Past, future and change:
Contemporary analysis
of evolving media scapes

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Understanding Mediated Storytelling in Social Networking Sites through Articulation: Actors, Processes and Practices

Sander De Ridder

1. INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites (SNSs) confront communication and media studies scholars with significant challenges. Not only are they an increasingly popular medium in the West, the web 2.0, and broader digital media culture, are characterised by continuous 'audience activity', producing "user-generated-content" (Carpentier, 2011b). Consequently, the analytical distinction between text, producer and audience is no longer tenable, but thoroughly disrupted (Livingstone, 2012). This does not, however, mean that SNSs are a completely new arena of study, as a considerable number of scholars have been producing theoretical and empirical insights for almost a decade. Boyd, as one of the scholars who pioneered research into SNSs, connected it primarily to youth culture (boyd, 2007), understanding it as a 'genre' of networked publics. Recently, she defined SNSs as "*(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice*" (boyd, 2011: 39). This description brings together what 'shapes the medium' of the SNS. What this contribution will do, however, is focus on what 'people do', offering insights into the social and cultural complexities behind the actual media practices (Couldry, 2012). 'Self-representational digital stories' (Lundby, 2008; Thumim, 2012) will be the focal point of this contribution, as this is what 'audiences do' in SNSs.

The central aim of this contribution is to offer an understanding of the activity of storytelling in SNSs from a cultural media studies perspective. Although it is impossible to introduce the multi-disciplinary, multi-the-

oretical field of cultural media studies exhaustively in the limited space of this book chapter. people's everyday experiences are a key interest in this broad field. As Hammer and Kellner (2009: ix) describe, cultural media studies are significant for "*interrogating and transforming the many ways in which people 'see' the world and relate to media, consumer, and digital culture*". Therefore, insights from media, communication and cultural studies work together to expose disciplinary regimes and power structures in relation to media. Debates in cultural studies on the formation of cultural identities, power, hegemony and difference are central (see Barker, 2008). Cultural media studies are aiming "*at making connections between texts and contexts, media industries and technologies, politics and economics, and specific texts, practices and audiences*" (Kellner, 2009: 6). I will therefore understand mediated storytelling in SNSs as embedded within the everyday-life hegemonic and counterhegemonic struggles of cultural identity formation. Such an approach aims to expose the discursive practices of disciplinary regimes within this mediated storytelling, but without assuming a one-sided structural domination. A cultural studies approach brings in a 're-flexive' understanding of power, and therefore an 'agentic' subject.

In what follows, I will define four 'processes' and introduce two 'actors' that will help create an understanding of audience activity in SNSs. Subsequently, by connecting these disparate elements to a temporary unity, which is understood as an 'articulation model' in cultural studies (see Barker, 2008; du Gay et al., 2003), four practices of what people do when telling stories on SNSs will be defined. Although the actual practices are rather straightforward, the value of the model is that it shows the complexities behind these practices, offering a better understanding of cultural identity struggles, power and agency in SNSs.

As mentioned earlier, theoretical and empirical work on SNSs is not new in media and communication studies. Therefore, the proposed articulation model partly builds further upon insights already developed, while at the same time differing from earlier work in three important ways. First, as the model defines the practices of what people do when telling self-representational stories on SNSs, it 'decentralises' the medium and brings the social and cultural dynamics of this activity to the fore. This understanding of media as practice (see Couldry, 2012, 2004) differs from understanding the 'implications' for selves and identities when using SNSs (boyd, 2007; Ito et al., 2010; Livingstone and Brake, 2010). Taking a decentralisation of media as point of departure means acknowledging that SNSs as media (see also Rettberg, 2009; Light, 2011) are only mean-

