

MiT7 Unstable Platforms: the promise and peril of transition

Panel 6 Narratives in Transition: Digital Life Writing, Digital Lives

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Digital Identity Narratives

Introduction

The proliferation of social media has led to an abundance of self-expression online in the form of identity narratives. The online cultural phenomena of digital identity has been explored using many different methods, one of these methods is through the analysis of digital narratives.¹ ‘Digital identity narratives’ is a term used to analyze identity narratives that are presented on social media platforms such as weblogs and social networking websites.

Two conflicting methodological practices used to study identity narratives are psychology and literary theory.² These approaches need to be reconciled, through interdisciplinary research, and as a result transformed into complementing methods for researching digital identity narratives. The micro-context of a digital identity narrative validates the use of a psychological approach, whereas literary theory is best suited for the sociolinguistic interpretation of the text and the online cultural environment – the macro-context. Using such a two-folded approach we can perhaps understand more about the motivation and meaning behind the cultural phenomena of digital identity narratives.

¹ Marina Grishakova and M. L. Ryan, *Intermediality and Storytelling*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010.

² Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh, *Narrative and Identity, Studies in Narrative*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co. 2001.

Digital Identity + Identity Narratives

We construct and understand the world around us through narratives. Telling stories is possibly our earliest form of entertainment, from oral storytelling traditions and pictographs on cave walls, right up to the information age with social media platforms and mobile technological devices. The medium that stories have been communicated through is constantly evolving, but are the stories themselves changing? Despite technological advances, are the story and the storyteller anchored as a constant and continual unit of culture? Digital identity narratives, are the stories we tell digitally about ourselves and our world. The term fuses together the established idea of digital identities, as the individual component of digital culture – the citizen of the global village so to speak and identity narratives, which analyze how we tell stories about ourselves. The study of digital identity narratives much like digital storytelling itself, is an interdisciplinary field which combines the methodologies of cultural anthropology, ethnography, sociology, psychology, literary criticism and socio-linguistic.³ Narrative study has long explored themes of identity as both a personal and cultural construction, and an expression of a particular place and time in history.

“Not many questions in Western literature and thought have a longer, deeper and livelier intellectual history than how we give meaning to our lives – and how, in doing so, we construct ourselves as Gestalten in time, as personal and cultural beings. But this question is newly alive today, for modern scholarship in various disciplines has brought new challenging perspectives to our understanding of human identity construction. These are the perspectives of narrative study.”⁴

Both ‘identity’ and ‘narrative’ have been the subject of long traditions of intellectual curiosity, research and discussion. Although the two research fields have not always been congruent and connected, as the study of identity has been explored using different methodological tools of investigation than the study of narratives. Identity has been investigated in the fields of psychology and sociology, and narratives have long been the domain of literature and literary theory. Psychology and literary

³ Although the topic of digital identity narratives is not limited to the digital humanities and has also been explored in digital art and computer science.

⁴ Brockmeier, 2001. Pg. 2.

criticism although both engaged in research of the same topic (identity narratives) have fundamental differences in their paradigm of human nature. Literary critic Daniel Albright (1996) said that “Literature is a wilderness and psychology is a garden”⁵, and went on to explain how psychology is domestic and methodologically rigid where as literature can more easily deal with the “irregularities and deformities”⁶ of undomesticated nature.

This notion of separation or fragmentation is an idea that has been well explored in post-modern philosophies, rhetoric and discourse analysis and can easily be applied to current understandings of identity and self-representation. (Goffman 1959, Giddens 1991). “By the mid-twentieth century, the idea of a fixed personality based on a stable mentality became increasingly untenable and the counter idea, of identity or subjectivity being an asset to be groomed and presented to best effect, has gained acceptance.”⁷ Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor is that everyday life is an identity performance, which is fashioned specifically to the context of the stage and feedback loop of the audience.⁸ This feedback loop is demonstrated in web-logs (blogs) where readers can leave feedback in the form of comments and also in social networking sites such as Facebook with comments, writing on walls and the ‘like’ button. Although Roland Barthes wrote about the ‘Death of the Author’ and post-structuralists provided many good arguments for why a written work and the biographical information or intention of the author is not relevant in the analysis of a literary text, in many cases of written works on the Internet, the authors’ intention is everything. For example, if a weblog author does not like the comments left by the audience/readers, the author/blogger has many courses of option at hand. The blogger can correct the text, add additional information, defend it or delete it within an instant. Depending in the psychological determinates some bloggers may strive for crowd pleasing, where others may intentionally be instigators for outrage.

