

Voices for a New Vernacular: A Forum on Digital Storytelling

Interview with Zizi Papacharissi

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What makes digital storytelling different than other received forms of storytelling?

Nothing and everything at the same time. Storytelling is driven by people, by human voices. People have always told stories to express themselves and to connect with others and, in doing so, to make meaning of their everyday existence. Media have always facilitated traditions of storytelling, and it is only natural for different media genres to invite varying modalities of storytelling. It is difficult to determine what it is that renders digital storytelling different from other received forms of storytelling, primarily because we are rapidly moving toward (if we are not there already) societies where all information that morphs into storytelling is either digital or digitally enabled. Even societies that have not fully made the digital transition are finding that digital paths to narrating their point of view can be both more meaningful and effective, given the context at hand, of course.

That said, we do have terminology to describe the unique form of digitality as spreadable (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), polyvocal (Chan, 2013), ambient (Hermida, 2010), reliant on polymedia (Miller & Madianou, 2012), and capable of amplifying voice and visibility (Couldry, 2012; Papacharissi, 2014). Personal and mass at the same time—and augmenting both *producing* and listening capabilities (Bonini, 2015; Bruns, 2008; Crawford, 2009; Lacey, 2013)—digital storytelling reorganizes binaries (mass/personal, producer/audience, private/public, new/old) into not opposite, or even simply reciprocal, but primarily parallel and symbiotic processes.

Why do certain forms of storytelling seem to persist regardless of platform?

For the reason that change is gradual, and thus certain forms of storytelling still work at affording expression and connection with others. But also because what is exceptional about digitality is that it does not annul previous forms of storytelling; rather, it provides opportunities for us to reconcile oral with print

traditions of storytelling. Here, I am referring to the work of Walter Ong (1982), who had distinguished between the interpersonal conventions of oral forms of storytelling that dominated the preprint era from the storytelling conventions of the printed word, mass media, and broadcasting practices. He termed the former a *primary orality* and the latter a *secondary orality* to emphasize the need for verifiability and permanence that the printed form ushered in, as opposed to the fluidity of the aural and oral variations of storytelling. The storytelling practices that we encounter on social media blend the drama of interpersonal conversation with the storytelling conventions of mass media in ways that invite us to think that perhaps we are looking at the production of new, digital orality.

The potential of storytelling afforded within the context of a digital orality excites but also confuses our imagination. We have not made the full transition yet, nor have we mastered the literacies necessary to both process and produce these stories—that is, to be good storytellers and listeners at the same time.

What is the most exciting prospect of digital communication for you? Why? How do you see it changing in coming years?

The stories we tell form the basis for the histories that are formulated. So the ability to produce, reproduce, and revise histories that are polyvocal, polymediated, and remediated at the same time is what excites me personally. The way we understand and record history has been reinvented through technology, perhaps most notably through the printed word, and then confined again by the tyranny of the written narrative. So for me, to record, retell, and impart histories in ways that evolve beyond the formalities of writing but also reconcile those with the interpersonal traditions of storytelling is revolutionary. But it is also perplexing, because it involves changing much of our hierarchy, conventions, and values for telling stories; it involves permitting our storytelling habitus to stretch, expand, and evolve.

For instance, journalists—often thought as producing the first draft of history—no longer have the privilege of being the first or the only ones to tell a story. This has led to a reorganization of both the sociology and the economy of journalism—a reorganization that is still in flux. But I firmly believe that it is a reformulation that will permit journalists to evolve as storytellers, reinvent their calling, and work more closely with historians and attain greater cultural gravitas. These changes mean that the journalists will not be the first ones, but rather the last ones to tell a story—and actually be the ones that tell the most comprehensive and compelling story.

What does a focus on the digital tend to obscure? How can students, practitioners, and scholars alike give the proper kind of attention to these issues?

The focus on the digital emphasizes that everyone is potentially a storyteller, and thus an influencer—someone with the potential to frame others' points of view. The operative word here is *potential*. These technologies promise; they do not guarantee. But because the structural affordances of most of these platforms invite people to share their point of view, however grand or trivial that may be, they place the emphasis on *opinionating*. So sometimes, because we have access to many events we otherwise would not have the ability to experience firsthand (what Lippmann, 1922) had termed *pseudo-environments*), we also feel we understand these events well enough to opine. Of course, we all have the right to

express our opinions, but my question is, have we all earned the right to express that opinion? Sometimes it is more important to listen than to speak, and these platforms also afford unprecedented listening opportunities, which are obscured in favor of the obsession with opinionating on everything that enters our information radar.

