

# An Analysis of Narrative Techniques and Health Communication Impact in the Medical Documentary *Depression and Me*

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**Abstract** This study discusses the narrative strategy of medical documentary and aims to analyze how its narrative technique promotes the effectiveness of health communication to the masses. This study takes *Depression and Me* as an example, using literature and text analysis. Based on Genette's narratology theory, this medical documentary is analyzed from the aspects of narrative speech and transformed speech in narrative discourse as well as internal focalization (fixed internal focalization and multiple internal focalization) in narrative focalization. It is found that the narrative mode of this documentary is conducive to generating emotional resonance with the audience, thereby improving the public's understanding of depression, and achieving the effect of health communication. However, this study also has problems with sample limitations and subjective interpretation, as well as limitations of data collection methods.

## 1. Introduction

Depression, a prevalent and complex mental health condition, is increasingly prominent in medical discourse and societal discussions. Medical documentaries, such as the BBC's *Depression and Me*, play a crucial role in disseminating information and shaping public perceptions. These documentaries deftly combine personal experiences with scientific insights, employing narrative strategies to engage audiences deeply and foster empathy towards mental health issues, thus underscoring the transformative power of narrative in health communication.

The development of health communication has been notably influenced by the adoption of narrative techniques, as established by seminal research in the field. Rogers (1994) was among the first to underline the significance of narrative in augmenting the efficacy of health communication, proposing that storytelling can significantly influence public health behaviors and attitudes. This perspective is reinforced by Freimuth et al. (2007), who highlighted the shift towards interactive new media platforms that have revolutionized the dissemination and reception of health narratives, particularly in the U.S. Subsequent studies, such as those by Zhang (2005) and Zhu & Zhao (2019) in China, have examined how health communication adapts to local contexts and technological

advancements, especially during health crises, demonstrating narrative's critical role in engaging the public swiftly and effectively through digital platforms. Meanwhile, narrative medical documentaries caught scholars' eyes and they began to investigate how narrative medical documentaries. Li (2017) analyzed the transformation of the narrative symbol system in medical documentaries from a structuralist perspective, examining how these changes affect the psychology and behaviors of the audience. Yang (2021) employed film and television narrative theory to conduct a comparative analysis of narrative strategies, highlighting their evolution over time. This body of research indicates that the way stories are told in medical documentaries can significantly shape viewer understanding and engagement. Moreover, the ethical considerations of narrative strategies in medical documentaries are critically important. Researchers like Pang (2019) have examined how narratives in medical documentaries can construct personal identities and social relationships, emphasizing the responsibility of filmmakers to balance informational content with empathetic engagement. These studies highlight the ethical imperatives of storytelling in health communication, stressing the need to foster a respectful and understanding portrayal of sensitive health issues.

Building on existing literature, this study focuses on the narrative structure, language use, and audience impact of *Depression and Me* within the context of health communication. The objective is to enhance the understanding of how narrative strategies can be effectively used to communicate complex mental health issues like depression, aiming to improve public awareness and sensitivity. The research is strategically divided into theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it delves into the application of Genette's narratology theory to medical documentaries, providing a detailed examination of how specific narrative techniques can elevate the clarity and emotional impact of health-related messages. Practically, the insights from this analysis are intended to assist documentary creators in refining their narrative approaches, focusing specifically on how to structure their content to maximize audience engagement and comprehension. This targeted approach is expected to improve the delivery and reception of crucial health information, contributing to better-informed public discussions around mental health. Therefore, this research raises three research questions as following.

- (1) How does *Depression and Me* construct its storyline to guide the audience's understanding of health and medicine topics?
- (2) How does the documentary utilize narrative strategies to accurately convey health information and medical knowledge?
- (3) How do the narrative techniques employed in *Depression and Me* stimulate the audience's concern and emotional resonance for health issues?

