Editorial

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Telling Stories about Self in Digital Contexts: Same, Same, but Different?

On 2 August 2016, one discussion topic caused a stir among social media users: a popular smartphone app Instagram introduced a new feature named 'Stories'. A 'story' involves a series of pictures and videos taken by a user throughout the day automatically collated into a slideshow. Many have criticised Instagram for closely modelling their 'stories' on the Snapchat's analogous feature, which in 2013 had been the key marketing point for the app and made the company successful. The most important aspect of both Snapchat and Instagram stories is that they are ephemeral: they can only be viewed for 24 hours after posting-time after which they fade into nothingness. Transience, it seems, is one of the most notable qualities of Web 2.0 storytelling in both visual and verbal formats. The microblogging service Twitter, for example, also foregrounds the most recent posts and lets the older ones scroll down into oblivion in a rapidly updating timeline.

Transience, non-linearity and other hallmarks of online communication have given rise to a body of scholarly work on how the internet is changing our linguistic practices. The present collection on *Personal Narrative Online* is situated within the growing presence of explorations of conditions of – and interactions with – narrativity in internet formats. The most recent in this line is Allington & Pihlaja's (2016) special issue devoted to reading and interpretation in the age of the internet. Two predecessors, Hoffmann (2010) and Page & Thomas (2011), have even closer ties to the present collection: both deal with the narratives in an environment saturated with the social media, blogs, augmented reality and other new affordances.

Often, research on 'new narratives' picks out rather liminal cases: Page & Thomas (2011), for example, include among their datasets hypertext fiction (Bell 2011) and the interactive novel *Breathing Wall* (Ensslin 2011). Stenglin & Djonov (2010) in Hoffmann (2010) look at hypermedia 'artedventure'. Similarly, Ryan (2004) takes on other non-traditional narrative media: genre paintings, reality TV, horror films, and music. In a word, 'new narratives' that attract attention are the ones strikingly different from the verbal prototype. Born-digital hypertext, tumblr blogs, vlogs make use of the new sensory and semiotic channels made available by the multimodal internet spaces[1]. Crucially, storytelling of this type questions the very basics of what constitutes a narrative: a fixed sequence of elements or "a sense of an ending" (Page & Thomas 2011:9). The reader can no longer peek in at the end of the book to learn how the story ends; indeed, the teller herself might not know the ending or even be unaware that she is telling a story (Dayter 2016:180-181). The recognition of the open-ended nature of online narratives has ushered in new theoretical frameworks that can accommodate it; most importantly, the small stories approach (Georgakopoulou 2007).

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1 This is not to say that verbal narrative enriched through other modalities is a new invention inextricably tied to the internet: one particularly striking example is Central Australian sand stories that involve drawing on the ground, creative placement of small objects, and sign and gesture in oral storytelling (Green 2014).

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However, as the range of papers in this special issue shows, there is also significant interest in the personal narratives in the internet age that use less than exotic modalities: they are predominantly verbal, have a clearly identifiable teller or a limited number of co-tellers, and can often be meaningfully analysed with the help of Labovian framework. Emails to a health counsellor (Thurnherr et al., this issue) or life stories on diasporic forums (Anchimbe, this issue; Heyd, this issue) are familiar in their structure and organisation. We argue that it is exactly this superficial conformity of the sample that makes it interesting for an analyst. The informants chose not to exploit the additional affordances of the online environment and, it seems, only make use of the online platforms for access and dissemination. Nevertheless, as the papers in this collection show, the influence of the internet does shine through in less obvious ways: it becomes evident in reader orientation and involvement practices, in setting the story and in managing the audience expectations, in assumptions about the cumulatively created identity and shared background knowledge.

Given the self-involved nature of online activities, it is inevitable that personal narrative finds fertile soil in internet environments. Page & Thomas (2011b:2) point out that increased access to the internet, and specifically the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies in the late nineties, have opened the gateway to online text even to the technologically unsavvy users. Internet seems to respond to the need of users to tell their story online – it offers a "low threshold and high ceiling" (Papert 1980) venue for writing; that is, it is easily accessible to novices and is powerful enough to satisfy every need in text production and dissemination. Moreover, along with verbal forms of expression, internet invites a type of narrative that shifts away from the text as the main narrative-carrying element to other modes (Hayles 2003). One case in point is the already mentioned Instagram and Snapchat 'Stories' feature that chronologically compiles photos and videos which can be augmented through text and drawings.

Volumes have been devoted to the definition of narrative and the characteristics of narrativity, together with various other approaches to listing narrative components and the accompanying methods of study. The reader only needs to look as far as the excellent overview by De Fina & Georgakopoulou (2011) or the fresh-off-the-press handbook by De Fina & Georgakopoulou (2015) to find comprehensive treatment of linguistic study of narrative by renowned scholars in the field. A useful guide to digital narratology is provided in Page & Thomas's (2011a) introduction, and Page (2012) is devoted to the analysis of social media narratives and accompanying theoretical debate.

