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Theorizing provocation narratives as communication strategies

Abstract

Despite multiple uses, the concept of provocation is under-theorized and under-investigated. Theorizing provocation narratives as communication strategies, this paper shows that what is at stake in provocations are crucial issues of intentionality, accountability and blame. While some provocations elicit reactions that are beneficial to the parties involved, others may incite violence. The second part of our study focuses on the latter because of their potential for shifting blame to victims. To deconstruct the mechanism by which provocation introduces this type of bias, we use Labov's method of narrative analysis and apply it to two news items. We conclude on how provocation can serve as a theoretical framework and methodological tool for narrative analysis in many communication contexts and fields.

Theorizing provocation narratives as communication strategies

“But he started it!” This is a commonplace line of defense in children’s responses to adults scolding them for fighting with siblings or schoolmates. Be it in this childish or in more sophisticated versions, invoking provocation to justify reprehensible conduct occurs in many contexts. This makes provocation a useful concept in a variety of disciplines, including psychology, the arts, law, sociology, and media studies. Yet provocation is rarely a central or transversal object of scholarly research and provocation narratives remain under-theorized and under-investigated.

Although provocation has various definitions, the literature generally considers that this concept refers to an action or speech that may be intentional and may stimulate a reaction, which is often, but not necessarily, violent. This definition, however, is very broad. Rather than giving a definitive meaning, scholars thus tend to propose definitional elements open to discussion, notably intentionality and reaction. At play in this discussion are issues of causality, accountability and blaming, which are vital to our understanding of human interactions and accounts thereof. This is why, although this paper contributes to further our comprehension of provocation in general, its focus is on the problematic issues of victimhood and blame as they relate to provocation narratives.

The first part of this paper compares the main definitions of provocation that the literature supplies in different fields and discusses its distinctive characteristics. Based on this examination, we conceptualize provocation as one of two types of communication strategies. One is meant to elicit a non-violent or beneficial response by the provoked party, such as constructive self-questioning in philosophical provocations. The other is supposed to trigger a conflict or a violent response, ranging from blaming an individual for a provocative behavior to declaring war on a nation. The second part of the paper discusses what we consider as a negative type of provocation,¹ which introduces the potential for bias in the communication

process and could only exacerbate violent – verbal or physical – interactions between the parties involved. We claim that provocation discourse can serve as a communication strategy that attributes false intention, hides or distorts causality, and shifts blame to the victim. Our study thus focuses on how provocation can serve as a rhetorical fallacy and how provocation narratives may distort causality. We propose a methodological tool for the identification of bias in provocation narratives based on Labov's approach to deconstructing chains of causality. In the last part of the paper, we show how our theoretical framework is relevant for the analysis of journalistic narratives, and we apply our method to two news stories for illustrative purposes. Thus theorizing provocation narratives in relation to intentionality and accountability contributes to our understanding of crucial issues of causality, blame and victimhood, of storytelling and narratology, and of bias in communication texts.

Conceptualizing provocation as a communication strategy

The few works that have tried to conceptualize provocation have been influenced by the specific fields such as marketing, political science or law studies. This explains the diversity of definitions of provocation in the literature. However, we identified three recurring definitional elements around which discussions revolve: unexpectedness, intentionality, and the contravention of norms.

Driessens' 2013 definition of "media provocation," although arguably incomplete, takes up these recurring features. He bases his definition on previous efforts at conceptualizing provocations made by German sociologist Rainer Paris (1989) and marketing researchers Vézina and Paul (1997). Media provocation is defined as a "mediated act that *questions or contravenes* norms, values, laws, rules and symbolic power, thereby *intentionally* running counter to the normal horizon of *expectations* in a certain situation or context" (p. 556 [our emphasis]). Although Driessens exclusively refers to mediated

provocations, this definition seems valid for any kind of provocation. Yet, contra Paris', Driessens' definition does not include reference to the reaction that provocation is supposed to elicit. For Paris, provocation elicits a reaction and, as it opens a conflict, two additional characteristics have to be considered: Accountability in the eyes of third parties and blame.

Transgression of norms and taboos

Interested in provocation in advertising, Vézina and Paul (1997) are among the first and few scholars who have attempted to conceptualize provocation. They consider it “an execution strategy,” which they define as “a deliberate appeal, within the content of an advertisement, to stimuli that are expected to shock at least a portion of the audience, both because they are associated with values, norms or taboos that are habitually not challenged or transgressed in advertising, and because of their distinctiveness and ambiguity” (p. 179). They further detail each of the three central definitional components identified: Transgression of norms, distinctiveness, and ambiguity.

