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Digital Storytelling as Public Discourse

Abstract: Technology is a part of our living and an important instrument through which we can construct and manage our identity. The discursive nature of new media accentuated the importance of storytelling. Also, the strong propensities towards sharing and interpersonal dialogical relationships encouraged the production and dissemination of digital stories. Moreover, the interactive modalities of self-expression gave voice to the “ordinary people”, creating micro-celebrities and making public various small-scale stories. In this vein, my article focuses on the intersection zone between the personal content of the online narratives and the public ways of telling them. The digital production of self-stories that are now disseminated in a public form redraws the line between public and private and shapes the interpretation of identity. Because online spaces can be private, semi-public or public, the cultural, societal and mediatic interpretation of such self-expressions becomes complicated, concepts such as “mediation”, “mediatization” or “remediation” being here at work.

Keywords: digital storytelling, public discourse, mediation, mediatization, personal stories, digital self, online archive.

1. Introduction

My paper has as starting point the idea that cyberspace represents a discursive place, where different kind of people can express their “voices”. New media are a meta-medium that makes possible different forms of ontology of discourse. The early stages of the computer-mediated communication enabled the development of a powerful technological imaginary that produced a range of paradigmatic discursive

constructions. Thus, we can map these frames and observe that these theorizations are profoundly polarized, divided in utopian and dystopian perspectives. On the one hand, we can notice the image of new technologies as a “new arena for communication, a new public sphere that can replace the old now crippled by commodification and fragmentation” (Tsagarousianou 1998, 3); they are “technologies of freedom” (Bentivegna 2002, 51) that can accomplish Habermas’s ideas. On the other hand, new media are seen as an important factor that drives us away from the “real” public life and moreover re-creates a perfect Panopticon or Big Brother scene, that represents the opposite of the “electronic agora” (Rheingold 2000, 376). In this context, the studies were focused on the public discourse through Internet especially tied to this typology, emphasizing the political discourse and the relationships between new media and politics. My paper is concentrated rather on the constituent discourse of the digital self, in an attempt to decipher the intersection zone between the public discourse and the computer-mediated communication. The digital production of personal stories that are now told in a public form redraws the line between public and private and shapes the interpretation of identity. The public way of the construction of the identity landmarks using the digital tools brings with it some opportunities (as the multiple modalities of composition) and limitations (as the problem of digital archive, because the identity-forming process is shaped by the narrative pieces that we select as representative). The digital identity emphasizes the conscious and active ways in which an individual constructs her or his image (constructivism and symbolic interactionism being here at work). Thus, the public self-narratives constitute a valuable category of discourses that compose the large sphere of Internet voices.

2. The narrative self

Human beings are storytellers by nature (Bruner 1986), our experience and our memory being organized “in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on. Narrative is a conventional form, transmitted culturally and constrained by each individual’s level of mastery and by his conglomerate of prosthetic devices, colleagues, and mentors” (Bruner 1991, 4). Stories represent a natural way to connect us with the profound human level and to build our identity in a significant manner. The culture itself is created by the medium of a history – a tissue of stories that link the past with the

present, and through which the knowledge transfer occurred. Even if narratives can achieve only “verisimilitude” (Bruner 1991, 4), the culture seen as a whole is nurturing its legitimacy and its continuity by stories. We learn, teach, comfort, understand ourselves and interpret the world using stories, so, as Espen Aarseth said, “the dominant mode of communication in our culture, long before the modern media, is the story” (Aarseth 2001, 229).

Narratives are also an “equipment for living” (Burke 1966), narrative identity being a relevant realm that pointed out that stories are constructed to make sense of our lives while they are reconciling ourselves with the image about us. Six common principles of the narrative study of life are able to create an idea about this concept: the self is storied; stories integrate lives; stories are told in social relationships; stories change over time; stories are cultural texts, and some stories are better than others (McAdams 2008). In this “social ecology of everyday life”, life stories interfere with practices, meaning systems and even dispositional traits.