ingful in relation to the specific appropriations of people using the SNSs software. Second, as a cultural media studies approach takes a reflexive and anti-structuralist approach to power, it differs from research into SNSs that understands these media within the opportunities/risks and agency/structure binaries (Livingstone, 2008; Livingstone and Haddon, 2012; Walrave and Heirman, 2012). These more structuralist approaches often explore how children and youth are empowered by these new media, but also need to cope with significant risks. Although it needs to be recognised that this research brings important insights with direct policy implications, the articulation model provided here places the medium of SNSs in long-term social, cultural and material complexities. Therefore, the model aims at exploring the broader 'zeitgeist' of modernity, taking SNSs as a central point of departure. Third, research into SNSs mainly approaches the self as shaped 'pre'-discursively in interaction. Here, technology is understood as mediating the process of a self-identity in making (Papacharissi, 2011). Rather than focusing on the self, the model will show how self-representation is also a matter of 'identification' with subject positions (Hall, 2000), understanding storytelling as a "*site for an intelligible identity performance*" (Cover, 2012: 181).

2. Actors of mediation

Self-representational storytelling in SNSs is what Lundby (2008) describes as "small-scale storytelling", where the narrator concentrates on his or her personal life to tell the story. Therefore, people use text, pictures, music and videos, organised as blogs, albums, interests, etc. Moreover, on SNSs, these stories become potentially public (Couldry, 2008). Thumim (2012) understands this self-representation as the activity of participating audiences. Further, she emphasises that self-representation is 'always' the mediation of a textual object. Mediation can be understood as a key to understanding storytelling in digital culture, as mediation is an inherently non-linear process (Couldry, 2008). An understanding of mediation shows how mediated storytelling is a double articulation of media as a material object of technology and symbolic object of representation and discourse (Silverstone, 1994). Mediation is a "*transformative process in which the meaningfulness and value of things are constructed*" (Silverstone, 2002). Consequently, an understanding of this transformative process is essential. Therefore, central to the articulation model are 'media institutions' and 'audiences', as two 'actors' that make mediated storytelling possible on SNSs. I will represent these actors as 'axes' around which processes are brought together (cf. figure 1), leading to practices that conceptualise self-representational storytelling as a doing.

Media institutions play a significant role in self-representation on SNSs, albeit they are often overlooked, or their role is minimised in a problematic way. This is often due to the overly optimistic discourses on web 2.0, as these applications are often inextricably linked to empowerment and power shifts. Digital media such as SNSs are thereby often understood as free and autonomous spaces for participation, something that has been heavily refuted and discussed by scholars such as Carpentier (2011a), Fuchs (2011), and Schäfer (2011). Schäfer (ibid.: 11) argues that this optimistic discourse is primarily an outcome of how new technologies are socially and politically understood. Media companies who use the technologies and operate SNSs have shifted from producing content to producing platforms for user-driven social interaction. Thereby they *gain control over cultural production and intellectual property in a manner very similar to the monopolistic media corporations of the 20th century*. As storytelling on SNSs happens within the mediated spaces of corporate-operated interaction platforms, it is undeniably important that they be seen as important actors in self-representational activity.

Next to the media institutions, 'audiences' are the second important actor. Although the analytical value in web 2.0 has been debated (see Sandvoss, 2011; Rosen, 2008), 'an audience' today is still more than an individual or social subject, but could be seen as a *"media-related practice outside production within specialist institutions"* (Couldry, 2011: 125). Moreover, the importance of audiences as an analytical tool in understanding self-representational storytelling is evident; it recognises the rich history of insights developed in media audiences studies (Thumim, 2012; Carpentier, 2011b). Audiences in SNSs are complex collectives, as they are interpreting and creating stories at the same time. Also, the specific 'networked dynamic' of audiences in SNSs (cf. boyd's notion of networked publics), brings in specific power structures and dynamics of surveillance (Barabási, 2011). As I approach mediated storytelling as an audience activity, self-representational storytelling has to be understood not solely as an individual or social activity, but embedded within a collective of people, engaging with media institutions and technology.

Both actors that are defined are important, as they make mediated storytelling possible. The next part will introduce processes that are strongly connected to both actors and their theoretical complexities.