While, as we will see, the criterion of ambiguity is problematic, transgression (or questioning) of values, norms or taboos (to which Driessens adds symbolic power, rules and laws) may be the most basic and agreed-upon characteristic. As for distinctiveness, it refers to the originality and spontaneity of the message: Provocations are unexpected and not to be repeated. Vézina and Paul here concur with Paris (1989) who argued that the bigger the surprise the larger the impact of the provocation. The criteria of transgression and distinctiveness are closely connected: Transgression is all the more shocking since it is unique, rather than repeated; exceptionally transgressive advertisements are supposed to attract attention, increase awareness, be better remembered and affect positively attitudes towards the brand. One classic example is the Italian clothing brand *Benetton*, which “has quite a history of provocative campaigns” (The Guardian, 2011), from the 1991 newborn

advert to the 2011 “Un-Hate” publicity campaign that includes images of President Obama kissing his Chinese counterpart, and Pope Benedict XVI kissing the imam of the Al-Azhar mosque.

Provocation has also become a key tactic for social and health marketing, as illustrated in HIV prevention or anti-smoking campaigns, which often have to break taboos to fight prejudices and raise awareness. In her book dedicated to road safety campaigns, Guttman (2014) has examined “provocative techniques,” defined as “attempts to startle, shock, scandalize, surprise or even offend audiences” (p. 88), in order to provoke responsiveness and behavioral change. Similarly, some activists, notably with Marxist or feminist leanings, practice what Wolfsfeld (2012) has called the “politics of provocation.” Provocation is perceived as a tool to awaken people’s consciousness regarding specific social or political issues, or to affirm freedom of speech against censors. This was the ambition of the Femen movement, whose topless protests have targeted sexism, homophobia, and religious or political institutions accused of being liberticidal.

In philosophy, as well as in political or legal rhetoric, provocation has served to challenge prejudices and trigger (self-)questioning. Philosophers, from Socrates to Nietzsche and Sartre (Betschart, Hackel, & Minot, 2014), tended to *provoke* their disciples, in the sense of disputing their pre-conceived ideas, in order to *provoke* – in the etymological sense of the Latin verb *pro-vocare*, “to call forth” – an original thinking. The point of Socrates’ maieutic is to incite the disciples to distance themselves from conceptions pre-given by others, so that they can deliver, that is, give birth to, the truth about things. The disciples walk on the path to the truth, by facing their own interrogations and contradictions. In the same vein, paradoxes, which play a central part in many philosophies, from Zhuangzi’s to Kierkegaard’s (Eliason, 1996; Sorensens, 2005) can be seen as provocations. They serve as apparent contradictions that the disciples are called upon to solve by questioning their beliefs, in an attempt to achieve

truth or wisdom. Thus, in philosophy, provocations are mostly conceived as pedagogic tools to enhance critical thinking.

Driessens (2013) distinguishes provocations “aimed at social or political change” from others “expressed for commercial or marketing ends” (p. 567). As our examples suggest, this typology is not operational: The same tactical use of provocation may serve to persuade an audience to buy a product, but also a political program, a set of ideas, or social change. Furthermore, the aims or ends of provocation are often blurred or multifaceted. For instance, artists and intellectuals may resort to provocation for many reasons. They often combine aesthetic pleasure and amusement with political, social, or even economic interests. The French musician Gainsbourg, for instance, broke many taboos related to sex, family, and money, and was known for his “permanent provocation” (Salgues, 1989) in the media. During a 1984 live broadcast on French television, he burnt a 500 francs banknote in protest against tax pressure, while expressing awareness that this is against the law: “What I’m going to do is illegal, but I’ll do it anyway.” Although he explicitly assigned a political goal to this specific transgression, provocation was more generally for Gainsbourg a *modus vivendi*, both a *jouissance* and the expression of a Baudelairean *mal-être*.

Vézina and Paul actually identify such “ambiguity” as their third definitional component of provocation (with distinctiveness and transgression of norms). They contend that the message and the advertiser’s intentions should be open to interpretations in order to provide a pleasing aesthetic experience to the consumer. But, as Driessens pointed out, this criterion may be specific to advertising, whereas for other provocations, the clearer the message the more likely it will have the desired effect on the receiver. In some cases, efficiently communicating intentions may better serve the purpose.