This research will employ a text analysis method to explore the complex of health communication through the medical documentary *Depression and Me*. Initially, subtitles will be extracted from the documentary using a video-to-text conversion tool to ensure a precise examination of the narrative subjects and perspectives. The study will then proceed with detailed text analysis where, through manual annotation, various audio-visual expression techniques utilized in the documentary—such as character interviews—will be cataloged and analyzed. This approach will focus on assessing the documentary's narrative strategies and their effectiveness in communication, aligning with the broader research objectives of enhancing understanding in medical documentary narratives.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Gérard Genette, a pioneering scholar in narratology, profoundly impacted the study of narrative structures within the field of literary theory, particularly through his engagement with French structuralism. His theoretical framework, developed during the latter half of the twentieth century, provides a comprehensive method for analyzing the intricacies of narrative discourse, significantly influencing both the direction and methodology of contemporary literary analysis. Genette's work

focuses on three core aspects of narrative: the narrator, the narrated, and the reader. These elements form the foundation of his theory, which examines the interplay between the person telling the story, the content of the story itself, and the audience receiving the story. This approach allows for a detailed exploration of various narrative voices and perspectives, highlighting the complexity of narrative construction.

A central component of Genette's narratology is his categorization of narrative speech into three modes: mimetic, narrated, and transformed speech. Mimetic speech involves the direct quotation of characters, aiming to replicate their speech as faithfully as possible. This mode enhances the authenticity and immediacy of the characters' voices, allowing readers direct access to the emotional and psychological depth of the narrative. Narrated speech, in contrast, sees the narrator paraphrasing or summarizing what characters have said or thought. This mode introduces a mediating layer between the character's original expressions and the reader's understanding, granting the narrator the power to shape the narrative's flow and influence the reader's perception of events and characters. It is particularly effective in guiding the thematic and emotional trajectory of the narrative. Transformed speech, the most interpretative of the three, involves the narrator altering the original words of the characters. This can range from slight modifications to substantial reinterpretations, reflecting the narrator's active role in the narrative construction. This mode allows the narrator to adapt the story to serve specific thematic or stylistic purposes, highlighting the narrative's ideological and psychological dimensions.

Focalization, another groundbreaking concept introduced by Genette, revises the traditional notion of point of view. He delineates three types: zero, internal, and external focalization. Zero focalization provides a narrator with omniscient knowledge of all characters and events, offering a god-like perspective that can move freely within the narrative space. Internal focalization restricts the narrative perspective to that of one character, diving deep into their psychological state and providing a personal, limited view of the narrative world. External focalization limits the perspective to what can be externally observed, not entering the minds of any characters, thereby fostering a narrative marked by objectivity and prompting the reader to engage more actively in interpreting the narrative.

Genette's analysis of time in narrative also forms a crucial part of his theory, focusing on how narratives manage the temporal ordering of events. He identifies several types of narration based on their temporal relation to the events they describe: subsequent (post-event), prior (pre-event), simultaneous, and interpolated (inserted) narration. This temporal framework helps in understanding how the timing of narrative delivery affects the structure of the story and the reader's experience. Moreover, Genette explores narrative layers, distinguishing between the outer narrative layer (the primary narrative framework), the inner narrative layer (stories within the main story), and the meta-narrative layer (which reflects on the act of storytelling itself). This multi-layered approach allows narratives to operate on several levels simultaneously, enriching the text's complexity and engaging the reader on various intellectual and emotional fronts.

Genette's analytical precision is exemplified in his study of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* in his seminal work *Narrative Discourse*. Here, he applies his narratological concepts to dissect Proust's elaborate narrative techniques, demonstrating how his theory can be employed to unravel complex literary texts. His emphasis on the structural and textual aspects of narratives, rather than solely on their thematic or content-based elements, has provided scholars with new tools for literary criticism, influencing a broad range of literary studies.

### 3. Discussions and Results

*Depression and Me* is an autobiographical documentary directed by Peter Gauvain that explored the life of Alastair Campbell, a British politician and media consultant known for his role as Chief Press Secretary under Tony Blair. The film portrays Campbell's battle with depression, showcasing how it affects his physical and mental health. By choosing a public figure like Campbell, the documentary

aims to dispel common misconceptions about depression and engage the public's interest in mental health issues. It also provides comfort and encouragement to others suffering from depression, fostering a sense of empathy and emotional resonance across diverse audiences. The documentary explores various treatment methods for depression, including medication, psychotherapy, support groups, and lifestyle adjustments, helping viewers understand the complexities of managing this condition. It highlights stories of recovery and hope, reinforcing that depression can be overcome with the right support. Additionally, it introduces social support and advocacy organizations, offering resources for those needing help.