⁵ Ulric Neisser and Robyn Fivush. *The Remembering Self*. Cambridge University Press 1994. 01 May 2011 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511752858.004>

⁶ Brockmeier, 2001. Pg. 2.

⁷ Joanne Finkelstein. *The Art of Self Invention, Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture*. London: I.B.Tauris, 2007. Pg. 3.

⁸ Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.

Changing Storyteller, Changing Language

Marshall McLuhan understood how much of an effect the electronic environment has on every facet of our everyday life. In the *Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan explained how the Global Village would be brought about by an electronic interdependence created by electronic media. In the Global Village there would be a return to tribal existence, as opposed to the more individualistic and fragmented life of the literary man from the previous communication revolution.⁹ McLuhan's ideas was that there would be a shift from literary man to tribal-integral man, visual culture would be replaced with oral culture and the need for privacy would be replaced with the need for community or tribe. Digital culture itself can be seen as online communities and online tribes, which share stories, values, collective identities and site specific established social conventions (netiquette).

“Following McLuhan, Meyrowitz says electronic media recalls simultaneity, a key aspect of oral societies – action, perception and reaction again become prime forms of communication. Only this electronic auralty is far different from that of old; it is not limited physically to time and space. The impression of experiencing distant events fosters a decline in power-instigated, print-supported, implicit hierarchies, thus imploding social structures.”¹⁰

In many ways digital identity narratives have more in common with spoken conversation rather than written communication and literature genres. The changing written form of communication used online has been referred to as ‘spoken written communication’ (Irene Kacandes)¹¹ or ‘secondary orality’ (Walter Ong)¹² which is explored by sociolinguists and digital narrative researchers such as Ruth Page in her work on ‘Interactivity and Interaction: Text and Talk in Online Communities’¹³ and Jannis K. Androutsopoulos in ‘Sociolinguistics and Computer Mediated

⁹ Marshall McLuhan. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962.

¹⁰ Mike Hunter, *McLuhan's Pendulum: Reading Dialectics of Technological Distance*. Sarai Reader 03 *Shaping Technologies*, 2003. Pg. 148.

¹¹ Irene Kacandes, *Talk Fiction: Literature and the Talk Explosion*, Lincoln 2001.

¹² Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, New York 1982.

¹³ Marina Grishakova, M.L. Ryan, *Intermediality and Storytelling*, Berlin-New York 2010.

Communication'¹⁴. Sociolinguists research the relationship between identity, language and discourse, and have experienced revolutions in their field as previous models of the relationship between identity, linguistics and social variables have been challenged by new approaches.¹⁵ The narrative structure of online communication is an interesting field for sociolinguists as digital culture has developed unique vernaculars, languages that were perhaps influenced and created by the technological environment itself. Much like William Labov studied the African American English vernacular and in doing so developed the methodology for sociolinguists¹⁶, so studying the vernacular used in online communities could help develop a framework or methodology for studying digital ethnography, digital culture and digital identity narratives.

“The distinctive and indissolubly “spoken-written” qualities of online discourse present a fresh challenge for exploring the modal resource of narrative. The convergence that typifies secondary orality means that the qualities of the literate and oral modes cannot be isolated from each other, nor can the analysis of narratives that emerge from this participatory culture rely on models derived from exclusively written or spoken paradigms.”¹⁷

In computer mediated communication (CMC), identity performances are disembodied, but constructed instead within the context of the virtual environment. Unlike in the offline world, where information is communicated not only through text and speech, but also through tone of speech and visual communication (multimodal communication), the online world has lost a few of those important senses. Miscommunication can be an outcome of the missing information, as without visual or verbal feedback the detection of nuances is much more difficult.¹⁸ The replacement of face to face communication with computer mediated communication has changed the written language, and introduced symbols used to communicate

¹⁴ Jannis Androutsopoulos, Introduction: Sociolinguistics and computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 10, 2006.