The problem of intentionality

Intentionality appears to be one of the challenging questions to address when conceptualizing provocation. Whereas Vézina and Paul contend that provocation is often used as “a full and deliberate communication strategy” (p. 177), Driessens argues that his findings “demonstrate the contingency of the component ‘intentionality’ in the definition of media provocation” (p. 556): “A provocation usually goes against the grain intentionally; however, there is an exception when a certain behavior is perceived to be a provocation by others, although the ‘provocateur’ did not (immediately) intend to provoke” (p. 566). This suggests that interpretation of a message as provocative should come from those receiving, rather than those emitting, this message. In his seminal work *Discourse as Social Interaction*, van Dijk (1997) supports this view, stating that “most social discourse analysis focuses less on speakers and even less on their (non-observable) intentions than on how discursive doings can be reasonably heard or interpreted, that is, inferred as actions from what is actually said, shown or displayed” (p. 11).

Yet disregarding the provocateur’s intentions is problematic insofar as it is the provocateur who is often held responsible for the provocation and its potentially damaging effects. Here we face a dilemma. On the one hand, as intentions are difficult to assess, they are subject to interpretations by the provoked one as well as by third parties. On the other, the original intentions of provocateurs cannot be ignored, particularly if they are to be accountable for the alleged provocation. A way to reconcile the provocateurs’ intentions with the provoked’s reception/interpretation is to refer, as Paris does, to provocation as an act “which should elicit a reaction” (quoted by Driessens, p. 558).

Eliciting a reaction

Considering provocation as a social process, Paris emphasizes (negative) reactions to provocation, which he defines as “an intentionally induced and unexpected contravention of a norm, implicating the other in an open conflict which should elicit a reaction, which in turn makes the other especially in the eyes of third parties morally discredited and exposed” (quoted by Driessens, p. 558). For Paris, eliciting a reaction is a definitional component of provocation.

Reaction to, and acceptability of, provocation are privileged objects of research for sociologists like Paris (see also Wahlström, 2011), as well as psychologists (Champion & Clay, 2007; Orobio de Castro, Verhulp, & Runions, 2012; Terrell, Patock-Peckham, & Nagoshi, 2009). Where Paris refers to elicited reactions, psychologists talk of “stimuli.” Interested in how narcissism and other psychopathologies account for different reactions to provocation, Reidy, Foster and Zeichner (2010) define provocation as taking “the form of verbal insult, physical attack, or other noxious stimuli” and as constituting “one of the most important causes of aggressive and violent behavior in laboratory and naturalistic research” (p. 414).

However, referring to stimuli and studying the nature, forms, and intensity of reactions imply that provocations may not always provoke actual reactions, or at least not the intended ones. The uncertainty of reactions corresponds with the ambivalence of intentions that we previously analyzed. This is why Vézina and Paul made (expected) reactions to provocation in advertisement their objects of empirical research, rather than an integral part of the definition of provocation. Their findings in fact show that final conclusions on reactions to provocation cannot be reached.

Likewise, Driessens (2013) suggests that “it is not essential that a provocation necessitates an immediate (counter-)reaction by the ‘other’ and even less that this reaction

implies a moral discredit” (p. 559). He nonetheless admits that it “does not mean that a provocation can be a one-way communication without any consequences; since a provocation is always directed towards or against someone or something, it entails certain social consequences, for example a change in the communicative situation through its transmission and possible reception” (p. 559).

There is therefore an agreement among scholars that certain reactions are pro-voked, in the Latin sense of *called for*. This nuance is what allows for the connection, and potentially disconnection, between the provocateur’s intentions and the reactions of the provoked one. Our examples drawn from various fields suggest that there are different types of desired reactions to provocation, from purchase, amusement, aesthetic pleasure, self-questioning, social progress to the call for a verbal or physical conflict. Certainly, both intentions and reactions may be ambivalent, mixed or contradictory. For instance, provocative advertisements may amuse and irritate at the same time; activists may provoke a violent conflict in the short term but with the ambition of provoking social or political change in the long run; artists and philosophers may try to provoke self-questioning in their audience and get rebuff and moral condemnation in return.

This is why we propose to define provocation as a communication strategy. The provocateur sets goals (e.g., starting a war) and performs the provocative act or speech for or against a person or a group whose expected reaction is supposed to serve these goals (e.g., the provoked nation enters the war). The provoked side not only reacts, but is also assigned responsibility for the damaging consequences (e.g., the provoked nation is held responsible for its bellicose reaction).