Marie-Laure Ryan (2001, 2) responds in ten standpoints to the interrogation “What is narrative?”. One fruitful idea discussed by Ryan is the independence of narrativity from fictionality and tellability. Moreover, problem-solving is the most important narrative pattern and that can explain why narrativity isn’t specific only for literature. A narrative consists into a sign that has a signifier (discourse) and a signified (that can be a story, an image, a mental representation). For Ryan, the narrativity is located at the signified level, thus “narrativity should therefore be defined in semantic terms. The definition should be medium-free” (Ryan 2001, 2). This is an interesting but objectionable point of view, which emphasizes the content against the form or the medium that makes possible the transmission of that discourse. The process of mediation is an important factor that can intervene in the understanding of a story. Thus, each medium disposes of a number of tools that can shape the production and the final form of a story: “new cultural tools change the use of narratives and the act of storytelling in fundamental ways” (Erstad and Wertsch 2008, 28). Ryan nuanced her position when she discussed Janet Muray’s statement “Narrative beauty is independent of medium”, giving one false and one true interpretation of it. The false one is when narrativity is conceived as a cognitive pattern that can be represented by no matter what medium – an interpretation that ignores the idiosyncrasies of each medium. The true one for Ryan implies that “the abstract cognitive structure we call narrative is such that it can be called to mind by different

media, but each medium has different expressive resources, and will therefore produce different concrete manifestation of this abstract structure” (Ryan 2001, 5). The transportation of a story from a medium to another may have significant effects on it, by changing paths of meaning or restricting some other possibilities of expression. Knowing which types of stories are suitable for each type of medium remains a central problem for the author. In the same vein, when we talk about digital media, we have to distinguish their most important characteristics that enhance narrativity. Even if we discuss about hypertext, computer games, VR environments or social networking sites, it seems that interactivity is the main resource of digital media. Through interactivity, digital stories are personalized and participative, the readers becoming co-authors of them.

3. Stories in cyberspace

Technology is a part of our living and an important instrument through which we can construct and manage our identity. The technosphere is a kind of natural environment for the contemporary human beings; in this context, computer-mediated communication, where it is possible (excluding “digital divide” cases), became easy and usual. As Abbe Don (1990) pointed out, in our culture computers can have the function that the storyteller had in the oral culture. The discursive nature of new media (seen as “conversational technologies”) accentuated the importance of storytelling. Also, the orality of digital era (Ong 1982, Soffer 2010) supports this idea, oral features being creatively utilized with a high level of intentionality. The strong propensities towards sharing and interpersonal dialogical relationships encourage the production and dissemination of digital stories.

Moreover, the interactive modalities for the self-expression gave voice to the “ordinary people”, creating micro-celebrities and making public various small-scale stories. The “ordinary voices” (Burgess 2007) constitute an effect of the democratization of technologies and of the transformation of the consumer in a creative media producer. As Henry Jenkins (2006) noticed, the “participatory culture” represents the counterpart to the passive media “spectatorships”, giving the possibility to take part in this emerging culture, in terms of personal skills and abilities. Thus, digital storytelling can be interpreted as a “field of cultural practice” (Burgess 2007, 207), not only as a media form. It complements this democratization of participation with an esthetic that creates authenticity and impact. Also, digital storytelling can be interpreted as a

movement that magnifies the ordinary voice, because it aims “not only to remediate vernacular creativity, but also to *legitimate* it as a relatively *autonomous* and worthwhile contribution to public culture” (Burgess 2007, 207). The self-narrative repertoire has grown, digital storytelling flourished on YouTube, social networking sites, blogs. Beyond the analysis of those narratives as form, the research in terms of societal phenomenon is truly challenging.

The possibility to perform a digital management of impression introduces self-stories in an active tissue of activities and methods. Because self-disclosure is emphasized by this medium, the stories told in cyberspace may constitute significant parts of the identity of a person. Of course, in the case of anonymous or fake identities, the interpretation of the relevance of digital identity archive becomes more difficult. Anyhow, the digital representations in the first person are seen as identity markers and, following Giddens’s perspective (Gradinaru 2014), they are included in the “reflexive project of the self”. The latter is defined as “the process whereby self-identity is constructed by the reflexive ordering of self-narratives” (Giddens 1991, 244). The identity is constructed and interpreted through narratives of the self; thus, the self-identity is a conscious process that has to be incessantly made (Giddens 1991, 75). The reflexive awareness of this identity discourse became a constant evaluation of our biography that questions the past, the present and also the future (Giddens 1992, 30). Reflexivity and rationality are two main traits that give coherence to the entire story of our life. In the contemporary world, personal narratives are inscribed in various media, so the effort required for keeping them united and coherent seems to be significant. The management of online texts in an expressive way is also an important tool for the strategic presentation of self in cyberspace.