3. Processes

As the central aim of this paper is to understand the activity of mediated storytelling on SNSs from a cultural media studies perspective, I will explain four key processes involved. Bringing these processes together through articulation will be beneficial to understanding the complexities behind the practices of storytelling (cf. figure 1). Here, I will shortly introduce 'subject', 'representation', 'technology' and 'participation'. These four processes create in their combination the discursive space through which storytelling becomes possible in SNSs. It must be clear, however, that these notions could be used for understanding a wide range of other social and cultural processes as well. Nevertheless, in terms of the goal I put forward, they will be defined and connect in specific and thus also limited ways.

'Subject' is in its most fundamental definition "the condition of being a person", but, in cultural studies, the process of how we "become a person" and are "constituted as subjects" is primordial (Barker, 2008: 213). Persons are understood as "subjects-of-language", meaning that they live with dominant systems of discourse and social organisation, creating "subject positions" by which we identify ourselves (Hall, 2000)[1]. Subsequently, these identifications lead to identities, constructed through "difference"; what one is not. This process of cultural identity formation is how one becomes a man, woman, European or the other.

The process of subjectivity is strongly linked to 'representation'. Hall (1997: 15), defines representation as *"to use meaning to say something meaningful about, or to represent the world meaningfully to other people"*. Associative with the notion of subject, cultural studies applies the discursive approach to representation and argues that the representational process produces regimes of truths. Moreover, representation has a double achievement, as it not only produces and reproduces discourses, but also constitutes by these same subject positions. Media are normalising these representations by continuously distributing them in different ways, through different channels. It is important, however, that although subjects and representation are constructed within these dominant regimes of power and knowledge, people can work with subject positions to resist, alter or erode discourses.

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1   In describing the complexities of cultural identities, Hall is influenced by different visions on 'the subject', all developed before cultural studies was established as a field. The discursive approach is mainly the merit of Foucault, who framed Hall's thinking, and thus also that of cultural studies approaches considerably.

Further, representation does not have a straightforward relationship with interpretation, but is continuously under negotiation (see Fiske, 2010).

'Technologies', as the third important concept, order the world and are therefore the basic of the mediation process; technologies provide structures and command specific actions (Van Loon, 2008). In relation to new media and web 2.0, the computer, Internet and software are the key technologies that make "social" software applications such as SNSs possible (Schäfer, 2011). Here, we will understand technology as both material and discursive (Carpentier, 2011a). Consequently, on the one hand, technology is socially shaped and needs to be contextualised culturally (Morley, 2007), while, on the other hand, technology is also shaping the social and is therefore thus 'material' in its consequences (Hutchby, 2001).

'Participatory media practices' are related to technology. Technology enables participation in media, but also represses it due to its specific material conditions or design choices. The processes of subjectivity, representation and technology, but also participation, are complex multidimensional *"sites of ideological and democratic struggle"* (Carpentier, 2011a). Although structurally the level of participation increased with the emergence of web 2.0, this does not automatically produce more intense and democratic participation per se (Carpentier, 2011b). Participation has to be 'contextually' understood, as it continuously oscillates between minimal/maximal and implicit/explicit participation (Schäfer, 2011).

4. PRACTICES

Figure 1 (below) brings together the actors discussed that take part in storytelling; which are the media institutions and the audiences (cf. supra); they are represented as axes in the diagram. Figure 1 combines the actors with the processes of representation, subjectivity, participation and technology. In this part, rather than explain these processes separately, I will articulate processes and actors to capture how storytelling must be understood as a meaningful practice and continuous site of hegemonic and counterhegemonic struggle. I identify four media practices that help to explain how people use the computer, Internet and software as 'opportunity structures for participation' with which to tell stories in public and networked environments. In digital spaces, they 'perform identities', which are identifications with subject positions. Therefore, they interact with media institutions that create specific platforms for user-driven social interaction, these 'software designs' are 'appropriated' by their users in specific ways.