In your view, how does the concept of performance intertwine with narrative in digital spaces?

Performativity is essential to narrativity. People cannot tell stories without performing. I understand performativity as the process of consciously and subconsciously choosing words, tone, approach, and gestures—however subtle or obvious those choices may be—as we tell stories. We thus cannot narrate without performing; and we inadvertently produce some kind of narrative through performances of a planned, accidental, or habitual nature. We tell a story by how we dress, how we talk, and how we conduct ourselves.

How do storytelling or narrative play into the social interplay of many online platforms? How do processes of self-presentation operate within social networks?

In the same manner that they play into the spaces of our everyday lives. Online platforms are just that. They are spaces where we interact with others; they are part of the social architecture that we traverse in our everyday lives. We are social beings; the spaces we populate are, in turn, social, and so are the media that digitally enable those spaces.

There is nothing exotic about how we perform the self online, to paraphrase one of the earliest studies of how we form friendships online (Parks & Floyd, 1996). We use these platforms for the mundane tasks that we nonetheless enjoy through our everyday routines. We also use them to reinvent rituals that have perhaps become too mundane or unfulfilling as performed in other spaces, so we look for different ways to date, make friends, or be creative through these platforms.

We adjust the way we perform the self as we traverse these spaces, in ways similar to how we adjust our behavior when we spend time with friends at a bar, or relax with family at home, or go to the movies, or go to work, or visit a different country, or play a game online, or post something on Twitter or Facebook. As per Goffman (1959), we are always performing to an imagined audience. We are always looking for an audience to connect to, and our expectations about what that audience will be evolve as we traverse the spaces, public and private, of our everyday lives.

What do you see as some of the most significant narrative implications of networked publics?

Primarily that the narrative activity of networked publics affords voice and visibility to issues misunderstood, underrepresented, or marginalized. But therein lies a danger. We frequently presume that voice and visibility are enough to render political, economic, and sociocultural change. They are obviously not. Context matters. So we frequently get caught up in the narrative virality of a story and become disappointed when social change of the same virality does not follow. But it is our expectations, not our media, that let us down.

In my own work, I understand the narratives sustained by networked publics as structures of feeling, particularly soft structures of feeling. I borrow the term from Raymond Williams (1961), who came up with it to describe storytelling structures (again, soft structures) that described the mood of a given historical moment, such as a song, a book, a popular speech, or a poem. Structures of feeling are about the sentiment of that moment, and that is what the narratives sustained by networked publics capture. I use the term *affective publics* to describe networked publics that bond (or disband) by sentiment. Affective publics materialize uniquely and leave distinct digital footprints. The digital texture of mobilized support they provide varies, depending on sociocultural context and systemic factors of political economy. They support connective (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), yet not necessarily collective, action. They are powered by affective statements of opinion, fact, or a blend of both, which in turn produce ambient, “always on” feeds further connecting and pluralizing expression in democratic and nondemocratic regimes.

These publics typically produce disruptions and interruptions of dominant political narratives by *presencing* underrepresented viewpoints. Do not look for immediate legislative, political, economic, or sociocultural impact here. You will not find it. The impact of affective publics is symbolic. Agency is claimed discursively and is thus of a semantic nature, and the power attained is attached to constantly evolving narratives and is thus liminal.

As technologies and modes of use have progressed, how has your understanding of digital storytelling changed?

The storytelling practices of networked and affective publics present a departure from the rational foundations upon which deliberative protocols of public spheres are based. It helps us reimagine how we may define and understand civic discourse among networked crowds in a digital era. While emotion has never been absent from the construction of political expression, romanticized idealizations of past civic eras magnify the significance of rational discourse and skim over the affective infrastructure of civic engagement. So I have moved toward conducting research and synthesizing it with the research findings of others to present a theoretical model for understanding *affective publics*: public formations that are textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked crowds. In the end, technologies network us, but it is our stories that connect us, or further drive us apart.

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