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Identity and Sense-making Through Narrative Processes on Social Media Platforms

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Identity and Sense-making Through Narrative Processes on Social Media Platforms

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Department of Anthropology,
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graduation from the Honors College

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of existing research into narrative processes, sense- and identity-making, and digital social medias for the purpose of analyzing how social media platforms facilitate individual production of self under the framework of narrative. General aspects of narrative and how individual producers consciously and unconsciously adhere to those frameworks when representing themselves on virtual spaces are a central focus. This discussion further examines specifically how virtual and non-virtual spaces relate in terms of how social media platforms enforce and reinforce existing social structures in positive and negative ways. I also aim to stimulate further discussion on the implications of social media networks and how individuals' participation on social media platforms could be utilized for specific purposes.

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I would like to further acknowledge one of my sources, *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-representations in New Media*, without which my research would not exist in its current form. Lundby's compilation of works in this book proved to be invaluable to turning my initial research into a cohesive thesis with a meaningful contribution to academia. Even where not directly cited, this book provided a great deal of structural and thematic support to my project that should not go unrecognized.

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Introduction

This thesis examines the relationship between the structure of social media platforms, and the construction of individual and communal narratives on those platforms. My research largely seeks to analyze how social media platforms reinforce and develop existing narrative structures in significant ways for identity- and sense-making. Particular focus is given to the manifestation of social performance online through narrative processes (Cunliffe 2012; Lee 2002; Mueller 2015) and the continuous (re)formation of communal practices through structures of interaction unique to social media platforms (Lundby 2008; Peck 2015; Rice 2018). My research frames the concept of ‘narrative’ by the actors involved in storytelling (Lee 2017; Van Laer 2014), the motivation to narrate one’s experiences (Cunliffe 2012; Rice 2018), and the use of narrative as a social tool (Peck 2015). I primarily contextualize ‘social media’ by its structural features: multi-media options (Kafalenos 2010; Mueller 2015), systems of feedback/communication (MacLaren 2017; Peck 2015), and inter-relationships between producer and audience online (Chow-White 2006; Peck 2015). Though these elements have been addressed separately by many researchers, when the socio-cultural aspects of narrative are expressed digitally on social media platforms, the structural constraints resituate sociality in a virtual context and reimagine narrative’s role as a tool for social performance.

In this paper I focus not on any one social media platform, but instead analyze the structural components which contribute to the standardization of sociality and narrative practices between on- and off-line environments (Kafalenos 2010; Lee 2002; MacLaren 2017; Mueller 2015). These elements interact to 1) constrain how users can express their content (ie if they are limited to text or can include visuals), and 2) influence the type of narrative a user expresses on a particular platform based on social and constructional conventions (Chow-White 2006; MacLaren 2017). I

argue that the nature of digital social media structures strongly influences how individuals translate their experiences for communal consumption and participation, and how they establish their role in a given social circle (Geertz 2013, 2014; Lundby 2008; Rice 2018). Operating in this capacity, social media reinforces negative societal influences on self-identification and authenticity by heavily mediating individual self-expression and the performance of social roles (Lee 2002; Lewis 2010; Shafak 2015). Social media platforms also function positively as a unique staging ground for sense-making and identity construction by incorporating interactive feedback processes into the established sense-making aspects of all narrative, thereby adding complexity to existing discourse practices (MacLaren 2017; Peck 2015). These elements provide a highly effective adaptation of traditional narrative platforms/medias by highlighting the role of cooperation in meaning making (Lashley 2017; Lundby 2008; Peck 2015).

The first section of this paper concentrates on the components that make up narrative and expands on what narrative means as a communal and individual practice in society. The second section deals similarly with ‘social media’ by broadly addressing the underlying structure of the modern internet and establishing the relevant elements – across platforms – which apply to users’ online production of self. The third section analyzes the surface-level relationship between social media and narration by examining social media personas and how users’ work to ‘story’ their lived experiences – and consequently themselves – for collective consumption. The fourth section expands on this relationship by examining the ways social media platforms contribute to deeper elements of individual identity- and sense-making fundamental to narrative processes. This section additionally discusses the specific impact of social media feedback systems on individual social performance in the context of the larger group dynamic.