But the provocateur’s strategy may fall short. In this case, failure to achieve the goals is not the only price to pay: If exposed, the provocateur also risks reprobation. Paris implies that provocation leads, and maybe is intended, to blame those reacting to it. However,

labelling an act or a speech a “provocation” is precisely meant to expose and discredit the so-called provocateur. Provocation narratives appear to reframe the story in order to persuade third parties (the audience appointed judge) that the provocateur is responsible for the subsequent violence, while the provoked one reacted expectably and justifiably. Thus, while the act of provocation itself may result in blaming those reacting to it, provocation narrative is meant to expose and blame the provocateur for initiating the chain of reaction. Resorting to narratives of provocation fundamentally, although often implicitly, raises questions about causality, accountability and blaming.

Theorizing bias in provocation narratives

In this second part of our study, we focus on provocations that elicit, or result in, violent reactions because of the sort of bias that they may introduce in accounts of interactions and in the assignment of responsibility. Intentions could be falsely attributed, causality hidden or reversed, and blame shifted to the victim. Interestingly, when turned into a narrative device, provocation is no longer a communication strategy for the provocateurs but for those provoked, who use provocation to excuse their negative reactions and pass responsibility on to their victims. Then the provocation becomes a speech act defined through the recipient’s reaction as this reaction represents the outcome of the narrative that ratifies this narrative as a provocation. Let us examine the processes of deletion or reversal of causality behind such narratives.

Deleting or reversing causality

While we acknowledge possible other, intricate, layers of interpretations, the Mohammad cartoon controversies² (from the 2006 Danish cartoons to the Paris murders in January 2015) represent a good case in point for underlining the importance and complexity

of taking responsibility for provocation and reaction. These controversies oppose two lines of argumentation, as synthesized by Laegaard (2009). While some are in favor of these cartoons in the name of freedom of speech, others contend that these cartoons, Islamophobic and hateful, hurt millions of Muslims, and incite violence. Responding to the latter who held the provocateurs responsible for the violence, the former argue that if Islamic symbols are more likely to be targeted it is precisely because their defenders are more likely to react violently.

The cartoon that won the controversial “Draw the Prophet” contest, organized in Garland, Texas, in May 2015, illustrates this debate. It shows a hand drawing the portrait of Muhammad who, brandishing his sword, shouts “You can’t draw me;” to which the drawer replies: “That’s why I draw you!” Here are opposed two conceptions of provocation: Provocation as aggression and provocation as bravery. In the first conception, provocation *calls for* a reaction: Perceived by Muslims as hurting their faith and identity, the cartoons are blamed for initiating a symbolic violence that some see as justifying verbal or even physical violent reactions. In the second conception, provocation *is* the reaction: The cartoonists claim they drew the cartoons in reaction to pressures and threats meant to censor them. In such a blame game, two chains of causality are opposed: One starting with the publication of the cartoons, and the other starting with the threat of violence in case a cartoon is published.

Pomerantz (1978) has argued that “if an event can be turned into a *consequent event*, an attribution of responsibility is performable” (p. 119). This is what is at stake in the competition between the two provocation-reaction narratives in the Muhammad cartoons affair:

A device for allocating blame involves treating an event, e.g. an ‘unhappy incident’, as a consequent event in a series. An antecedent action, one which is intendedly linked with the ‘unhappy incident’, is referenced. The actor of the antecedent action has the status of a candidate blamed party. One aspect of the linking between the action

referenced in the blaming (the antecedent action) and the ‘unhappy incident’ is the relative temporal ordering of one to the other. (Pomerantz, 1978, p. 119)

Provocation introduces bias in the narrative when the narrator turns a conjunction of time (“provoke” in the sense of “what comes afterwards”) into a causal relation (“provoke” meaning “incite”), which becomes emotional or judgmental (“provoke” signifying “irritate”). In that sense, the provocation fallacy is a subtler version of the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. Provocation is then perceived as an aggressive action to which an aggressive reaction would be expectable, if not inevitable. Benefiting from an apparent confusion between temporal and causal relations, narrators making use of “provocation” are thus excused from explicitly defending their violent deeds, which are normalized by the action-reaction structure of the provocation narrative. The provocation fallacy becomes a sophism, since it dispenses narrators from addressing other aspects of the story such as why the provocation occurred in the first place (deletion of causality), and whether the reaction was reasonable or proportionate. The narrators then create a fundamental confusion between objective causal reasoning and normative judgmental interpretation.

Another implicit argument in the problematic use of provocation to excuse violence is that the provocateur (could have) anticipated the violent reaction and should thus have refrained from provoking. In his study of discourse as social interaction, van Dijk (1997) has insisted on such responsibility when arguing that speakers may be “expected to think at least about the more likely implications and consequences for others of what they do with talk and text. *Responsibility* for discursive action may involve norms and values about how ‘thoughtful’ they should be” (p. 11). The provocateur should thus have been deterred by the foreseeable reaction. But what if this reaction is unacceptable according to social, cultural or moral standards? When one decides to speak or act regardless of threats, should they still be

accused of (irresponsible) provocation? Conversely, if one refrains from acting because they anticipate violent reactions, should they not be considered cowards?