Figure 1: Mediated storytelling on social networking sites: an articulation model
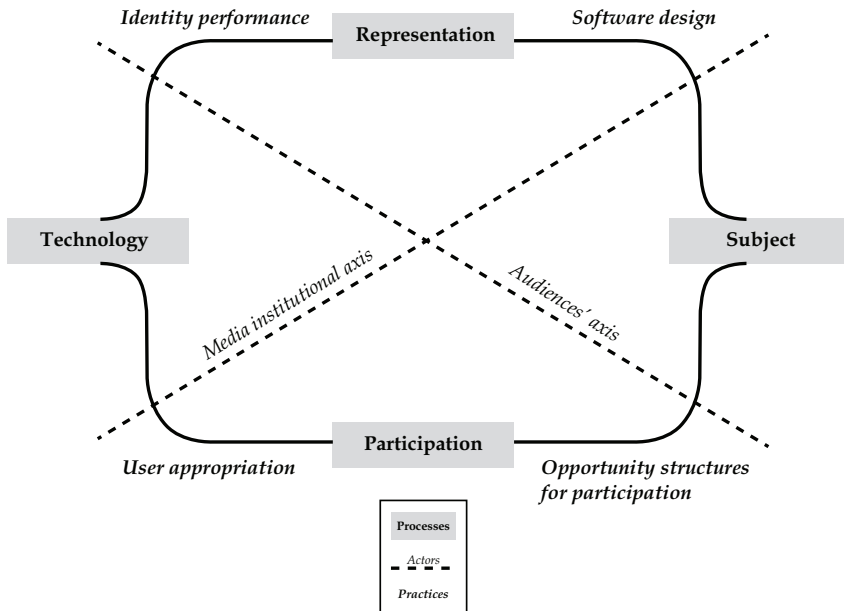
4.1. AUDIENCES' AXIS

4.1.1. OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES FOR PARTICIPATION

When telling self-representational stories on SNSs, people make use of technologies that increase the opportunities for participation in media. As mentioned before, the computer, Internet and software are key developments that have made more democratic participation possible. 'Opportunity structures for participation' is a concept developed in social movement literature, explaining how "*structural aspects of the external world outside the control of activists affect the development and success of social movements*" (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004 in Cammaerts, 2012). Cammaerts (Ibid.), develops the 'mediation opportunity structure model', to explain how media and communication are relevant to activists and resistance practices. However, I will use this term not to explain collective action, but rather to explain how people use a combination of technologies to tell stories in web 2.0, 'independently' from stories produced by content-providing mass media. In particular, this opportunity structure for participation could be interesting for cultural identities that are excluded from

the mainstream. In this way, the relevance of self-representational stories is therapeutic, but also profoundly political; what Thumim (2012) understands as a "democratic voicing of difference".

What technologies such as the computer, Internet and software bring to self-representational storytelling is the specific 'networked' nature that allows these stories to be told in 'public', to be negotiable, to be shared and connected. Further, these opportunity structures could help certain minorities and excluded social groups avoid symbolic annihilation, supporting assimilation. Stories then become resistance practices, making conscious statements that endorse voice through identity politics. Moreover, in self-representational storytelling on SNSs, multiple identity aspects are dealt with (gender, sexual, religion, music I like, brands I like, …). In this way, identities become 'hybrid' constructs, rather than representations that focus on one particular identity aspect, as content-providing mass media often do.

Aside from being obvious identity statements, self-representational stories can also, produce resistances to cultural inequalities that are more subtle and, often, but not always, produced unconsciously. Moreover, they are highly dependent on interpretation. These subtle resistances can expose how identities are performed by continuous reiterations. In this way, they implicitly question identities as "natural", or "original" performances, outside of regimes of power (Butler, 1990). However, these resistances are not evident, as audiences on SNSs often have a tendency to produce coherent identities, rather than approaching SNSs as places for free identity experiments.