Blogs represent a privileged way of “telling lives”, giving voice to a personal interpretation of experiences. In short, “blogs still function as an important outlet for emotion and self-expression throughout the Internet community” (Fullwood, Sheehan, and Nicholls 2009, 688). Even if the “narrative trail” is sometimes difficult to follow, the repository created by the texts posted in this form can construct a suggestive frame of our identity and can offer an integrative image about specific fragments of our life. In the same time, the reconstruction of the self through the interpretation of a blog may conduct to false or contradictory pictures. Also, blogging was analyzed as a symptom of the compulsive consumption of the past and of the tendency to live the present through the lens of the anticipated gatekeepers. In this vein, blogging can be seen

as a “form of self-memorialization, and an impulse to save the most trivial details of one’s past” (Haskins 2007, 407). The archival tendency is calculated to be obsolescent. As Gillis pointed out, “we can no longer be sure what to save, so we save everything... The scale of collecting increases in inverse proportion to our depth perception” (Gillis 1994, 15). In this respect, digital narratives evoke the problems of memory, archive and participation in the digital culture.

Even if not all the profiles, posts, storytelling on mobile phones or photos disposal are narratives in a proper sense, they

“have brought about an important change insofar as they store this type of autobiographical information to a degree that is unprecedented. All our email exchanges, all of the exchanges on Facebook ‘walls’, etc., are stored and can in principle be accessed. This fact has an important potential consequence for questions of personal identity. The existence of abundant stored autobiographical narratives may have an impact on our ongoing identity-forming processes of self-reinterpretation” (Rodogno 2012, 326).

This impact is still unclear and its direction is also uncertain. The abundant online *archive* requires certain abilities in selecting, ordering and linking them. The Internet is the contemporary vehicle of producing, preserving, and collecting mementos in various forms (texts, pictures, videos, e-mails etc.), with all its merits and limitations. Thus, all digital stories can become a part of public memory, not only of a personal one. The classical professional memory gatekeepers have to acknowledge the role of ordinary people in “history making”, through the integrative process of participation. At the same time, “in exploring the internet’s promise as a medium of public memory, it is important to realize that the contemporary Western obsession with recording traces of the past is an ambivalent cultural trend – it signals not only the ‘democratization’ of memory work but also the acceleration of amnesia” (Haskins 2007, 418). The lack of selection and the archival compulsion may conduct rather towards oblivion than towards the guaranteed recall of the past. As Haskins explained (2007, 401), digital memory collapses the distinction between modern memory, that is above all archival, and the traditional memory, that was a “lived” one. This collapse is due to the interplay of functions that Internet can provide at once: storage, ordering, interactivity. The collective digital authorship is another problem that occurs, dissipating the responsibility and the mainstream curatorial practices. Thus, “the boundaries between the official and the vernacular, the public

and the private, the permanent and the evanescent will cease to matter, for all stories and images will be equally fit to represent and comment on the past” (Haskins 2007, 405).

4. Between public and private discourses

The public character of digital self-stories is explicit from the very beginning, in many definitions of the concept. For example, they are seen as “personal stories being told in public form with digital tools” (Lundby 2008, 12). The definitions condense in a genuine form the public identitary discourse and the private characteristics of the individual life, challenging Rorty’s dichotomy between vocabularies of public deliberation and vocabularies of self-creation: “the vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared” (Rorty 1989, xiv). The users, anyhow, mix the public and the private in the perception of the stories transmitted online as well as in their construction. In legal terms, the personal Facebook profile, for example, is a public space, not a private one, even if this is accessible to a limited number of “friends”. Social networking sites are emerging social spaces that draw an interesting borderline zone, neither public, neither private, with a blended discourse. This zone is between open and closed space for the audience, even if the sharing of private information is sometimes exacerbated. Thus, “Privacy is not an ‘all or nothing’ proposition, and it is at least possible that a reasonable social network participant might still expect privacy in her profile, despite the social nature of the site or the possibility that she has a large number of Facebook friends who have access to the information that she posts” (Burkell et al. 2014, 966-967). The possibility of “privacy in public” seems to be the right hypothesis to research. T. Fahey considered that instead of the public – private dichotomy, “it may be more accurate to speak of a more complex re-structuring in a series of zones of privacy” (Fahey 1995, 688). Lange (2007) talks – in the context of YouTube – about two degrees of “publicness”: “publicly private” and “privately public” behaviours. The first concept signifies that the identity of the video maker is known, while the latter involves a limited access to the producer’s identity, even if the content may be visualized with many viewers. In this case, the private sphere is not relied with the concept of spatial entity, as the studies of public – private relationships in the use of mobile telephones showed. The video-stories are public, but the identity

is the factor that can be revealed or not and which can turn on or off the privacy rules.