Shifting blame to the victim

Paris (1989) argues that third parties hold the provoked responsible for opening a conflict, even though their reactions are elicited by provocateurs. This may be true, unless the provocation narrative succeeds in presenting the provocateurs as blameworthy, although they are the victims of violence. In that case, third parties hold the provocateurs responsible for the reaction they provoked. What is fundamentally at stake in provocation narratives is thus the complex question of social accountability,³ in relation to causality and blame.

According to Brees and Martinko (2015), in order to hold someone accountable, that is to determine how punishable someone should be held for a behaviour or outcome, the first step is assessing their personal causality. Yet, as Lagnado and Channon (2008) pointed out, the attribution of responsibility and blame depends on the location of the putative cause in the chain of events that led to violence. In particular, some would invoke a “primacy effect” and look for an initiating event (for instance, the original provocation), while others would consider the “recency effect” and look for the last event that directly caused the outcome (for instance, by focusing on the violent agents and ignoring or denying that they were provoked).

Other factors that make causal attribution more complex are the questions of intentionality and foreseeability that we already mentioned in discussing the definition of provocation. In two experiments, Lagnado and Channon (2008) showed that participants rated intentional and foreseeable actions as more causal and blameworthy (p. 754). This concurs with the fact that actors tend to refer to their intentions rather than to the outcomes when evaluating themselves (Brees and Martinko, 2015, p. 44). More generally, an attributional bias seems inherent in the concept of accountability, as agents tend to attenuate the judgments

of responsibility that observers may formulate against them. The purpose of provocation narratives is to convince third parties that the provocateurs, not them, are responsible for the violence. At play in provocation narratives is a power struggle, in which one side tries not only to win a rhetorical battle, but also to obtain the condemnation of the other side.

The provocation defense used in court to mitigate, if not excuse, crimes is typical of a problematic transfer of blame and guilt. Originating in sixteenth century English courts (Dressler, 1982), it was grounded in the perception that a man's violent reaction to attack on his honor was not only acceptable but suitable. This conception declined in the nineteenth century although there was social and legal tolerance for such violence, still viewed as a natural and somewhat unavoidable loss of self-control, justifying mitigating circumstances. Since the end of the twentieth century, however, the provocation defense has become controversial, and is even rejected as archaic in a society that expects its members to manage their anger. Angie Zapata's 2009 murder trial epitomizes this change. The defense described the killing of a transsexual, Zapata, as its client's immediate reaction to the brutal discovery that Zapata had male genitalia, thus arguing that the victim provoked in the perpetrator a "transgender panic." But the jury considered this reason as homophobia and the accused was found guilty of first-degree murder with the aggravating circumstance of a hate crime (Tilleman, 2010).

Feminists and gender scholars have contributed to sensitizing law enforcement, the media and the general public to bias in provocation narratives about the rape and murder of female victims. We contend that provocation narratives introduce similar bias in many other contexts, although we may be less attentive to these other instances. For example, Lacy (2010) has deconstructed the mechanisms, including the use of "rhetorical reversals" (p.213), by which narratives on desegregation blamed Black Americans for being the sole parties responsible for their social problems. But he has not considered "provocation" itself as a

device of rhetorical reversal or provocation narrative as calling forth the sort of bias that he pointed out.

Labov's method applied to provocation narratives

The concept of provocation should thus represent a remarkable object of interest for discourse analysis and narratology:

Generally, talk about provocation serves an important function in justifying one's actions and passing judgment over the opponent's actions (cf. Bedford, 1986); in other words, it often contains a strong moral element. Accordingly, provocation narratives can be analysed as 'accounts' (Scott & Lyman, 1968), thus taking into consideration their 'rhetorical, persuasive properties, and their functions in constructing particular versions of events, justifications of actions, evaluations of others, and so on' (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006, p. 167). (Wahlström, 2011, pp. 370-371)