### 3.1 The Narrative Discourses of Depression and Me

According to the theorist Gérard Genette, narrative itself represents the multitude of events occurring within a story. Dialogue between characters is a distinctive aspect of the art of fiction and plays a crucial role in any narrative. Character discourse not only enhances character development but also augments the storyline, making it a vital element in enriching narrative works. Genette (1980) regarded narrative discourse as an "imitation" of real-life events, suggesting that "if the imitation of non-verbal events by language is merely a fantasy or illusion, then narrative discourse represents a departure from absolute imitation." In his seminal work *Narrative Discourse*, Genette categorized narrative speech into three main types: narrated speech, transformed speech with indirect narration, and the most "mimetic" form of narrative speech. This analysis will focus on the medical documentary *Depression and Me*, examining it through the lens of two of Genette's narrative discourses: narrated speech and transformed speech.

#### 3.1.1 Narrated Speech in *Depression and Me*

Narrated speech, as defined by Genette, encompasses not only character dialogues but also their inner monologues and personal reflections, making it a vivid and direct type of discourse. This form of speech narrows the distance between the audience and the characters, enhancing character portrayal. In the medical documentary *Depression and Me*, narrated speech is utilized to convey the protagonist Campbell's inner thoughts and direct dialogues with others. This approach vividly captures Campbell's internal psychological state and effectively advances the narrative. It prominently features in scenes of Campbell's discussions with his family and doctors, various interviews, and segments where he narrates his own experiences in a vlog-style format. Through these methods, the documentary uses narrated speech to deepen the viewer's understanding of the characters and propel the plot forward.

Example 1:

*So, this is.....this is quite a strange one actually because just sitting having dinner, with Fiona and some friends, and most of the day I've been feeling absolutely fine. And, literally kind of in minutes, just went from this massive plunge..... and you know, not...close to, kind of, suicidal feelings. Just... straight up there to down here.*

Example 2:

*His depression has a profound impact on the people around him. It controls my emotions as well. It is overwhelming to, especially with somebody with such a strong personality, to live with it in those down phases. I felt that I was doing something wrong. You know so I was at fault, and it made me feel absolutely terrible because I thought if obviously if I was doing...you know, I can't make him happy.*

Example 1 captures a moving monologue that reveals Alastair Campbell's emotional change. During a tense gathering, his uncontrolled outbursts initially strained the atmosphere. However, the reflective thoughts that followed highlighted his acute awareness and deep remorse over the impact his actions had on his wife and friends, despite feeling powerless to change. Through the lens of Genette's narrative theory, this narrated speech effectively immerses us into Campbell's inner world,

vividly conveying his emotional struggles and enriching the storyline. From a health communication perspective, such narrative techniques not only depict Campbell's personal struggles authentically but also resonate deeply with the audience, reflecting the experiences of many with depression and sparking greater public empathy and awareness.

Example 2 features an interview with Fiona, Campbell's wife, which sheds light on her perspective and the emotional toll of her husband's depression. Instead of voicing complaints, Fiona's reflections reveal her selflessness and commitment, pondering her own adequacy and responsibilities. This portrayal resonates as a truthful depiction of the sacrifices made by families dealing with depression. Theoretically, this narrated speech from the perspective of those close to the protagonist deepens the plot and enhances understanding of the characters' relationships and emotional complexities. For health communication, this approach not only fosters empathy among viewers but also encourages a broader dialogue about the challenges faced by those living with depression and their families. The interview transcends mere conversation, offering a profound exploration of family dynamics and mental health that invites reflection and inspiration.

### 3.1.2 Transformed Speech of Depression and Me

According to Genette (1980), transformed speech involves the narrator using their own language to convey the characters' dialogue, effectively becoming a medium that integrates the characters' voices with the narrator's own thoughts and emotions. This technique goes beyond mere intermediary narration; it transforms the characters' words into the narrator's own, weaving them together with personal reflections and feelings. This transformation allows indirect discourse to not only fully express the characters' meanings but also to blend different forms of discourse, making the narrative more vivid and engaging. In *Depression and Me*, while the use of transformed speech is limited, it is effectively employed in scenes where the narrator, Campbell, discusses doctors' plans for treating depression. This narrative technique allows the audience to gain a deeper insight into Campbell's internal experiences and treatment journey, bringing his struggles and growth to life with greater clarity and impact.