4.1.2. Identity performance

The process of self-representational storytelling on SNSs demands a subject that represents itself through 'performing an identity'. Therefore, self-representational stories are shaped within social and cultural regimes, creating positions with which subjects identify. Norms and values restrict free-floating representations of identities. Often, subjects produce and reproduce intelligible and normative identities in unconscious ways, therefore relying on dominant scripts. Cover (2012: 181) understands Facebook or Myspace as places for *a never-ending process towards coherence and intelligibility.*" Consequently, this is in sharp contrast with arguments that understand self-representation as the creation of self-conscious, reflexive biographies (Papacharissi, 2011; Livingstone, 2008). Accepting the critical

remarks of a cultural media studies perspective is equal to recognising that SNSs are mediating everyday inequalities and power regimes. Sveningsson Elm (2007) concludes an inquiry into Swedish youth's self-representations by showing how classical gender stereotypes are repeatedly produced and reproduced in online meeting places. Further, she shows how non-heteronormative identities are not highly valued in online intimate negotiations. Thus the utopian dreams that connect increased opportunity structures for participation with 'free' floating identity experiments need to be nuanced.

Nevertheless, these constraints, the political, therapeutic and democratic voicing possibilities in self-representational storytelling, need to be acknowledged. As mentioned before, subject positions can be used to question dominance and overcome difference. However, specifically for minorities telling self-representational stories on highly popular SNSs, specific attention is needed. Networked opportunity structures are environments that can be easily surveyed, making the audience a possible policing and interpellating collective, pushing stories continuously into ideology. In this way, self-representation of identities outside the dominant does not come at any cost. Rather, self-representational storytelling then becomes a form of "emotional labour". This includes coping with possible negative reactions (Sender, 2012).

4.2. MEDIA INSTITUTIONAL AXIS

In 'doing' mediated storytelling, people make use of media institutions that operate SNSs. Today, these institutions, such as Facebook and MySpace, have become large private companies. As they not only continuously promote, but also facilitate self-representations on platforms designed for social interaction, they are active actors in shaping stories. Thumim (2012) argues this has specific consequences for storytelling. In these environments, self-representation becomes a 'condition' for participation. Therefore, it must be recognised that not all self-representational storytelling is profoundly meaningful, political and therapeutic. Therefore, Thumim (bid.) describes self-representation on SNSs as "banal" and "inadvertent". Indeed, as some critics suggest, it could be argued that SNSs are exploiting the free labour of the content people delivered (Terranova, 2000; Andrejevic, 2011). In general, web 2.0 applications not only represent and archive content delivered by 'ordinary' people, but are also reproducing this content. In this way, media institutions are accumulating the content's value.

However, to understand the media institutional axis in relation to mediated storytelling, I argue for an understanding of the technology/media in relation to the appropriation. Users can apply the platform in their own interests. Consequently, a better understanding of the relationship between the design of SNSs and its appropriation exposes a more complex relationship than a one-sided domination.

4.2.2. SOFTWARE DESIGNS

In combining the processes of technology and representation (see figure 1), questions concerning how people use software designs become central. This articulation understands how designers use particular programming software to produce SNS platforms that are, first and foremost, easy to use. Therefore, they create different applications to upload text, pictures, videos inter alia. SNSs platforms also have inventories from which the user can choose pre-programmed options (e.g. male/female). These designs could be understood as "cultural templates", that co-create self-representations in particular ways, connecting them with social and cultural norms and practices (Rettberg, 2009). Software designers create easy-to-use inventories, meaning they are limiting and structuring ways of storytelling. Further, users are not always conscious of this technological process. I want to argue that this process needs to be connected to the subject positions of the designers who shape these interaction platforms. Design choices are primarily human choices (Taylor, 2003), and, even more, choices of marketing, branding and corporate strategy (De Ridder, forthcoming). However, the designs, designers and connected institutions do not completely determine how people represent themselves, but the pre-defined inventories are limiting subject positions users can identify with, or certain applications structure storytelling (Van House, 2011: 428). In sum, the design enables, but also – and maybe more important – closes, some options. To critically evaluate and understand the relationship between the material aspects of technologies and design choices, the notion of affordance is useful here, as it signifies "*the fundamental properties that determine how objects can be used*" (Schäfer, 2011: 19). Moreover, the affordances of SNSs software platforms are the relationships between this artifact and human practice. When subjects participate in SNSs platforms, they use them in specific ways, rearticulating the affordances. Therefore, software designs and its limitations and opportunities only become meaningful in relation to the 'user appropriation'.

