nation," conclude Skocpol and her coauthors, then Americans worried about civic decay today must look beyond bowling leagues and soccer moms. They must seek to revitalize "representative democracy as an arena and positive model for associational life."

Press & Media

Get Me Drama, Sweetheart

A Survey of Recent Articles

News (or what passes for it) is always breaking now, wave after wave surging ceaselessly from the Internet, television, and radio, hitting the battered shore of consciousness—and leaving more and more Americans feeling that they can get along just fine without the lengthy elaborations the next day's newspaper will bring.

To win back readers, newspaper editors have tried almost everything, from color and jazzy graphics to pious "public journalism" promoting civic betterment. But circulation has kept tumbling. Since 1993, even the thick, ad-rich Sunday papers have been losing readers.

Now there's a new remedy: "narrative journalism." It uses some of the techniques of fiction—such as building a central narrative, deploying characters, and setting scenes—to deliver the news in the form of an unfolding drama. Enthusiasts and skeptics debate the merits of this approach in *Nieman Reports* (Fall 2000), published by the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University.

The "voice" that the reader "hears" in traditional news stories is bland and impersonal, but it can be made more engaging to readers "without threatening the crucial mission of newspapers," contends Mark Kramer, a professor of journalism at Boston University. Gripping, revealing, and accurate narratives can be crafted, he says, that appeal to readers' "civic" emotions.

In many narrative-minded newspapers these days, news stories often have an anecdotal "lede" (lead), with the point of the story buried in a "nut graf" below. Other, more ambitious narrative news stories, at the risk of seeming pointless, have no explicit point at all. A 15-part series about racial relations in the United States that appeared in the *New York Times* last June and July concentrated on the stories of many individuals and deliberately avoided drawing any broad conclusions.

Some narrative journalism has proven compelling. Sales of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* jumped by 20,000 in 1997 when a month-long series by reporter Mark Bowden appeared, reconstructing in dramatic detail the battle four years earlier in which 18 U.S. soldiers died in Mogadishu, Somalia. Enhanced with audio and video clips on the *Inquirer*'s Web site, the series drew increasing "hits" each day—until the daily number reached 40,000, causing a server to crash.

Successful narrative journalism has even been done on tight daily deadlines. At Florida's *St. Petersburg Times*, after months of background research, Thomas French and two other reporters covered a murder trial by turning out narrative "chapters" in the continuing saga each day—chapters in which the day's "news" was disclosed not right away, as it would be in a traditional news account, but only gradually, as it would be in a novel. "The verdict itself," French notes, "was revealed on the third jump page, in the 112th paragraph." Two readers complained, but hundreds of others lauded the unusual coverage.

The news does not always lend itself to narrative journalism, however, and adding a dollop of narrative to news stories does not necessarily make them more engaging. Indeed, it can make them less useful, former *Washington Post* columnist Nicholas von Hoffman points out in the *New York Observer* (Oct. 16, 2000). The *New York Times*, he complains, "is now larded with meandering, verbose stories" with "long-way-around-the-barn" human-interest leads.

Busy readers are forced to "skim through paragraphs of secondary fluff to get to the point of the thing. For the crisp and reliable imparting of important and necessary information, the style leaves everything to be desired because it invites muzziness, confusion, and imprecision."

"Obviously," says Kramer, narrative journalism should be done only by reporters and editors who have "the knack" for it. But even some talented writers can't resist the temptation to turn messy realities into compelling stories by reordering events or inventing details, observes Anthony DeCurtis, a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone*. "The industry's nasty little secret, unfortunately, is that editors often look the other way, or even encourage such embellishment. . . . Those same editors are, of course, shocked—shocked!—when scandal breaks out."

Fearful Confusion

"Risky Business: Vividness, Availability, and the Media Paradox" by John Ruscio, in *Skeptical Inquirer* (Mar.–Apr. 2000), 944 Deer Dr., N.E., Albuquerque, N.M. 87122.

Do more Americans die each year from (a) shark attacks or (b) falling airplane parts? Remembering the movie *Jaws* (1975) and news accounts of various incidents involving homicidal sharks, most people would probably answer (a). The correct answer, however, is (b). Falling airplane parts get nowhere near the publicity but kill 30 times as many people in an average year. Ruscio, a social psychologist at Elizabethtown College, Pennsylvania, says this illustrates a larger truth: The mass media give us a warped sense of life's hazards.

In part, this is because of the nature of "news": Man bites dog, not dog bites man. (Shark bites man is another story.) Seeking out the unusual to captivate readers or viewers, the news media then do their best to make their accounts vivid, emphasizing concrete details and the personal and emotional aspects of the story. Precisely because the accounts are vivid, Ruscio points out, they tend to stick in readers' and viewers' minds, available for ready recall later. "A news report will leave a more lasting impression by documenting one individual's personal suffering than by providing a scientific argument based on 'mere statistics.'"

The calm pair in Robert LaDuke's* Smoke *(1998) seem to have correctly gauged their risk of being hit by the airplane.

The likely cumulative result, he says, is a distorted picture in our minds of the risks we face. In a widely cited 1979 study, college students were asked to rank 30 technologies and activities according to their danger. The students deemed nuclear power most dangerous, even though specialists in risk assessment put it 20th on the list, less hazardous than riding a bicycle. That same year, a much publicized (albeit nonfatal) accident occurred at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in