

Voices for a New Vernacular: A Forum on Digital Storytelling

Interview with Knut Lundby

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

I would stress the extended multimodal options and the possible speed, expansion, and multiplicity in sharing digital stories. The multimodality of the digital, with the endless possibilities to combine text, sound, graphics, video, and still images, goes way beyond the received forms of storytelling. The received forms also have their modalities in plural, as in the combination of spoken words and body language. But the modalities built over the basic binary code of 1s and 0s offer a fundamentally different and wider range of expression than the analogue forms. To this come radically different opportunities to tell and distribute the stories. Today, digital stories are shared in digital networks, through social media, on blogs, or in other media forms. Sharing and retelling stories happens at immediate speed, possibly to much larger audiences that could be distributed all over the globe.

Admittedly, digital is a loose term that comes with some restrictive assumptions. With that being said, what encompasses the digital for you, and what particular affordances does it offer?

To give a brief answer to a big question, in addition to the many modalities made possible, the digital opens avenues for interactivity and hypertextuality. Digital basic technology combined with digital networks makes a strong base for communication and storytelling across countries and communities. However, digital storytelling is just one part of the digital transformation that modern societies are going through. Our everyday lives as well as institutions and production systems are being changed. As the digital affects so many aspects of society and social life, the description of social and cultural adaptations and consequences may seem loose; however, the base digital technology, with its 1s and 0s, is not. A particular affordance of the digital is the connectivity it offers—just think of the smartphone as a digital terminal in global digital networks.

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

A good story has a point and touches people emotionally. That could occur regardless of platform. Paul Ricoeur reminds us, in the first volume of *Time and Narrative* (1984), about the "emplotment" of narratives, which works regardless of platform. It works in digital storytelling as well. Digital multimodality actually adds to the power of configuration, which is part of the mediation of any good story. A digital story is configured in a combination of digital resources and elements. The prefiguration becomes refigured through the mediation that takes place in the configuration, to put it in Ricoeur's terms.

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

For me, the most exciting prospect of digital communication is the option to share with people anywhere on the globe, as long as they have equipment and a network connection. To illustrate this with an anecdote, I am old enough to remember when it took a summer to correspond back and forth and agree with a colleague in the United States about a joint conference presentation. I appreciate the opportunity I now have to share shorter and longer stories of life and to work with colleagues and friends wherever they are. In the years to come, I expect digital power and the networks for digital communication to become obvious and everywhere, like electricity in those parts of the world where such energy access is taken for granted. More and more social processes will be digitized and run by algorithms. Automation by digital technologies will be a relief as well as a challenge to workers and established structures. The prospects for privacy that follow with control based on big data may be frightening.

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?

Enthusiasm for digital communication and story sharing may obscure the surveillance that the main digital companies are performing on small-scale storytellers. Big companies are harvesting our networking and storytelling in various forms of postings, exploiting this sharing for commercial purposes. Students, practitioners, and scholars alike need to perform critical acts of counterstories to lay open the choices we still have to join or not to join, to use the digital tools or to let be. However, it is not easy to escape the digital connectivity. The answer may rather be a call for transparency, to show that there still are political choices to make, for example, on the balance between considerations of privacy versus security.

What are some problems or possibilities for digital storytelling that are associated with mediatized or media-saturated societies?

In media-saturated societies, there are so many stories around. Media saturation may not in itself imply mediatization, which involves more structural changes over time in the interrelation between emerging media and aspects of culture and society, in this case, in how we tell and share stories. Mediatized conditions transform known forms for digital storytelling. Even basic forms, like the short, personal stories taught and encouraged by the pioneers at the Center for Digital Storytelling in California, undergo mediatized transformations as they adapt to continuously new platforms. Although there still are touching

stories with a point at the core, the art of digital storytelling has been changing from the uses of the first multimedia Macs through various early generations of social media to handheld storytelling with cell phones. In a master's course on "mediatized stories" during the last half of the former decade, we had to rethink and readdress the concept of digital storytelling year by year as the available media repertoire changed. We should expect the technological conditions for storytelling to continue to change.

How have digital platforms changed the ways in which individuals associate with their personal networks?

This is a highly general question. The general answer is that individuals, as we all know from experience, easily could keep shallow connections with a much higher number of people but also be able to stay in closer, continuous contact with those at their heart. A telling example of the first is the concept of *friends* and the actual degrees of friendship and acquaintance that have developed with Facebook and other, so-called social media. An example of the latter is relatives that stay in touch over distance by solutions like Skype or Facetime. Thus, new forms of communication over digital platforms change patterns of interaction. Regarded as long-term structural transformations, this is part of the ongoing mediatization molded by digital technologies.

What do you think are the "conductors of interaction" that are most useful to focus on in discussions of digital communication?

That's still people—those who shape and tell the stories and conduct the interaction with digital tools in digital networks. However, I hope for more elaborate "conductors of interaction" than what has become visible with the phenomenon of the "selfie." It says the most about the individualized forms of sociality we live by—in a global system of corporate power that makes phenomena like the selfie possible and easily shared.

For you, what are the most significant institutional consequences of digital storytelling? How has narrative changed the ways in which media and social institutions operate?

Media industries, companies, political parties, and public institutions all fight for people's attention in a time of considerable oversaturation of impulses and attractions. These institutions all need to present their messages through stories that have appeal in order to get attention. Digital stories are easily made and easily shared for institutional purposes. Digital storytelling has influenced how news is presented, how advertisements are made, how political parties try to attract voters, and how public institutions offer their services. Again, this is part of the ongoing mediatization, as it emerges from the institutional side of society.

Much of your work has dealt with how religion and online social interaction influence one another. How have digital platforms contributed to the narrative possibilities of religious ideas and networks?

Digital platforms and digital media have influenced the narrative possibilities of religious ideas to the good as well as to the bad. Religion has always had this double face. The new digital modalities of production together

with the new, global connectivity has intensified this tension over religious ideas. Religious ideas may be shared by religious groups but also may be exploited by nonreligious actors. You could no longer draw a caricature of the Prophet in one corner of the world where it does not hurt, as it may be transferred via the Internet to areas of the globe where it fires. Digital communication invites sharing of faith stories to create and strengthen faith communities—but also distributes the dark sides of religion. It may not be easy to come through with “soft” stories on faith in the public sphere, where religious networks and groups compete with “hard” stories on conflict and terrorism that are being connected to religion.

Reference

Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and narrative, volume 1* (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Trans.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.