, or, everything is text

Ton van Oosterhout\*

*B. Alleyne, Narrative networks: Storied approaches in a digital age. Los Angeles: Sage, 2015, 207 pp., ISBN 9780857027832, £ 23.99.*

Brian Alleyne, who teaches Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London, has written a timely book on the confluence of narrativity and the present, digital age. He manages to start with, roughly, a chapter on how sociology began, and end with the particular pieces of software that he uses in his anthropological work, and still present a coherent book. But the book is (relatively) short being 191 pages, so some subjects inevitably get short shrift. In this review, I will look at the content of the book, the website, strong points, and some minor issues.

## A whole narrative world

The six chapters of the book provide a good overview of the subject, beginning with broad brush strokes, but quickly zeroing in on techniques and tools. The first chapter, entitled 'In the beginning there was the social explorer', contains a bird's eye view of the branch of sociology that came into existence in the late 19th century and matured in the Chicago school. The next chapter, 'Narrative ways of knowing', presents a telescopic summary of the key concepts in narrative research, covering both 'research of narrative' and 'narrative research'. These concepts relate to, respectively, studying events in the social arena that present themselves to the scholar in the form of narrative text; and, relating the results of this research in a narrative manner. The next chapter, entitled 'Analyzing narrative', is a virtual do-it-yourself retelling of the main schools involved in the analysis of narrative. Alleyne thus covers structuralist analysis (semiotics), thematic analysis, and discourse analysis. These schools are, roughly, concerned with the visible structure of the text, the significance of parts of text as related to each other and to the world outside of the text, and (finally) with that grand concept of discourse. Alleyne uses these approaches to delve into forms of storytelling specific to the digital age, like hypertext stories and video games, and the environment in which this storytelling takes place: social networks and social media. In chapter 4, 'Narrative at work in the world' Alleyne uses the tools he has identified in the preceding chapter to tackle narrative in the digital domain. He goes into making sense of stories of self, Facebook stories, game narratives, and hacker narratives. 'Constructing narrative' is the chapter on 'narrative analysis', which recounts the links between the realist novel, and new (and new new) journalism. The point of this chapter is to show how social

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research may be rendered and synthesized in narrative text, instead of dissected into separate themes, the usual analytical approach to reporting research. Finally, in the chapter named ‘Techniques and tools for the narrative researcher’, Alleyne discusses the steps to be taken in a narrative research project: planning and designing projects, journaling and memo writing, data and information management, and software programs for fieldwork, coding, journaling, and mindmapping (brainstorming).

The website ([www.narrativenetworks.net](http://www.narrativenetworks.net)), which comes with the book, contains background material, such as outlines for a proposal for narrative research, analytic templates, tutorial videos, case studies, web pages mentioned in the book, an overview of relevant software, and online resources for both video games research and narrative research.

### **The bright lights**

I won’t conceal that I was quite fascinated by this book. Reading about the roots of sociology never ceases to interest me: the various links between the realistic novel, exploration, a growing social conscience, and the birth of sociology remains an enticing story. The (sometimes not so) new, modern-day tribes, like online or off-line video gamers, Facebook junkies, and software/website hackers clearly need to be studied by sociologists and anthropologists. This world is changing so quickly that it is almost impossible to remain up-to-date when one does not actively participate in it; social study is needed, and to my mind, narrative analysis is an interesting and useful approach to it.

The overview of research methods into narrative was interesting too, in fact so much so that I would have wished for more. The templates and examples are very concrete and up-to-date; a researcher new to this field would really be able to kick-start his work with them. Alleyne uses an inviting style of writing; in fact, just as he advocates in one of the chapters. I found many positive aspects to this book, and do not hesitate to recommend it.

### **The lights that could shine a little more brightly**

But, of course, there are always some objections. The book covers a subject area that is far too large for the limited number of pages allotted to it. Alleyne should, I think, have written a substantially more voluminous book if he had wanted to really present the roots of sociology, the basics of the analysis of narrative, and (especially) the various analysis methods that exist, in a satisfactory manner. The first half of the book has the effect of letting the reader taste the drink, but not slake his thirst. The reader will still need to delve into additional literature on the schools and techniques of analyzing narrative, because the detail given here is simply insufficient.

Unfortunately, the same gripe applies to the examples of new digital tribes and ways of studying them. This is the real focus of Alleyne’s work, and he allots to it

a paltry 30 pages. Further, I feel that the chapter on constructing narrative is an unfortunate result of the earlier decision to divide the subject area of the book into analysis of narrative, and narrative analysis, with the latter (in this context) referring to the use of a narrative form for sociological research and reporting. Its description is certainly interesting, but to me it seems less relevant to the real central issue of this book: the analysis of narrative in a digital age.

Finally, I would be interested in the links and divisions between the analysis of narrative, on the one hand, and the various qualitative and quantitative approaches to the social and anthropological sciences, on the other. The concept 'analysis of narrative' requires, I think, a clearer positioning in a crowded field. Even the title of the book, *Narrative Networks*, leaves something to be desired. There is a suggestion of connected stories, maybe of the worldwide web, but I doubt that this quite covers the field.

### **Undecided**

I am undecided about the examples of computer programs and the tutorials. But not because I think they are not appropriate or correct; rather, to form an opinion on this, the techniques and tools presented in the last chapter (and much of the contents of the website) would require a proper test. I have not done this. Since the author is a self-confessed "proud geek", I suspect that his knowledge of software and its use is very good, so that his suggestions would definitely be worth investigating. Software changes fast, and there is a need for expert guidance from someone who really understands the technology, but also knows the work of the sociologist. Clearly, Alleyne fits that description.

### **Final**

This is a very interesting introduction into narrativity in a digital age. Alleyne shows how to apply a number of approaches to the research of narrative to the digital tribes that have come into existence in the past 20 years or so. The issues I have with the book all refer to its very brevity; I want more examples, more explanation, more elaboration!