¹⁵ Anna De Fina, Deborah Schiffrin and Michael Bamberg. *Discourse and identity*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

¹⁶ William Labov. “The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax.” In *Language in the Inner City*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1972. Pgs 354-96.

¹⁷ Grishakova, 2010. Pg. 208.

¹⁸ Danah Boyd, Michele Chang, and Elizabeth Goodman "Representations of Digital Identity." Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work, Chicago, IL, 2004.

emotions. This has resulted in a convergence of spoken and written communication, on mobile phones with text messaging, instant messaging as well as other communication platforms where typographic symbols are used in new ways to express emotion within the text.

The ‘smiley face’ and what are referred to as emoticons (emotional icons) are commonly used in interactive digital media. The smiley face was invented by Scott E. Fahlman at 11.44 on the 19th of September 1982, the entire transcript of the online discussion on a Carnegie Mellon University computer science general board is available online.¹⁹ The computer science board (an online discussion forum) were trying to come up with different ways to let others know that they were joking, and were proposing different typographical marks to indicate to others the intended emotion behind the typed text. This need for non-verbal communication, such as facial emotions and the use of body language to tell a story reveals the nature of online communication. “Since emoticons may serve as nonverbal surrogates, suggestive of facial expression, they may add a paralinguistic component to a message.... The fact that emoticons are used implies that individuals at least feel the need to express some of their emotions with short symbols rather than text.”²⁰ The new medium created a need for a different kind of communication, yet in 1982 computer technology was far from a multi-media environment that it is today. Almost 30 years later, despite technological advances, which have incorporated sound and images into the online environment – we are still using emoticons in text to express ourselves. What is it about the online environment and digital culture that created this playful or emotional need? Early criticism of computer mediated communication with the opinion that CMC’s are a cold and impersonal medium, has been challenged by new studies on the use of emoticons in online environments. (Derks 2007)

“Our conclusion is that emotions are abundant in CMC, and there is no indication that CMC is an impersonal medium. This can first of all be inferred from the success of MSN, the presence of blogs and support lists, and the success of online therapy, in all of which emotions about a variety of personal experiences and problems are shared.

¹⁹ Original board in which the :-) was born: <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~sef/Orig-Smiley.htm>

²⁰ Daantje Derks, Exploring the missing wink: emoticons in cyberspace. Open University Netherlands, 2007. Pg. 29.

The analyses of these messages, although not always focused on the communication or expression of specific emotions, clearly show that emotions are communicated, whether more implicitly or more explicitly.”²¹

This “spoken-written” text²² has interesting characteristic that have developed online, which possibly stem from the same root as the need for emoticons, the use of symbols instead of expressing emotion through text. What did the online environment provide that created a new need to inject emotion and traits that are common in oral culture and storytelling into text based communication? Was it a more familiar environment, more relaxed, interpersonal and interactive than the traditional letter, fax or telephone communication in which text can be ‘set up’ in a greater context? Was it the public aspect, where the text was being read by a larger (and possibly anonymous) audience who may not understand insider or personal senses of humour? Or was it the medium itself that forced people to find new ways to interact with each other? A basic and global human need is storytelling, which has evolved to a more diffused cultural background and a larger anonymous audience in the information age. Traditionally stories would be told to a known audience of similar cultural background. Every culture that we have known has been a storytelling culture, which makes storytelling possibly a pan-cultural form of defining generic human life.²³

²¹ Derks, 2007. Pg. 31.

²² Grishakova ,2010.

²³ Brockmeier, Jens and Rom Harre. Narrative: Problems and promises of an alternative paradigm. Research on Language Interaction, 1997. Pg. 266.