Narrative and Storytelling

The process of packaging lived experience into a digestible format is not a new or unnoticed phenomenon in human history. Narrative is a fundamental aspect of human social bonding and the creation of cultural norms because it establishes acceptable interpretations of particular situations/ideas for the community, society, and/or culture. Storytelling helps to frame concepts of social hierarchy, to define what is or is not important, and to set an example for how individuals should understand their future experiences through an established lens. (Lundby 2008; Peck 2015; Rice 2018). This section aims to describe the role of narrative in human sociality and tries to expand on storytelling as a provider of social frameworks. The fundamentals discussed here will parallel the frameworks I provide for the internet/social media platforms as well as contribute greatly to later discussion on the application of narrative processes on social media platforms.

Components of Narrative

All stories begin with a ‘producer’, the person (or people) who creates the narrative in the first place. I deal primarily with individual producers, but there are also instances of collective narratives which involve multiple producers, each with varying degrees of involvement. In the context of social media, I often refer to individual producers as ‘users,’ largely to reaffirm the notable performative aspects which separate virtual and non-virtual narrative processes for a given individual. The simplest way to illustrate this difference is to consider the many cues humans have for interpreting tone and emotion during face-to-face conversations. While video and audio captures some of the same elements (facial expression, intonation, etc), ultimately the user must adjust to accommodate the slight limitations of the media (ex: over exaggerating facial expressions to be visible on a small screen). The other key actor is the audience which consumes the producer’s narrative in various contexts and across mediums. (Lewis 2010; Mueller 2015; Van Laer 2014). In

relation to social media, the ‘audience’ will be further expanded to reflect the complexity of virtual networks online, establish the dual role of the audience as a (co-)producer, and address the gap between the intended and actual audience in the production of narrative.

Narrative can therefore be understood as both a discursive and performative tool utilized by people to facilitate interpretations of experience, and to purposefully convey that interpretation outwards for external validation. The relationship between producer and audience is consequently central to storytelling/narrative as a social tool because the presence of an audience directly influences the producer and their narrative. Moreover, knowledge of one’s audience can shape production in multifaceted ways. (Lundby 2008). Involved in this dynamic are other factors like the situation/environmental context, the form the narrative takes (spoken, written, visual, etc), and the medium by which the producer constructs their story (Lee 2002). All of these relationships take on additional qualities and constraints unique to the internet when scaffolded by social media platforms.

The Need for Narrative

Storytelling is not simply a platform for entertainment or even basic moral instruction, but a primal function of humanity across the globe (Peck 2015; Rice 2018). To understand this fundamental drive to narrate, I rely on sensemaking theory as it is described by Cunliffe, which recognizes stories as an instrument for individuals to create meaningful structure out of their “*lived embodied everyday experience*” (2012, emphasis in original). This largely internalized process has a specific focus on the importance of sensations and emotions in real-world interactions, and the idea that individuals must make those elements cohesive when processing situational input. Sensemaking theory suggests that the construction of narrative from observed life concurrently results in 1) producers becoming understandable to themselves, and 2) becoming understandable to

audiences (Cunliffe 2012). The practice of storytelling allows individuals to establish a coherent, constructed meaning out of isolated daily experiences, a process which ultimately allows them to construct from their day-to-day life a meaningful narrative of themselves on a larger scale (Geertz 2013, 2014).

Regardless of content, narrative is fundamentally a form of communication between the producer and the audience. The central communicative aspect is vital because sense-making narrative necessarily involves participation from both producers and audiences to be properly constructed (Lee 2002). Widening the colloquial definition of a narrative to include informal production of meaning between individuals or groups stresses the significance of co-production by audiences. The producer ultimately becomes only one part of the full construction of their narrative, and they subsequently rely on a participatory receiving audience to make their experience wholly sensible (Lee 2002). The extent to which an audience actually contributes to individual narration depends greatly on other aspects of narrative but ranges from a strictly one-way/reactionary role, to an iterative, two-way/co-producing role (Peck 2015). The difference here being between a critic writing a review of a novel which will not actually become part of the novel, and social media users replying back and forth on a post and creating a greater cooperative whole. Constant across this spectrum is an interdependency between the producer and audience that makes narrative an intrinsically collaborative process.