In this short introduction, we will not attempt to cover this ground; we also believe that the following articles are much better placed to provide the background to their arguments. Instead, we would like to lay stress on one aspect of online narratives that has emerged as prominent in the papers in this volume – *audience design*. We will consider how audience design influences some of the oft-cited characteristics of online discourse, or how authors make use of online affordances to shape their texts for the audience.

Audience design as a framework for explaining stylistic variation is usually associated with the name of the sociolinguist Allan Bell (1984, 1997). He argued:

> "...speakers design their style for their audience. Differences within the speech of a single speaker are accountable as the influence of the second person and some third persons, who together compose the audience to a speaker's utterances" (Bell 1984: 159).

In a ranking of audience roles that is reminiscent of the participant framework suggested by Goffman (1981), Bell (1984) proposed an implicational hierarchy consisting of speaker, addressee, auditor and overhearer. All three types of hearers may be implicated in responsive or initiative style shift. Responsive shift includes linguistic accommodation or differentiation, i.e. converging with the interlocutor on linguistic markers in order to demonstrate affinity and liking, consciously or unconsciously (or, alternatively, in case of differentiation, dissimilarity and distance). Thus, in responsive style design, speakers react to situational circumstances. Initiative style design, in contrast, itself initiates a change in the situation. A prime example of an initiative shift is the switch from V to T pronoun in conversation in order to redefine the interpersonal relationship between the speakers. Bell (1984:184), however, is careful to point out that initiative style shift is still a type of audience design: "a speaker who takes the initiative and redefines the situation through

speech is still responding to the audience. Initiative shift is essentially a redefinition, by the speaker, of the relationship between speaker and addressee."

When applying the concept of audience design to CMC (computer-mediated communication) contexts, we need to consider the role of internet audiences in both their potentially interactive and in their largely anonymous nature. The original application of audience design dealt with the adoption of particular stylistic features of radio presenters according to their assumed – but anonymous and not physically present – audience on different radio stations (Bell 1977, 1984). The relationship between speaker/writer and audience in internet environments is not entirely dissimilar: as scholars have pointed out, there also exists a rift between the intended (or conceptualized) audience of a tweet or a blog post and its actual audience in CMC contexts (Puschmann 2010, 2013; Viégas 2005; Qian & Scott 2007). When it comes to internet environments, the parts of an addressee and an auditor from Bell's framework are therefore most usefully subsumed under the concept of imagined audience (Marwick & boyd 2010). An imagined audience can consist of the friends and followers that the user interacts with most frequently, a generic sympathetic reader, a knowledgeable peer interested in the topic of the post, or even the writer him- or herself. Although the users are aware of the fact that potential audiences of unprotected Facebook or Twitter accounts are boundless, they rarely incorporate this understanding into their construction of an imagined audience (Marwick & boyd 2010:116). Consequently, any judgements about audience design of online talk are complicated by the impossibility to define exactly which addressee and auditor the speaker is interacting with. Puschmann (2010: 93-94) mentions that one approach is to collect the bloggers' answers directly via surveys; alternatively, he suggests, one may rely on the topic to get an idea of the imagined audience.

As far as narrative studies are concerned, the concept of audience design has already been successfully applied in the courtroom setting where Gibbons (2003) sees the public – and assumptions about their background and beliefs – as central to the design of courtroom narratives. Unlike in face-to-face institutional settings, the audiences in the investigations of personal narrative online in this volume are necessarily imagined. Both in online health contexts (Thurnherr et al., this volume) and in online dating ads (Mühleisen, this volume), the notion of positioning (Davies and Harré 1990) is vital for an understanding of how the interactants create a particular role for themselves by considering not only their own but also their (intended/imagined) audience's face concerns. Inspiring credibility in order to invoke trust is highly important for the construction of a counselling or advisor persona in the three online health contexts Thurnherr et al. are analyzing in their contribution. Similarly, the construction of a credible and authentic life story is a vital "selling point" in attracting a response from the audience in online dating ads (Mühleisen, this volume). The autobiographical narratives which are used to create these personas – real or fake, almost always fragmented – are therefore very much designed for the audience.

Life writing does not always have to rely on verbal narrative – pictures may very well also tell a story. In her analysis of three types of selfies, Georgakopolou (this volume) also draws on positioning analysis and small stories. Audience engagement is crucial for the creation of the selfie story, which is reliant on participation and knowledge of audience expectation: "a perspective on selfies as small stories recognizes narrative stance taking as an important aspect of posting selfies in context and for specific viewers/users" (Georgakopolou, this volume). Expectation and group-specific knowledge in the self-styled community of practice of Pick-up Artists (PUA) provide the frames for their narrative interaction in online forums (Dayter & Rüdiger, this volume). In the narrative reconstructions of encounters between Pick-up Artists and women ("field reports"), the event is framed in three layers as [PUA TRAINING], [PERSONAL NARRATIVE] and [SUCCESS REPORT], specifically designed to meet the expectation of the audience. Shared knowledge, attitudes and beliefs are the underlying currents in the construction of African diasporic narratives and belonging in Nigeria (Heyd, this volume) and in Cameroon (Anchimbe, this volume). Particularly in the diaspora, the creation of an authentic and credible online identity of the interactants (Nigerian; Anglophone versus Francophone Cameroonian) is vital for the design of the stories.