Example 1:

*Campbell: "Dr Golam Khandaker has been analyzing my blood samples. He believes a key to depression lies in the body's immune system, which can be affected by prolonged unhealthy living. Oh dear..."*

Example 2:

*Campbell: "Roland asked me to choose a trigger word that would make me feel guilt or blame. And I chose Donald."*

Example 3:

*Campbell: "So, film people, I've cracked it for you. I think, so, we've done all these different things. Done the "tap, tap, tap", looked at the psilocybin, looked at the mental/physical scanning, looking inside the brain and all that stuff. and it's all been fascinating. But, the one thing that has really, kind of got in there and made an impression on me was Janine's jam jar. So, here we go. Here's a jam jar. I'm drawing the jam draw now. And she said, down the bottom, here, you've got all this stuff that. You know, we're all born with, then, into the jam jar in our life....."*

In Example 1, Campbell, serving both as the narrator and mediator, not only accurately recounts the findings of Dr. Goran Khandak but also adopts Dr. Khandak's voice through selective word choice. This technique not only facilitates the dissemination of medical knowledge about depression treatment, achieving effective health communication, but also enriches the narrative by positioning Campbell as a pivotal narrative conduit.

In Example 2, Campbell employs a storytelling tone to relay Dr. Roland's therapeutic trials, exemplifying his role as both narrator and mediator. From a health communication standpoint, the

adoption of transposed rhetoric in the narrative helps mitigate the complexity of medical terminology, thus enhancing the audience's comprehension. Additionally, from a narrative standpoint, this approach aids in crafting more compelling storylines, showcasing the documentary's rich narrative capabilities.

Similarly, Example 3 illustrates Campbell's engagement with various treatment options, culminating in his interest in Jenny's "jam jar" theory. Through monologues, he conveys this concept to the audience, sharing his interpretations and expectations of the theory. This segment represents his transformed speech on Jenny's theory, serving as a bridge to alleviate the audience's potential confusion caused by the obscure terminology. This narrative strategy not only clarifies this particular treatment approach for depression but also aligns the documentary's language with public understanding, facilitating easier assimilation of complex treatment ideas. Moreover, this technique enhances public awareness of depression treatments and fosters effective communication between doctors and patients, offering new prospects for collaborative management of depression.

Throughout these examples, the documentary *Depression and Me* utilizes transformed speech effectively to narrow the gap between specialized medical knowledge and lay audience understanding, thereby enriching the narrative coherence and depth of the documentary and enhancing the impact of its health communication.

### **3.2 The Narrative Focalizations of *Depression and Me***

In the medical documentary *Depression and Me*, the concept of "narrative focalization", as proposed by Gérard Genette (1980), is effectively illustrated. Focalization, often understood as perspective, mandates that events be narrated from a specific viewpoint—what a narrator or a character sees and hears. Genette extends the concept of focalization beyond merely being a point of observation; he considers it an avenue to access the psychological emotions of characters. This technique allows the audience to gain a profound understanding of the characters' emotional fluctuations and psychological states, thereby enriching their grasp of the narrative.

In *Depression and Me*, the director adeptly employs internal focalization to deepen character portrayal and advance the plot. By exploring the inner thoughts, narratives, and behaviors of various characters, the documentary vividly demonstrates the intricate relationship between the characters' internal worlds and their external roles. The narrative interweaves the contributions of different doctors, specialists, and Campbell's family, each adding depth to the storyline.

Although *Depression and Me* primarily follows the experiences of its protagonist, the documentary encompasses a wide array of characters. Thus, the director skillfully navigates shifts in narrative focalization to craft the personalities of these characters, employing various forms of "internal focalization" to reveal their inner lives. In his seminal work *Narrative Discourse*, Genette (1980) categorizes "internal focalization" into three types: fixed, multiple, and variable. The documentary predominantly utilizes fixed and multiple internal focalizations to unfold the story, showcasing the director's strategic use of narrative techniques to engage the audience and enhance the storytelling.