Narrative as a Social Tool

Narrative and storytelling are powerful enforcers of social norms and definers of societal deviance but, in being so, are also avenues for navigating away from the confines of established communal structures. Minor modifications within conventional social frameworks helps support a “*communal exploration of social boundaries*” (Peck 2015, emphasis in original) through trial-and-

error experimentation. In having established expectations for what narrative looks like, and what content it should contain, producers may introduce changes that intentionally or unintentionally break away from those frameworks in various ways. Audience approval/acceptance is key to the effectiveness of narrative, as discussed above, so the producer is necessarily driven by a need for external cooperation in order to progress outside of convention even in small ways. In this way producers can affect long term change in sense-making through iteratively deviant narratives but are restricted from any radical nonconformity which would be communally rejected. (Peck 2015). I further explore this concept in the section *Sense-making and Sociality* to include the role of social media feedback systems in reaffirming, readjusting, or even removing established models for interaction on these platforms.

It is crucial to recognize that these processes have both conscious and un/subconscious aspects for producers/audiences. Actors are not always active in their intentions/interpretations while constructing/consuming narrative in everyday interaction and often do not recognize the factors compelling them to follow particular norms (Cunliffe 2012; MacLaren 2017). Much of this paper focuses on informal narrative used by individuals to express their experiences instinctively, not on crafted stories with formal markers of literature and intentional portrayal of specific meaning. Informal narrative processes reflect a balance of 1) the subconscious use of storytelling to make sense of one's experiences, and 2) a conscious desire to establish oneself and share within a social environment. These elements inform each other and create a "productive tension between our self-expression (meanings we convey) and our self-knowledge (our current knowledge of ourselves)" (Rice 2018) which culminates in the producer cultivating a distinct relationship with the larger community as a direct product of their narrative. Notably, this relationship may not wholly encompass the individual and will likely be perceptibly different from other relationships

with the same community in-person, or by any other media. This dynamic also includes an element of introspection by producers concerning how they relate to the expectations of the audience, as well as consideration by the audience of how to interact with the narrative post-production (Geertz 2013, 2014; Rice 2018) – both of which are addressed more fully in the final section, *Collective-Individual Dynamic*.

Social Media Platforms

Even within the relatively short lifespan of the modern internet, social media platforms have evolved drastically. Common social media platforms have gone from rudimentary chat rooms, blogs, and email services, to sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube in a matter of decades. For the purposes of this paper, the currently popular social media platforms are most relevant, but longer standing platforms like blogs still contribute to an extent. I primarily include a structural and functional breakdown in order to establish my theories as foundational to social media platforms as a construct, rather than correlated only to attributes of specific sites. This section develops from a brief discussion on the internet as a medium because its network structure is incredibly significant to how social media platforms operate through the internet and how individuals interact in groups online. Though focused on the internet and social media, the link between social media platforms and narrative is fundamental because, as described previously, where people are congregating there are always narrative processes occurring. As such, parts of this analysis necessarily introduce some elements of narrative that are otherwise discussed and elaborated on in the following sections.

The Internet

The pervasive reach of the internet has extended to the point where almost every facet of modern life has a digital/virtual presence – so much so that it is common to think that without being involved online, it is all but impossible to be truly successful long-term both in business and social spheres. Whatever the reality of that sentiment, it does address a fundamental aspect of the internet as it is currently structured: networks. The interweaving, interconnecting, and interlacing of “global flows of information, technology, identity and the new economy” (Chow-White 2006) situates the internet as a junction of critical avenues of power that affect nearly – if not every – aspect of the modern world.

A networked system of this magnitude represents an unprecedented structure for, and dispersion of, power along its interconnected channels rather than a controlled, top-down, linear hierarchy (Chow-White 2006). This, however, does not mean that the internet circumvents the inequalities of other power structures: “Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies and the diffusion of *networking logic* substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in the processes of production, experience, power and culture” (Mueller 2015, emphasis mine). The presence of so many connection points across multiple spheres of influence means reshaping the way individuals manipulate the system, and adapting existing “processes of production, experience, power and culture” (Mueller 2015) to function under a new systemic structure. The unprecedented – and rapidly developing – nature of the internet presents a large divide between surface level interaction and deeper structural elements dictating that interaction. This perceptual gap becomes significant when focusing on social media platforms because it distorts a user’s general sense of their audience, their productive options, and ultimately their narrative production on social internet platforms.