Small Stories of Everyday Life

The relationship between the online self and the offline self, in the case of digital identity narratives, can be explored through discourse analysis. Traditionally discourse analysis discusses the relation between discourse and interaction and the relation between text (discourse) and context. However discourse analysis much like narrative analysis is an umbrella term not a single unified approach, as the same term covers many different approaches used by researchers in this interdisciplinary field.²⁴ Danah Boyd pointed out, online we have no identity information in the form of bodies in the corporeal sense – which obscures identity information, and to be able to exist in mediated contexts people must ‘write themselves into being’ for example filling in profiles on social networking sites.²⁵

“As far as human affairs are concerned, it is above all through narrative that we make sense of the wider, more differentiated, and more complex texts and contexts of our experience. It is essentially this notion that has been both generalized and broadened as well as specified in a wide spectrum of inquiries that include studies on the ways we organize our memories, intentions, life histories, and ideas of our “selves” or “personal identities” in narrative patterns.”²⁶

Digital identities can be constructed out of text, images, sound, video and any other computer mediated means of conveying meaning from the author of the digital identity to others, and at times only to themselves. In many cases a digital identity may exist as a small blurb of text under the subheading of ‘Biography’ or ‘About Me’ (often used in social media platforms). Other times in less structured environment, or web-platforms with more flexible and less stringent design in how to communicate, such as commenting or blogging, a digital identity can be created and maintained by a single or series of small stories. The ideas of Alexandra Georgakopoulou in ‘Small stories, Interactions and Identities’²⁷ and ‘Small Stories as New Perspective in

²⁴ Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe, 2006.

²⁵ Danah Boyd. *Taken Out of Context, American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics*. University of California, Berkeley, 2008. Pg.121.

²⁶ Brockmeier & Harre, 1997. Pg. 264

²⁷ Alexandra Gerogakopoulou. *Small Stories, Interactions and Identities*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007. Pg. 1-20.

Narrative and Identity Analysis'²⁸ lend themselves very well to the idea of digital identity and it's modern versions of narrative, story teller and identity construction. "Our analysis has demonstrated how a careful reading of a strip of interactions as a 'small story' can reveal aspects of identity construction that would have otherwise remained unnoticed."²⁹ The work of Erving Goffman has been essential in the study of digital identity, particularly "Self-Presentation of Everyday Life". Goffman's idea that social interaction and face to face interaction are framed as theatrical performances, with the metaphor of the self as a performer and life being a stage with the back stage symbolizing privacy and private lives and the front stage symbolizing the public and public actions, easily translate to the notion of the digital identity being a mode of performance or theatrics that utilise the online environment as a stage to perform. (Goffman, 1959) Georgakopoulou further expands Goffman's³⁰ exploration of self as performer, story telling and propagandist:

"As Schiffrin (1990) has explicated it, drawing on Goffman, storytellers can present themselves in the capacity of (a) animator (the aspect of self which physically produces talk), (b) author (the aspect of self responsible for the content of talk), (c) figure, the main character in the story, someone who belongs to the world that is spoken about and not the world in which the speaking occurs, and, finally, (d) principal, the self established by what is said, committed to what is said... Through such manipulations of their kaleidoscope of selves, storytellers can diffuse their agency or responsibility in the social field, create a widened base of support for their views and beliefs, or, generally, cast positive light on them (e.g. see Hill 1995)"³¹

Much in the same way, a digital identity narrative can show how an author can "manipulate a kaleidoscope of selves"³² to multi-function and fit into different environments and roles that have been outlined online. However, the internet as a networked public³³ complicates previous eras' understandings of what is public and private and what is front or back stage. Exploration of spatial and digital identities

²⁸ Michael Bamberg and Alexandra Georgakopoulou. "Small Stories as a New Perspective in Narrative and Identity Analysis." *Text & Talk*, 28(3), 2008. Pg 377-396.

²⁹ Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008. Pg. 392.

³⁰ Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.

³¹ Georgakopoulou, 2007. Pg. 16.

³² Georgakopoulou, 2007.

³³ Boyd, 2008.

was neglected for a long time by identity researchers, and has only recently began to gain ground. Also the spatial and visual aspects of digital identities were at first ignored by identity researchers who focused on linguistics. A more holistic approach to explore digital identity construction, would use both visual and textual data and incorporate the spatial aspects such as time and place as well as the intentions of the author. By placing digital identity narratives in location, space and time, a greater context can be built which can explore both group and individual digital identity narrative practices.³⁴

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³⁴ Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe, 2006.

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