These functions of provocation narratives can be analyzed using the work of the sociolinguist Labov who studied oral accounts of personal traumatic experiences. Labov (1972) shows how the narrators' telling of events of their past is a partial reliving of their experiences, which they evaluate through the use of specific linguistic techniques. In transferring their experience to the listeners, the narrators build a personal theory of causality, which involves the assignment of praise and blame for the reported actions. Labov (1997, 2001) examines the different ways in which narrators twist or erase the causality in their accounts in order to hide or shift responsibility for the reported event. According to Labov (1997), to deconstruct a chain of causality, we have to identify the reportable event (E_0) which the story will be about. Then we ask the question "How did that happen?" and we try

to find the answer in the narrator's account. The answer is the event E_{-1} , which is the cause for E_0 . If we keep asking the question "How did that happen?" we will get the chain of causality according to the narrator. The chain is complete when the answer to the last question is "because that's the kind of thing we always (usually) do" (p. 11). If, on the other hand, a question that has no such self-evident answer is not addressed by the narrator, we can conclude that there is a missing link in the chain of causality that the narrator constructed.

Missing links are never random. They often hide or transfer guilt (of the narrators themselves or of other protagonists). The narrators try their best to cover up for missing links and propose a coherent story, but they unavoidably leave semantic or syntactic traces of the "operations on the original event sequences" (Labov, 2001, p. 82). Labov aims at identifying these traces left by the narrators, while refusing to characterize the "operations" as "Machiavellian manipulations of truth" (p. 82).⁴ We contend that "provocation" can be used as one of such lexical and logical tricks or, as Labov prefers to define them, "operations."

Assigning blame in news stories: Two examples

In this last part of our study, we apply Labov's approach to the analysis of two news items to illustrate how provocation distorts the chain of causality and introduces bias in narratives.

Blaming the bad guys in news stories

The questions of causality and blame are particularly fascinating when it comes to news stories. This is because, on the one hand, journalistic accounts are supposed to be as neutral as possible given the profession's standards of objectivity and impartiality (Maras, 2013) and, on the other hand, news is generally about negative events for which someone has to be held responsible.

Hartley (1982) argues that journalists fundamentally fulfil a “bardic function”, which is “not unlike that of the maker and teller of tales in oral cultures” (p. 104). As such, they are narrators in charge of assigning praise and blame, and of assigning roles of heroes, victims, villains to their protagonists. This reminds the seven character types that Propp (1984) identifies in Russian folk tales. Contending that the news has many of the qualities of myth, constructionist frame researchers focus their work on the identification of formulae recurrent in news stories, as they can be in tales, legends or myths. For instance, Barkin (1984) shows that news stories steadily contain elements of tension and conflict between villains and heroes, and that these elements solicit responses from the audience: Support, sympathy, or indignation. In this schemata, the individuals or groups identified as responsible for the violence become the focus of attention for the journalists/narrators and for the audience. Journalists thus bear a heavy responsibility when characterizing the protagonists of their stories. The very use of the term “provocation”⁵ in news stories should thus be alerting if we consider its function of blame assignment.

The two items that we selected using Lexis/Nexis database offer different instances of typical provocation narratives. The first refers to the provocation defense in a murder trial report. The second mentions provocation as one country’s justification for prospective sanctions that it might take against another country, in the context of international relations.

EXAMPLE 1: Provocation fallacy in a trial news report

In this article from the Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail* (“Man is sentenced to 10 years in hammer death of card player,” 1978) (Figure 1), the journalist reports a court’s decision and stops the chain of causality with the victim’s alleged provocation, thus refraining from investigating the grounds for provocation.

[Figure 1 about here]

Labov's chain of causality. The central event, as the headline makes explicit, is the condemnation: A man has been sentenced to ten years in jail for manslaughter (E_0).

Following Labov's method we ask: How did that happen? and reconstruct the chain of causality as follows:

E_0 : A man is sentenced to ten years in jail for manslaughter → E_{-1} : The perpetrator was a superintendent who lost his tenants' money in a card game and killed the winner with a hammer → E_{-2} : The perpetrator lost self-control → E_{-3} : The victim provoked the perpetrator: He laughed at him when the perpetrator said he was going to stop gambling → E_{-4} : Why did the victim laugh? No further explanation is provided.

Following Labov, in the absence of circumstantial clarification, we are prompted to think of an essentialist explanation, that is, based on the victim's character. He must have been provocative by nature. Thus the blame is, at least partially, shifted to the victim. The journalist uncritically reports the perpetrator's story and the judge's characterization of the victim's behavior as "evidence of provocation." However, the journalist/narrator left a trace of a missing link that may challenge the provocation narrative: "Mr. Hutchings had told police that after losing the money in the game last March, he told the winner, Joseph (Lou) Driscoll, 55, that he was going to stop gambling. However, the older man just laughed at him." Did the victim really *just* laugh because the gambler said he would stop gambling? Or was it for another reason, which the perpetrator had an interest not to report in his account to the police?