Mixed Media

Almost all currently popular social media sites allow users to include a combination of text, pictures, videos, and sound in their produced content. The precise representation and proportion of these elements varies by the platform; Snapchat limits the length on videos posted while Facebook does not, Twitter restricts textual content to 280 characters while blogs can contain endless written content, and YouTube is almost exclusively video content while Instagram is largely comprised of still photos. The variation in allowable content, as well as the combinations of content types on each platform, means users can construct narrative in different ways purely based on the subtextual contributions of audio-visual material to a written post, or captioning to a visual post (Kafalenos 2010). For example, many Facebook posts whose content is a textual story of social injustice (common subjects include: school dress codes, police brutality, or other physical abuse) add photographs in order to emphasize their subject matter, though the pictures cannot stand on their own without the provided textual context. Instagram, by contrast, largely relies visual matter to structure posts, with the written caption merely acting as a brief addition. Even simple variety of this nature means that any one experience a user has can be captured by different angles simply by posting to different social media platforms with variable restrictions on, and conventions of, content form (Mueller 2015). Individual sense-making then becomes a direct function of the platform used because the nuances of the specific platform structure the narrative potential.

Connectivity and Communication on Social Media

The internet is foundationally a networked system connecting users, information, technology, and economy to one another in complex ways. Social media, having built up from that foundation, is arguably the most accessible form of virtual communication available today precisely because it taps into the meta-framework of the internet and leverages it as an underlying structure to parallel

the connective properties of the network on a smaller scale (Lashley 2017). In doing so, social media platforms also include the same downfalls of inequality present on the larger infrastructure (see: *The Internet*). These platforms are further affected by the volume of communication and connections present, which can be so considerable that users become lost amongst innumerable others (MacLaren 2017).

The balance of extraordinary potential connective power and the limited actual interaction online engenders a liminal quality to the socially interactive aspects of the internet (namely social media platforms). The product of this liminality is a “sense of ambiguity and disorder and the confusion of usual categories” as well as “a time/space of opportunity” (Maclaren 2017) that would otherwise not exist in traditional/face-to-face exchanges. Individuals can foster entirely new avenues of communication by associating with one another across spatial and temporal boundaries. The spatial aspect is reasonably straightforward: individuals on opposite ends of the world can interact in real time – and in diverse ways – on social media platforms so long as the internet connects them (Lewis 2010). On the temporal side, social media becomes important because most platforms – the notable exception being Snapchat (though even that platform has added features for users to privately save content) – allow audiences to see and interact with past posts to the same degree they would real-time posts. The equal (or near-equal) accessibility across time will ultimately affect the scope of the audience in virtual settings and diminish the portrayal (or even acknowledgment) of change over time (Cunliffe 2012). Temporal accessibility also enhances a user’s retrospective capabilities by providing individuals an opportunity to consider their narrative over time (Rice 2018). This aspect of permanency will factor in heavily on the production of self on social media platforms.

Social Media Personas as Narrative

As alluded to in the previous sections, my main focus is an examination of how narrative (and narrative processes) exist on social media platforms and play a role in identity construction on- and off-line. Given the discussion of narrative as an individually-executed and socially-driven sense-making process, user profiles are the basic manifestation of narrative on social media platforms. These profiles, or ‘personas’, are simply the content a user expresses on a particular platform which, when taken as a whole, represent the socially-driven narrative structure discussed above in *Narrative as a Social Tool*. I postulate that the social media personas created by users on these platforms serve as virtually-performed social roles executed via narrative processes with specific (if un/subconscious) socially-driven intent. I use existing specialized research on narrative production, sense- and identity-making, and digital/multi-media structures to analyze how social media platforms represent a unique combination and application of these elements.