In their research about information sharing practices, Burkell and collaborators have a user-centric perspective for finding if online social spaces are perceived as public venues. Examining the ways in which users treat their own information and also that of others, their analyses

“reveal that online social spaces are indeed loci of public display rather than private revelation: online profiles are structured with the view that ‘everyone’ can see them, even if the explicitly intended audience is more limited. These social norms are inconsistent with the claim that social media are private spaces; instead, it appears that participants view and treat online social networks as public venues” (Burkell et al. 2014, 966).

Thus, these results are linked with the studies done by Boyd and Gelman, in which the online spaces are seen as “networked publics” with interconnected audiences. The presupposition of the participants when they use the online social networks is that their stories are available to a large and undefined audience. Their practices confirm this hypothesis, the online information sharing being treated as “public”, even if their profiles are customized and only one participant had a totally open profile.

In another study about students’ attitudes on public and private spheres on Facebook, Anne West, Jane Lewis, and Peter Currie also found that the strict dichotomy public – private doesn’t hold, the participants conceptualizing these notions in multiple and nuanced modalities. Moreover, their use doesn’t fit the way in which the academic literature presented them, social networking sites being associated with the constructions of new concepts that surround the “old” public – private separation. Thus,

“on the basis of our findings, interviewees did not appear to conceive of there being two distinct realms of the public and the private. Facebook was construed by some as part of the public or ‘semi-public’ sphere. [...] Our findings do not necessarily suggest zones of privacy, with the connotations of distance. Rather they suggest a fuzzier understanding of what is private. In short, the user’s private social world is his or her ‘public’, comprising Facebook friends (West et al. 2009, 624).

The audience’s mixture makes this fuzziness to be more apparent in the case of Facebook than in other occurrences.

Thus, when we talk about the public trait of the digital stories we have to take into consideration the audiences, that become interconnected and with blurry boundaries. In the contemporary computer-mediated communication, an important public of our digital narratives consists of well-known friends, parents, or other people with which we have relations in the offline environment, too. On the one hand, the digital stories created by the user must maintain a satisfying degree of coherence (for instance, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest accounts or the personal blog have to be semantically and pragmatically synchronized). On the other hand, the digital stories have to match offline narratives, in order to achieve a unitary image of the self. The dichotomy between online identity and offline identity is a thesis labeled today as limited (Marwick 2013). Also, network-generated content and the collapse of context are some valuable things that constrain the deliberate construction of identity. In this respect, the online autobiographical stories are to a great extent verifiable and reality-oriented. The inner reflexivity of self-stories made another point on their coherence, no matter what mediational means are used for express them.

Anyhow, the participation of this audience cannot be guaranteed, “storytelling does not elicit the participation of audiences through claims to the ‘prompt verifiability’ of information, as Benjamin finds in newspapers. Rather, storytelling invites participation by ‘leaving it up to’ the reader to interpret the way she or he understands the events” (Langellier and Peterson 2011, 180). As Benjamin argued, newspapers only disseminate information and because of this central function they don’t practice storytelling. Blogs are also collaborative spaces that are both monologic and dialogic in nature, involving both the personal and the public sphere: “identity with the blog genre is based on a balance between the need for privacy (if one doesn’t want to be found) and the need for community based on identification with others through sameness. The balance of public and private in a blog shows how blogs constitute their own genre rather than a new form of an old one” (Rak 2005, 176). The engagement of audience in storytelling is variable, “contextually marked, collaboratively mediated, and provisional” (Langellier and Peterson 2011, 181). Those traits had questioned the authenticity of the discourse in weblogs, for example, but blog readers are more interested about the writing style and representation of the author’s life that about the truth of the stories. The poststructuralist ideas seem to be fulfilled in the digital storytelling that is detached from its author, deconstructs linear reading, reflects different cultural voices, and is

opened to multiplicity of interpretations. The identity becomes a text that is submitted to an audience, in an online context hardly controllable, opened to the criticism of the audience. Thus, blogs can promote a suspicious and superfluous attitude: “what weblogs share with daily life is a disposition to trust in appearances” (Langellier and Peterson 2011, 182).

