Four reasons why source monitoring cannot explain how people handle fictional information

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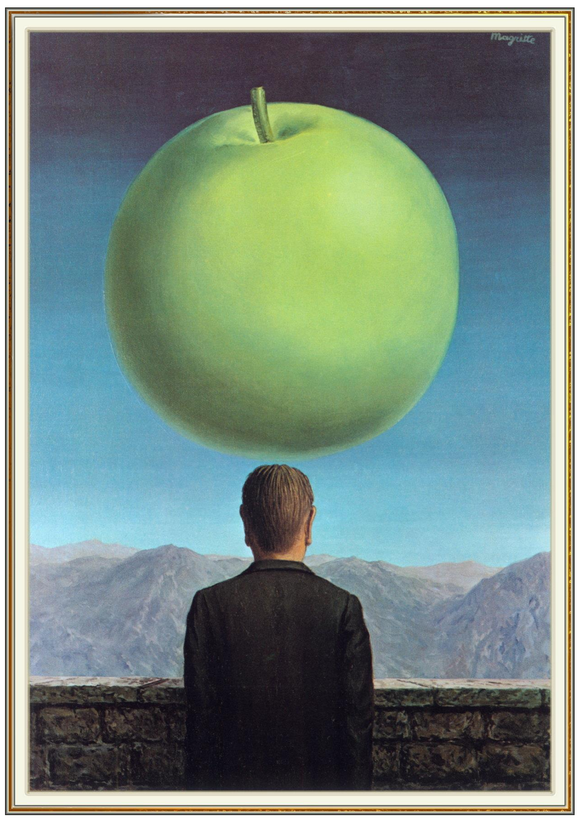
Background

Fictional information refers to information which a person can learn, remember, and use, but that the person believes should not be evaluated against the real world (such as objects and persons that do not exist and events that did not really happen) (Gander, 2005). Examples include fairy-tales, novels, and thriller movies. Source monitoring (Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993), a theory of how people handle information from various sources, has been applied to many phenomena, such as eyewitness testimony, persuasion, amnesia, and memory and aging. The theory has also been suggested as an account of how people handle fictional information (Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993), but more specific research to test this account has not been made.

Question

Can the handling of fictional information be explained by source monitoring theory?



Discussion and conclusion

There are at least four problems with using source monitoring as a theory of how people process fictional information.

1. First, a single source can convey both fictional and non-fictional information. Identifying the source of some information is not sufficient to decide whether that information is fictional or non-fictional.

2. Second, it is possible to remember the fictional status of the information without remembering its source.

3. Third, results from studies suggest that the processing of fictional information shows a different pattern compared to source monitoring. Marsh, Meade, and Roediger (2003) and Green and Brock (2000) found that people still applied fictional information to the real world, even when they realised that the information was fictional. This is in contrast to source monitoring, where people adjust their beliefs when they learn that the information originated from an unreliable source.

4. Fourth, there is a problem with associating internal events to events that are made up and external events to events that really occurred. The part of source monitoring which lets people distinguish between internal and external events are called reality monitoring (Johnson & Raye 1981).

   From the perspective of reality monitoring, memory of non-fictional events is equated with memory of external events, and memory of fictional events is equated with memory of internal events. According to reality monitoring theory, there is a systematic difference between these memories, in that memory of external events contains more perceptual, spatial, and temporal details.

   However, since fictional information can be conveyed through various media and sense modalities (e.g., text, speech, video, face to face), reality monitoring theory cannot give a satisfactory explanation to how people are able to distinguish memory of fictional information from that of non-fictional information (Gander, 2005). Explorative empirical studies suggest that the perceptual and contextual details do not differ between memories of events which have varying fictional content (e.g., a short story, computer games, and real events). Rather, what seems to be involved are two unrelated dimensions: external/internal and fictional/non-fictional, where reality monitoring theory only captures the first dimension.

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