‘Storying’ Oneself on Social Media

In their basic form, narrative and storytelling are strictly functional instruments for processing information in human culture (Cunliffe 2012; Peck 2015; Rice 2018), but in small-scale social applications it is key to also recognize the importance of the performative aspects which exist when individuals story themselves for others. Performed social media narratives are able to achieve the potent effects of narrative persuasion (Lee 2002) because they situate the individual stylistically as a character, and therefore underlyingly embody the persuasive and engrossing elements of fiction in a real-world context. Narrative-driven personas are subsequently able to function as influential tools on social media platforms because they lean on the compelling aspects of literature in their form/construct – conveying morals and norms, instructing judgment calls, providing an efficient structure for information, and presenting material in simple yet vivid ways

(Lee 2002) – and then leverage the power of actual, lived experience for their content. The resulting long-form stories attempt to “plot narrative coherence [of one’s experiences] across time” with a specific focus on the individual’s “desired gain” (Cunliffe 2012). In the context of social media, the “desired gain” is to embody specific social appearances or positions in the eyes of the audience and, over time, persuade the audience to support and recognize the user’s place in the group.

All this is perhaps obvious. Speakers across disciplines often use anecdotal ‘evidence’ to drive their message or otherwise connect with audiences because the format makes the content more digestible. On social media platforms this is taken a step further because the anecdote or narrative of a given user is a constant and continuous, rather than isolated, process for the individual which occurs iteratively over time. In fact, the current societal obsession with social media – and a pressure to maintain a particular social image online – drives individuals to produce significant amounts of content on a regular basis (Shafak 2015), all of which fuels their overall persona. Furthermore, though strict in their structural capacities, social media platforms do not demand that user personas be “coherent and unfragmented, or that the stories should follow a clear narrative arch” (Rice 2018) that would potentially constrain a user’s narrative freedom to represent themselves. Even beyond that, the ‘plot’ of social media narratives is disjunct (from the producer’s side) and relies on the audience to connect the dots of a user’s content. Users’ active awareness of their production often – though not always, particularly in regard to celebrities – only extends to individual posts as they make them. It is left to the observing audience to narratively process the larger scope of a user’s entire profile into a meaningful whole as more content is being produced.

To return more to the narrative theories, a key aspect that drives narrative processes on social media platforms is sense-making (Cunliffe 2012). The focus on intentionally and unintentionally organizing one’s life into a meaningful whole – and specifically the ordinary or

everyday experiences (Geertz 2013, 2014) – is directly complemented and supported by the structural properties of social media platforms. In the broadest scope, the network configuration engenders a critical reimagining of the systems by which humanity operates its societies and businesses (Mueller 2015). Similarly, social media platforms are reimagining how individuals participate in their own production of self on a foundational level. More specifically, the variety of medias (Kafalenos 2010) by which individuals can produce digital content on social media platforms give creative power to producers, allowing them to control the conceptualization of their narrative more precisely – if inadvertently. The extent and expression of a user’s control is further constrained by the particular platform the user produces content on, as described earlier, but the collective narrative capacity of cross-platform personas all but negates the pitfalls of any one platform by providing multiple angles/perspectives on the same central theme: the individual.

Virtual Performance of Social Roles

Tension between an individual’s ‘authentic’ self and their performed persona constitutes an important aspect of “reflexive meaning-making” (MacLaren 2017) especially potent on social media platforms. Users must concurrently have 1) an understanding of what their audience will accept and construct from their narrative, and 2) a retrospective awareness of their existing social media profile. The former has been well addressed already, but the latter is equally critical to the conversation. Conformity and effective performance within a given virtual social group is not just about producing narratives which fit expectations; it necessarily includes a long-term construction of self online. The challenge, as I have mentioned, is that in the individual users are far less conscious of their long-form productive role and therefore are not as active in the construction of their ‘big picture’ narrative. That said, because of audience involvement, producers are ultimately given an understanding of their own persona iteratively over time as they engage in feedback

systems. This means that while the interpretation the audience creates was not necessarily an intentional production by the user, it still becomes part of the user's sense of self going forward. The conformative pressures therefore exist on the surface/communal level, with the audience expecting users to stay in line with their given interpretation, but also on an internal/individual level because users are pressured to preserve their persona in a recognizable form, and therefore refrain from deviating from their own precedent as constructed by the audience.