4.2.3. USER APPROPRIATION

The interaction between media institutions and users participating in web 2.0 applications, understands how people are telling stories in SNSs, have the opportunity to appropriate pre-defined software designs. Therefore, they could use them for unintended purposes, neglecting certain inventories or options to fill in, mocking or parodying them. More radical, but also demanding of technical skills, is the process of adapting media technologies in different ways by hacking their operational structures. In my own research (De Ridder, forthcoming), I have shown how young people neglect inventories on a popular SNS. The software designs asked users to complete the question "I'm falling for", leaving the audience with the option of ignoring the question or choosing; "boys", "girls" or "boys and girls". The majority (86%, N200), ignored this specific question. However, sexual identities were very often made clear or mentioned in the free spaces for textual self-introduction. Youngsters used more "original", creative and sophisticated ways to make their sexual preferences clear, instead of the limited labelling proposed by the software inventory. The example here shows how the dialectical struggle between the software design created by media institutions always need to be understood in relation to its appropriation. Individual acts continuously open up the intended purposes of software, redefining its significance.

5. CONCLUSION

In this limited space, I have offered an understanding of how the audience activity of self-representational storytelling in SNSs can be understood from a cultural media studies perspective (Kellner, 2009). It has centralised processes of cultural identity formation, accepting dimensions of power as an everyday, reflexive struggle (Hall, 2000). Approaching media as practice, what people do with media is placed at the very centre of analysis, rather than taking evolutions in media/communication technologies and artifacts as the central point of departure (Couldry, 2012). The argument here proposed an articulation model (du Gay et al., 2003), connecting different processes and actors, which eventually contributed to understanding the complexities behind the actual media practices.

After accepting that self-representational storytelling is an audience activity, always 'within' mediation (Thumim, 2012), the double articulation of media as material objects of technology and symbolic objects of representation and discourse (Silverstone, 2002) defined two actors that are closely

associated with the stories told in SNSs; media institutions and audiences. SNSs are complex structures that are built around material, social and cultural processes such as technology, representation, participation and subjectivity. By articulating these processes, I offered an understanding of how people telling self-representational stories are continuously fluctuating between increased opportunity structures for democratic participation and restrictive identity performances, limiting software designs and possibilities for creative appropriations.

The real challenge, to explore the broader 'zeitgeist' of modern transformations and struggles in cultural identity formation in relation to lives that have become unthinkable outside of mediation (Livingstone, 2009), has only started with the articulation model. As the model departed from self-representation as a mediated process, it uncovered the non-linearity of what happens when stories are mediated on SNSs (Couldry, 2008). Therefore, it is highly dependent on explorations of small-scale storytelling, particular web 2.0 applications, particular cultures; in one word, 'contexts'. However, I am convinced that, by accumulating empirical insights from different cases and contexts, 'macro' understandings of social and cultural transformation processes in relation to what people are doing in and with 'social' media become possible.

Further, the articulation model also poses questions for critical media literacies. As self-representational storytelling is not only a condition for participation in SNSs, inadvertent and banal, but politically and therapeutically meaningful for some individuals, social groups, communities, institutions, identities, etc.; SNSs stories are linked to everyday 'civic' life. Therefore, it is important to maximise opportunity structures for participation, making people aware of the dynamics of social software design and understanding SNSs as a particular 'genre' of self-representation (Thumim, 2012).

I want to emphasise that the model here does not have any aspiration towards becoming a closed template in itself for inquiries aimed at producing an understanding of storytelling in SNSs. Rather, the articulation model and attached argument should be approached in a way that is close to its very basic form; as a multidimensional look at media practices.

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