The victim cannot defend himself from the accusation of provocation and no witness

of the verbal exchange is reported; therefore we can only draw assumptions. What goal did the perpetrator assign to the conversation with the victim? He said that he feared the building's owners would find out that he had gambled with the tenants' money. So we may assume that the purpose of the conversation was to ask the victim for the money, promising that he learnt a lesson and would never gamble again. If the victim laughed, it might have been at the perpetrator's request for money rather than at his commitment to stop gambling. But this will remain a hypothesis. The provocation narrative leaves us with a crucial missing link in the chain of causality and partly assigns responsibility to the victim without further call for evidence.

EXAMPLE 2: Provocation fallacy in international news

In international news reports, the provocation fallacy would consist of supporting the friendly nation by justifying its violence as an acceptable reaction to a provocation, and/or shifting blame to the unfriendly nation by referring to a "provocation" without further justification. Testing this hypothesis would require a large-scale empirical research that is beyond the scope of this paper. We will be content here with analyzing one example.

The selected news item was published in the *New York Times* (Landler, 2010), and contains the word "provocations" four times, in addition to the words "provoke" and "provocative." We here reproduce passages that include these mentions and refer readers to the online full version (http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/world/asia/07diplo.html?_r=0)

Labov's chain of causality. The headline indicates the central event (E_0) in this news story: "Obama urges China to check North Koreans." Following Labov's method, we look for the reasons for this event. Already here the journalist/narrator mentions the North Koreans' "provocations": "after a series of provocations, which has stoked fears of a wider military

confrontation in the Korean Peninsula” (E₁). We note that the journalist did not write “because of a series of provocations” but “after,” thus subtly superimposing a temporal relation to the relation of causality implied by the term “provocations.” We are close to the *post hoc* fallacy.

Why did North Korea provoke? How did that happen? The journalist does not directly answer those questions, contenting himself with some details on the nature of the alleged provocations: “North Korea has lobbed artillery shells at South Korea, killing four people, and disclosed the existence of a clandestine uranium enrichment complex.” Why would North Korea shell a South Korean island and flout its commitments regarding its nuclear program? No explanation is provided beyond repetition of the word “provocations.”

The chain of causality in this story is therefore:

E₀: President Obama urges China’s President to “put the North Korean government on a tighter leash” → E₁: North Korea is responsible for “a series of provocations,” including shelling a South Korean island and flouting its commitment regarding its nuclear program → E₂: Why? No answer.

As Labov has suggested, this lack of circumstantial explanation prompts us to look for an essentialist explanation, that is, a reason based on the protagonists’ character: That is how North Korea behaves in general. It is provocative by nature.

However, a careful reading of this news item reveals traces of an alternative, circumstance-based, explanation. We can find such traces in the following two extracts:

Mr. Hu did not offer any specific assurances to Mr. Obama, the official said, but he also did not complain about joint American-South Korean military exercises in the Yellow Sea. Nor did he suggest that the United States was partly to blame for North

Korea's belligerence because of its unwillingness to negotiate with Pyongyang [our emphasis]. (Landler, 2010)

And: "After Mr. Obama's national security team met last Tuesday night, administration officials began saying that the United States would conduct more military exercises near North Korea and China should the North engage in further provocations" [our emphasis]. (Landler, 2010).

In the first extract, the journalist implies that the U.S. and South Korea conduct military exercises near North Korea and that the U.S. rejects negotiations with North Korea. These actions, albeit not part of the main narrative and not time framed, could have been interpreted as American provocations. This is confirmed in the second extract: The U.S. says it "would conduct more military exercises near North Korea" – meaning that it had already conducted some prior to North Korea's alleged "provocations."

It is noteworthy that the journalist did not insert this explanation in the chain of causality that he constructed, but only provided the information in the second part of the text. We can re-construct an alternative chain of causality by paying close attention to the traces that he left behind:

E₀: China's President is not responsive to President Obama urging him to "put the North Korean government on a tighter leash" → E₁: China supports North Korea's reaction to the U.S.' provocations → E₂: The U.S. and South Korea conducted military exercises near North Korea and the U.S. refuses to negotiate with North Korea → E₃: The U.S. has geopolitical and commercial interests in isolating North Korea and China, in the context of a new Asian version of the Cold War.

However, we can notice that this alternative chain (implied from the article's pieces of information) still proposes a problematic provocation narrative. Had the journalist developed this alternative chain in his narrative, he would only have opposed two flawed versions of the "He started it!" blame game. Further research may determine to what extent international news reports may escape such pitfalls.