Complete narrative construction and interpretation is reliant on audience input. In the context of social media, content is in part a broadcasted advertisement of self to a particular audience (MacLaren 2017). Construction of personas, though personally-focused are therefore inherently for the audience, not the producer. The nature of audience as co-producer in narrative is thus intensified by social media platforms because the narratives are produced for, and evaluated by, intrinsically social entities (Lee 2002; Mueller 2015). The content on these platforms is more heavily critiqued for its cultural/communal relevancy (Geertz 2013, 2014) because users are actively and specifically submitting themselves for judgement by the group whether they are conscious of it or not. Virtual social groups have boundaries on what is worth noting within a social media persona (ex: changes or developments in romantic relationships) and what is not (ex: overly graphic or disturbing glimpses into private life). Passive and active knowledge of those boundaries (in line with the previous discussion) contributes to the final narrative because it is the audience which draws the connection between 1) the user's past, 2) the acceptable/not acceptable practices from an audience perspective, and 3) construction of new material (Cunliffe 2012). Ultimately, this underlying constraint on content (and, in some cases, format) guides users to perform a specific version of themselves, aligned with in-platform audience expectations, while still attempting to cultivate a 'true' self-image for themselves.

In an ironic way, though production of narrative intentionally for an audience is central to sociality on social media platforms, the actual consuming audience is often an unknown/unknowable element for the user. This is partially due to the public nature of social media platforms and the drawbacks of the breadth of the internet (as described in *Connectivity and Communication on Social Media*; MacLaren 2017). The other part is the permanency of social media profiles on many platforms which all but removes the element of time from the equation. Every part of a user's profile – and therefore the sum total of their virtual self/identity – is accessible at any point by any newer members of the audience/group. As a result, content produced earlier in the communal history remains significant in the present despite any developments in the group or in the individual.

The regressive side effect of breaking down temporal boundaries with permanency ultimately means that the user has more variables to consider when trying to gauge the communal appropriateness of their content. This is ostensibly in direct conflict with the notion that self-centric narrative is “dependent on the context, the genre of the narrative, the selection of memories and reflections of the narrator” (Lundby 2008) because all of those elements are in flux over time and cannot be controlled by the user. However, in all of the uncontrollable variables there remains the fact that the entire system is in similar flux. Individual posts are internally “an ongoing interaction between performer and audience” that must be understood as “an iterative, not concurrent, process” (Peck 2015) at any given time. Many social media platforms go beyond saving an accessible record of previous posts; Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat all have ‘memories’, functions which automatically recall posts from the same date in previous years and allow users to re-share them in the present. ‘Memories’ make it even easier for newer members of a social group

to participate in older content because the platform itself provides a way for them to interact with old posts in the same space as they interact with current ones.

Sense-making and Sociality

Sensibility and identity formation are at the core of this entire discussion; the drive to narrate comes from a need to translate lived experience in consumable ways (Cunliffe 2012; Geertz 2013, 2014; MacLaren 2017; Mueller 2015), existing in a social group depends upon a structured codification of understanding (Lee 2002; Peck 2015; Rice 2018), and social media platforms function to extend these processes through application of network logic (*The Internet*). As such, this analysis is not complete without addressing the significance of feedback systems, the place of individual narrative in the context of the communal structure/narrative, and the broader interactive elements built into social media platforms. These components further solidify the unique influence of social media on individual and collective sense-making beyond a virtual medium for otherwise traditional human sociality.

Interactive Feedback Systems

A key structure I have thus far only alluded to are the specific means by which audience participation is facilitated on social media platforms. Built-in, structured systems for text-based commenting are most prevalent across social media platforms, but the range of feedback systems far exceeds written response. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram all have functions for posting written and audio-visual comments on original posts and options to ‘like’ posts publicly (or, in Facebook’s case, ‘react’ with one of several emoticon options). Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram additionally have ‘story’ options which consuming audiences can send private replies the user. More general platforms like blogs often have response sections for both the whole site

and particular pages of content where audiences can comment their thoughts and/or reactions. An important side note is that, in many cases, some degree of subscription to the platform or digital relationship with the user is necessary to access these functions. This ultimately circles back to the reinforcement of social structures by further regulating how individuals can become participating members in a particular group on social media. Regardless of the precise manifestation, these universally present processes facilitate better interactive capabilities, and represent an approach to synchronous virtual communicative possibilities that better mimic in-person communication.