The range of papers in our special issue shows that audience expectation and audience design play an important role for personal narratives on the internet in various settings and modes. The first paper, "The functions of 'personal narratives' in three written online health contexts" by Franziska Thurnherr, Marie-Thérèse Rudolf von Rohr, Miriam A. Locher (University of Basel), engages with the discursive practices in

which "sharing personal experience in narrative form is not the purpose of the practices per se". The three online contexts examined in their study – email counselling, support forums, and anti-smoking websites – have interpersonal persuasion as their primary function. They employ personal narratives simply as an argumentative device that is intended to lend credibility to the experienced quitter persona or to facilitate the therapeutic process through making explicit the patient's feelings and beliefs. Thurnherr et al. demonstrate how the framework of positioning (Davies and Harré 1991) can be usefully applied to make sense of personal narratives even in the contexts where autobiographical storytelling plays a secondary role.

The second contribution to the volume, "Reporting from the field: The narrative reconstruction of experience in pick-up artist online communities" by Daria Dayter (University of Basel) and Sofia Rüdiger (University of Bayreuth) explores the importance of shared knowledge schemas in the narratives of the community of practice of Pick-up Artists. Their analysis ultimately also shows how powerful the position of the storyteller is in that, depending on who holds this position, "the same events can be narratively cast in a variety of guises" in which "the reader is being set up to agree with the storyteller's version of the events".

Susanne Mühleisen's (University of Bayreuth) paper, "'More about me' - self-presentation and narrative strategies in Caribbean online dating ads", focuses on the narrative means advertisers employ to construct a credible life story and persona in online partner search. Employing a small story approach in her analysis of a corpus of Caribbean dating ads, Mühleisen argues that "the act of posting the dating ads also functions as part of the advertiser's life story".

Both Theresa Heyd (Free University Berlin) and Eric Anchimbe (University of Bayreuth) look at narratives and identity in African and African diaspora online forums. Heyd's paper entitled "Narratives of belonging in the digital diaspora: Corpus approaches to a cultural concept" uses a sociolinguistic perspective to establish narratives of belonging as a specific narrative genre. As her analysis of a corpus of Nigerian web forum data (Nairaland.com) shows, narratives of belonging can be identified by a number of linguistic features and structural patterns. To have such a heuristics of identification can benefit any researcher who is confronted with large datasets, including material from ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and in particular data from digital discourse. In his "Digital narratives of belonging as anglophone or francophone in a Cameroon online news forum", Anchimbe focuses particularly on the use of inclusive and exclusive pronouns and their indexical power for in-group versus out-group belonging in the Cameroonian online news form (The Post newspaper). It is shown how narratives of belonging and the narration of a common colonial history, linguistic background and experiences can thus also be tied to inclusive pronouns such as 'we', 'us', 'our' and 'ourselves'.

In the final paper of the volume by Alexandra Georgakopoulou (Kings College London), "From narrating the self to posting self(ies): A small stories approach to selfies", the investigated mode of narration changes from verbal to visual/verbal. Georgakopoulou makes a leap from purely verbal self-presentation to the mode of visual self-portrait, which can be analytically accommodated under the intellectual roof of the small stories research, proving once again the indispensable status of this paradigm in making sense of narrativity. Tackling this form of self-representation on social media largely unexplored in narrative studies, Georgakopoulou convincingly argues that selfies present "semiotic hallmarks of small stories". In her analysis of three types of selfies ("me selfies", "significant other selfies" and "group selfies"), she shows how systematic positioning configurations works on various levels. Interactional practices like ritual appreciation and knowing participation make selfies "contextualized, multi-semiotic and co-constructed presentations of self, shaped by media affordances".

This final paper in our collection invites a question: is it indeed the case that internet is changing our linguistic practices? Or are we, as analysts, becoming more open in our understanding of what constitutes a narrative? The point of convergence in the contemporary literature is that narrativity cannot be defined through a list of necessary and sufficient features. Perhaps recognizing a narrative in its many guises will nudge the inquiry away from attempts at definition and instead underscore the more fundamental question: what is its function in our cognition and sense-making? One thing is certain: the advent of the internet or any other mode of communication, however futuristic, is not going to herald the end of the narrative. For as the recognized master of the 'what-if' Margaret Atwood assures us, "you're never going to kill storytelling, because it's built into the human plan. We come with it."[2]

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2 Interview for Time, October 8, 2012, http://entertainment.time.com/2012/10/08/margaret-atwood-on-serial-fiction-and-the-future-of-the-book/

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