Conclusion

Provocation and provocation narratives are communication strategies. They may serve pedagogic purposes, enhance critical thinking and be beneficial for the provoked party. But provocations may also elicit negative reactions and open conflicts. In that case, the provocateur and the provoked are likely to respectively use provocation and provocation narratives to distort causality and shift blame to the other side. This type of provocation was the focus of this paper because of its potential for introducing bias in the communication process, especially regarding the assignment of responsibility and guilt.

Reference to provocation is made in many fields and in various contexts of everyday life; yet its study is often limited to the scope of particular disciplines on which its definition is contingent. In this paper we offered an integrative framework to look at provocation from a broader communication perspective. To conceptualize provocation, we thus compared the various definitions found in the literature in diverse disciplines. Rather than finding common grounds on which to base a unique definition, we arrived at definitional elements around which discussions may take place: Unexpectedness and distinctiveness, questioning or contravention of norms, intentionality, and the elicitation of a reaction.

Intentionality and reaction are the most challenging aspects. Indeed, if a provocation may be unintentional, how can the provocateur be held responsible for it and for its alleged consequences? Who is mainly accountable for violent reactions elicited by the provocation?

At stake in provocations and provocation narratives are crucial issues of intentionality, accountability, and blame.

This is why we propose to define provocation as a communication strategy. The provocative act or speech is performed for or against a person or a group whose expected reaction is supposed to serve the provocateur's goals. But provocation is a risky strategy. If exposed, the provocateur becomes the one accountable in the eyes of third parties. As long as the provocation is not identified as such, it might benefit the provocateur as it serves to expose the provoked to judgment by third parties. But from the moment when it is recognized as a "provocation", that is, put in a persuasive narrative, the blame is shifted to the provocateur who will be accountable for the reaction of the provoked one, even if this reaction makes him/her the victim of violence. Provocation narratives may thus transfer blame to victims by hiding or reversing causality.

As deviance is a predictor of newsworthiness (Shoemaker, Chang, & Brendlinger, 1987), conceptualizing provocation and investigating provocation narratives are particularly relevant in the field of journalism. This may be even more the case for international news, where "bad guy" narratives and stories of world threats are more frequent (Segev, 2016). Future research could test the hypothesis that countries that are framed as provocative often have poor diplomatic relations with the reporting country. When analyzing world news, Labov's method could be further combined with a network analysis to show how provocation is used to frame international relations. This is one among many opportunities to use provocation narratives to advance research on causality and assignment of responsibility in a variety of communicating texts. More broadly, we want to invite critical analysts and those concerned with information and communication literacy to consider the term "provocation" as an alert. When it appears in any communicating text, questions of intentionality, causality, accountability, and blame should be addressed and potential for bias assessed.

Notes

1. As we shall see, the complexity of the issues of intentionality and causality imposes important limitations to the dichotomous conception of provocation as “positive” or “negative.” However, this distinction is helpful given the focus of our paper on the potential for bias inherent in provocation narratives that are meant to convince third parties of the responsibility of some of the protagonists in the negative event in which they are involved.
2. Controversies and provocations are closely connected concepts. Provocations may – but this is not necessary – open controversies, in the same way as, for Paris (1989), provocations “elicit” reactions that open conflicts. Controversy may even be the strategic goal of the provocateur and, in this case, we characterize the provocation as “controversial,” that is, likely to give rise to a controversy. The conditions for a provocation to lead to a controversy deserve further investigation.
3. An in-depth discussion of the intricate relations between intentionality, attribution of causality/responsibility and the issue of accountability is beyond the scope of this paper. However we should insist here that these intricacies strongly contribute to the limitations of a distinction between “positive” and “negative” provocations. For instance, how is someone held accountable for a provocation motivated by good intentions but leading to bad consequences? Is such provocation a “positive” or “negative” one?
4. Although missing links in a narrative are never random, they are not necessarily intentional, nor is the process consisting of “covering up” for them. Labov insists that lacunae

in a narrative are often unconscious, even though they result in hiding the narrators' responsibility.

5. Journalists may refer to provocation in quotes to save the appearance of objectivity.

Showing that quotes are often used as a tool in narratives of conflicts, Nylund (2006) contends that news is hardly about reporting factual events but rather revolves around various practices of quoting. Journalists work to select, edit and represent explanations, interpretations, and speculations about certain events, and to praise and blame actors. Hence, although quotes are supposed to contribute to the journalists' effort at balancing two sides of a conflict, they are often used to illustrate or support one side, and are woven into a moral discourse that dominates the story.

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