Asynchronous expression is the most noticeable symptom/side-effect of translating face-to-face interaction to virtual/digital expression; there is always a temporal gap between one individual's post and another individual's response which creates a suspension of definition, closure, and interpretation (Peck 2015) for both parties. The potential for immediacy on social media feedback systems when communicating back to the user helps reinforce the performative elements of an individual's narrative by providing audience participation without significant delay. Structurally speaking, this occurs in several steps. 1) The producer is influenced by the existing "conventionalized performance" (Peck 2015) constructs of a social media group; this basically comes down to the user observing other posts on the same platform when they are not posting themselves. 2) They story themselves in the context of that scaffolding with an intended audience in mind; for example, by mimicking another user's post of them with their significant other or by posing the same way in a solo picture, and then posting it. 3) Actual audiences consume and participate in the producer's narrative via response/feedback; a common (positive) example in this scenario is for audiences to extensively fawn over the user and to 'like' it – particularly if it is a profile picture – or to comment on the compatibility of the couple. 4) The product of that interaction further refines and defines expectations for participation in both roles; in this case,

members of the group see simultaneously that posting similar content as a producer will garner a positive response, and that they should follow the feedback modelled when acting with audience.

Collective-Individual Dynamic

Thus far the discussion has centered closely around how an individual user/producer constructs themselves narratively on social media platforms for a larger social audience, and how the audience then influences their construction. However, it would be remiss of me to put forward a thorough discussion of narrative sociality on social media platforms without acknowledging that the individuals in all the previous examples coexist in colossal numbers online. Constant and concurrent narrative production by millions of users within and across platforms creates incredible complexity in terms of accurately understanding the social frames in place, properly participating as an audience for other producers, and producing one's own content. Rather than having a clearly precedented structure for social presentation, as I have simplified in the previous sections, users must reconcile current content by numerous other producers – before and after they've gone through any significant feedback process(es) – with past examples in order to effectively contribute their own content.

The interrelationship of producer and audience already built in to the structures of both narrative (Lewis 2010; Lundby 2008; Mueller 2015; Van Laer 2014) and social media (Lashley 2017; MacLaren 2017; Mueller 2015) are further regulated internally by scripting the “communal negotiation” (Peck 2015) of performances. The idea of leveraging narrative techniques to expand or alter the existing frameworks on social media platforms (*Narrative as a Social Tool*) is ultimately aided by the intense complexity of managing so many individual users under one unified structure. Subsequently, social media platforms – for all their strict underlying structures for content, and their exaggeration of existing societal elements – have the potential to facilitate

monumental, widespread social change in the long term. In fact, it is the structures that provide social media platforms with conformative capabilities which also allow hijacking of that power for other (and contrary) purposes.

Conclusion

This paper provides a concentrated overview of existing research on narrative processes and social media dynamics, then fuses them to analyze the ways in which narrative manifests on social media platforms. My primary focus was on general aspects of narrative and how individual producers (to varying degrees) consciously and unconsciously adhere to those frameworks when representing themselves on virtual spaces. My research finds that it is ultimately the audience, not the producer, who codifies interpretations and user's personas. I further demonstrate how the scaffolding of social media platforms reinforces the existing structures of narrative and compels adherence to the audience-directed production to such a degree that users conform to expected audience performance as well as producer performance. This research, by taking a wide approach to the topic, serves as groundwork for future investigation into specific nuances of social media platforms and their more nuanced roles in these processes.

Awareness of this phenomena can provide an avenue for significant societal change if utilized correctly, or terrible consequences if exploited. Many users, as I discuss, are both consciously and unconsciously using their performed persona on social media to form their identity on the small scale and facilitate sense-making on the large scale. Even passive/trivial participation on social media platforms engenders powerful effects, so an active effort by individuals to use social media intentionally could have considerable impacts. Narrative performance also provides important benefits to the producer and audience individually, and the group as a whole. Narrative

on an individual scale already serves a sense-making role regardless of media/platform, but the addition of co-production and interaction expands the capacity for narrative to collectively construct deeper meaning from aggregate experiences. Furthermore, because social media platforms constitute an iterative system of individual narratives, they also facilitate interpretation and understanding which build off past sense-making. The greater implications of the largely untapped potential of social media platforms are unclear in many ways, but the simple effectiveness of users' participation on social media platforms speaks to incredible possibilities when wielded for a specific aim.

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