#### **3.2.1 Fixed Internal Focalization**

Fixed internal focalization, as its name implies, maintains a consistent narrative from the perspective of a single character, immersing the viewer in the character's personal experiences and emotional journey. This narrative style allows the audience to explore the character's inner world, align closely with their viewpoints, and deeply empathize with their emotions. In *Depression and Me*, fixed internal focalization is utilized extensively. Campbell documents his emotional fluctuations through monologue-style vlogs and provides intimate insights into his experiences with depression during interviews. This technique enhances the viewer's connection to Campbell, making his struggles and revelations more immediate and influential.



**Example 1:**

*...you know not close to kind of suicidal feelings, and, Fiona spotted it, that I was kind of disengaging. Then the others spotted it, then they all started asking... was okay... and then trying to bring me out of it. And it's impossible when that happens, so I just...I just vacate...*

**Example 2:**

*Yeah, I think I need the depression and I need the ups and downs. Some of my most creative periods have been when I've been a bit manic, and other things that I've managed to achieve have actually been when I've been fairly down, so ...so I don't know.*

Example 1 presents that Campbell's mood plunged at the party, which made the whole atmosphere of the party awkward, and then he fled to a place to narrate himself. In this segment, Campbell showed the unpredictability of emotional changes and was troubled by uncontrollable emotions. This is a typical fixed internal focalization, and through the protagonist's self-narrative, the audience can gain insight into his inner fluctuations and struggles. Such fixed internal focalization makes the audience pay their attention and emotion to the character, Campbell, and deeply resonate with him. From the perspective of the effect of health communication, this narrative technique not only makes the documentary more humanized but also makes the audience more intuitively feel the inner world of patients with depression in the first-person way, to reduce the misunderstanding of depression and promote more openness and understanding of mental health problems.

Example 2 is also narrated with a fixed internal focalization. Campbell gave an inner monologue about depression, expressing his opinion that depression could help him formulate his writing in some ways. From the perspective of the effect of health communication, such a positive attitude is useful material for health communication in medical documentary that aim at mass communication. By showing the positive attitude of the protagonist, the audience can gain inspiration and power from it, especially those who also suffer from depression, and can better adjust their mentality, and learn and imitate the positive attitude of the protagonist. This is also the director's way to improve the character's personality through fixed internal focalization, which provides one strong evidence for the presentation of the theme. This positive mindset not only gives the audience a deeper understanding of the protagonist's personality but also gives the audience a different perspective on depression, prompting them to face life's challenges more positively.

The above two examples are classic cases of fixed inner focus in *Depression and Me*. Through this narrative technique, the audience can have a richer understanding of the inner world of patients with depression. This narrative strategy is effective in medical documentary aimed at health communication.

### 3.2.2 Multiple Internal Focalizations

Multiple internal focalizations are narrative techniques in which the same event is narrated multiple times from different characters' perspectives, or in the process of narration, different stages of the event are presented from the perspectives of multiple characters. Compared with fixed internal focusing, multi-type internal focusing is not limited by space and time and can show the multifaceted complexity of the story, thus giving the story more uncertainty and ambiguity. In the documentary, the director narrates Campbell's depression through the perspectives of his family, doctors and other different characters. Each character's point of view and attitude are different, thus presenting different characters' character characteristics and attitude differences. This kind of multi-modal internal focus narrative technique not only enriches the level of the story but also provides the audience with a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of each character and the whole story.

**Example 1:**

*Fiona (Campbell's wife): It was a difficult period for us because I had been quite opposed to some elements of what the Labor Government was doing, particularly the Iraq war, and he found that very difficult because I think he likes to feel he controls the space around him.*

*If the key person-he personally-in his space is not going along with what he wants, he finds that really, really hard.*

Example 2:

*Dr. Roland Zahn (a specialist who treats Campbell): What excites me about neurofeedback is that it allows us to look at how people's brains deal with emotions in real-time. And that will allow us to really understand hopefully what's going on with depression and we've got tools that allow us to look inside people's brains.*