Another important problem related to the public traits of the digital self stories is the mediated way of their existence. In other words, does the mediation of narratives shape their public character? Taking into consideration the concept of “mediatization”, developed by Stig Hjarvard and Winfried Schulz, and the concept of “mediation”, developed in particular by Roger Silverstone, Nick Couldry analyzed the digital storytelling through these two different perspectives. Thus, “mediatization” is related with media form, suggesting that a unitary media-based logic is prevalent. In this respect, digital storytelling has distinctive patterns and features that can be resumed in: a pressure to blend text with other type of materials (narrative becoming more visual), a restraint of the narrative length, a trend towards standardization and the unknown character of the audience (Couldry 2008, 382). The presence of logic of use or of social expectations in the construction and management of digital narratives constitute a counter-argument to the idea of a single logic of mediatization. The adjustment of stories problematizes the idea that

“social networking sites represent simply the mediatization (and publicization) of formerly private self-narratives [...] On the contrary, we might argue that by holding back personal narratives from such sites, young people are protecting an older private/public boundary rather than tolerating a shift in that boundary because of significant social pressure to have an online presence” (Couldry 2008, 383).

In this interpretation, the division public/private remains stable, even if the mediation enters the scene powerfully. In Silverstone’s approach, mediation is seen as a dialectical process in which institutionalized media “are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life” (2002, 762). Digital storytelling as mediation can be understood as the resultant of flows of production, circulation, interpretation, and recirculation, including the study of their long-term consequences for particular types of people. If these practices formed around digital stories will be stabilized and will have consequences in the distribution of power remains a central question. If this hope is

characteristic to Joe Lambert's vision, Couldry detects the seeds of doubt in Silverstone's articulation of mediation:

“that digital storytelling is, and will remain, a largely isolated phenomenon cut off from broader media and, more importantly, cut off from the broader range of everyday life, both private and public/political. To put it crudely: a phase that individuals and groups ‘go through’, which is not recognized more widely in the regular distribution of social and cultural authority or respect” (Couldry 2008, 388-389).

Thus, the power of the digital “voice” is a key factor that can convert the personal traits of digital narratives into a public force. For that, the process of remediation that ensures the transformation of quotidian experiences into public culture is not enough to establish the relevance of the contribution of digital narratives to the latter.

In this context, the question is: what kind of media are those who make public stories from private lives? As Marika Lüders (2007) pointed out, self narratives are mediated through personal media that are opposed to mass media. Because online spaces can be private, semi-public or public, the evaluation of such self-expressions becomes complicated. In this respect, Lüders emphasized that mediated communication has to be interpreted in the context of technologies and not through comparison with the gold standard of face-to-face communication (2007, 179). The self-presentations are altered through mediation, being filtered versions of the self, and in this way “digital network media are used to mediate personal experiences and bring what is private into public spaces” (Lüders 2007, 125). The borders between mass media and personal media are regularly overdrawn through Internet technologies, as well as between mass communication and interpersonal communication:

“with blogs, private homepages, message boards and newsgroups, people are never sure who will constitute the Ego(s) who select an understanding from their utterances. This is arguably the most fundamental change which has occurred, and explains how personal media forms may take on mass communication characteristics. Popular private blogs may have a huge anonymous audience and are, as such, personal media with mass communication characteristics. In other cases,

personally-mediated utterances may not be received by anyone at all, despite being publicly available online” (Lüders 2008, 689).

While various stories and actions remain available to an audience independent of time and space, “the Internet is more public” (Lüders 2007, 123). Thus, the multitude of combinations and degrees of public and private behaviours is much better grasped, with a special attention for its nuances, revealing the importance of other factors that intervene in this equation.

5. Conclusions

This article focused on the digital storytelling in the new media context. The relevance of digital narratives as media forms, as cultural practices or as identity projects was emphasized and a large part of my paper was dedicated to the goal of understanding them in connection to the concepts of “public” and “private”. Online narratives shape in many ways the traditional dichotomy between these two terms, reinventing their boundary within the new forms of discourse. Because online spaces can be private, semi-public or public, the digital narratives may have also many degrees. The studies made on various kinds of sample indicated that the use of concepts of “public” and “private” doesn’t match the way in which the academic literature presented them, social networking sites being associated with the constructions of new concepts that overcome the traditional public – private dichotomy.

Thus, the discussion is not just about the “colonization” of new media tools in order to express the self, but more than that, it is about the societal, media, and power effects that technology and storytelling can produce when they are interconnected.

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