In Example 1, Fiona gave an insightful account of the causes of Campbell's depression and his early experiences. She described Campbell's emotional fluctuation, life changes, and the challenges he experienced in his early years. In the medical documentary with Campbell as the protagonist, Fiona's inner-narrative interview is typical of multiple internal focalizations. This narrative focalization describes Campbell's depression from another perspective. This approach can show the multifaceted complexity of Campbell's depression, and metaphorically illustrate the uncertainty and ambiguity of depression as a disease. From the perspective of the effect of health communication, such narration can arouse the attention and thinking of the audience who are the family members of the depressed patients, and provide them with emotional support and inspiration. At the same time, choosing the narrative perspective of the people around the protagonist as the focus is a way to improve the story. Such narration not only enriches the level and plot of the story, but also makes the development of the characters fuller, and can arouse the emotional resonance of the audience.

In Example 2, Dr. Roland Zahn, a psycho-scanning therapist, explains his treatment. He introduced the principles, methods, and expected effects of treatment, and this scientific description helped to disseminate knowledge about depression treatment to the public. From the perspective of the health communication effect, through the explanation of experts, this kind of mass communication, which tends to be popular, can help the audience better understand the principles and methods of depression treatment, and enhance the understanding and coping ability of depression. At the same time, focusing on the inner hearts of other characters, this narrative method, multiple inner focalizations, breaks the time and space limits of fixed inner focalization and enriches and improves the storyline. By comparing with the narration of a single protagonist, it enriches the shaping of characters and storylines, making the story more vivid and easier to be accepted and understood by the audience.

Through analysis, the medical documentary *Depression and Me* mainly adopts the narrative method of internal focalization but lacks external focalization and zero focalization. This also has something to do with the fact that it has personal experience throughout the story. This documentary is an autobiographical medical documentary, which takes Alastair Campbell's personal experience and treatment process as the story clue, interspersed with the narrative and inner activities of the surrounding characters. Therefore, it is more suitable to choose inner focalization as the form of narrative focalization.

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1 Main Findings

Based on Genette's narrative theory, this research conducts a comprehensive analysis of the documentary *Depression and Me*, focusing on narrative discourse and narrative focalization, yielding insightful findings.

Firstly, the documentary employs a strategic narrative approach that meticulously constructs a storyline and guides the audience's understanding of health and medical topics. Through the lens of Genette's narrative theory, the documentary effectively leverages narrative discourse to depict the real-life experiences and treatment processes of depression. The narrative speech, articulated by the main character and supported by family members, experts, and doctors, vividly conveys the personal



and clinical aspects of depression, fostering a strong sense of empathy and providing valuable medical insights to viewers, particularly those affected by depression.

Additionally, the documentary skillfully uses transformed speech, as conceptualized by Genette, to bridge the gap in understanding complex medical knowledge among the audience. This is achieved by the main character's translation of expert terminology into more accessible language, enhancing health communication and making medical knowledge more approachable.

Moreover, *Depression and Me* explores the characters' inner worlds through the use of internal focalization, a technique that not only portrays the genuine emotional states of individuals with depression but also intersperses various treatment methods. This narrative strategy not only captivates the audience's interest but also resonates emotionally with those experiencing depression, providing both insight and solace.

In conclusion, this study finds that *Depression and Me* effectively presents the multifaceted nature of depression through adept use of narrative discourse and focalization. The documentary not only heightens emotional resonance and understanding among viewers but also stimulates in-depth discussions and raises awareness about depression. Its approach serves as a valuable model for narrative construction in other medical documentaries, demonstrating the potential of narrative techniques to enhance viewer engagement and comprehension in health communication.

## 4.2 Limitation

Despite the detailed narrative analysis of *Depression and Me* provided in this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the scope of this research is confined to a single documentary, *Depression and Me*, which may restrict the universality and generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the focus of this analysis is primarily on narrative discourse and narrative focalization, with less attention given to other narrative elements such as narrative structure and style. Moreover, this study does not extensively explore the audience's reactions and attitudes, which can be significantly influenced by factors such as cultural background and psychological characteristics, potentially affecting their understanding and reception of the documentary. In summary, while this study offers a comprehensive narrative analysis of *Depression and Me*, it is important to consider these limitations when interpreting the findings and applying them to broader contexts.

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