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Dangers of Narrative: A Critical Approach to Narratives of Personal Experience in Contemporary Story Economy

Abstract:
The current storytelling boom across various spheres of life encourages actors from individuals to businesses and institutions to instrumentalize stories of personal experience, but the search for a "compelling story" is often blind to the possible downsides of experientially and emotionally engaging narratives. This article presents key findings of the project *Dangers of Narrative* that has crowdsourced examples of instrumental storytelling via Facebook and Twitter. We focus on three cases of political storytelling on social media, which foreground certain problems of using narrative in the public sphere: Donald Trump's anecdote about "Jim who stopped going to Paris"; a viral Facebook story by a Finnish MP about an encounter with a drug addict; and the social media controversy around the alleged confrontation between Covington High School students and Indigenous People's March attendants at the Lincoln Memorial in January 2019. Based on the idea in cognitive narratology of the experiential narrative as *prototypical* and on Caroline Levine's influential theory of colliding representational and social *forms,* we formulate a theory of how viral, affective storytelling may distort the intended rhetoric and ethics of narrative. We demonstrate how the prototypical narrative form, in collision with the formal affordances of social media, ends up contradicting the political or social forms that the teller or sharer of the narrative advocates. We describe the social media logic that creates a chain reaction from narrative experientiality to disproportionate and uncontrolled representativeness and normativity created by affective sharing, and we conceptualize this contemporary narrative phenomenon as the "viral exemplum."

Keywords:

experientiality, exemplum, virality, social media narratives, political storytelling, new formalism

Introduction

This essay is grounded on the theoretical, analytical, and public activities in our research project *Dangers of Narrative: Contemporary Story-Critical Narratology* (2017–20).[1] We have set out to theorize the contemporary *storytelling boom* (see Salmon; and Fernandes), while illustrating the need for story-critical narrative theory through qualitative analyses of instrumentalized narratives crowdsourced via social media. Many of the observations presented here reflect our discussions with various stakeholders and professional groups with which we have collaborated in the context of this project during 2017–20: journalists, educators, politicians, influencers, and marketers. Our aim in this essay is to bridge the gap between narrative theory and contemporary narrative practices by demonstrating what it could mean for a narratologist to provide the general audience as well as various professional groups with critical tools for navigating today's textual and social environments, dominated as they are by storytelling.

Critical views of the storytelling boom are becoming frequent and gaining more academic visibility. In her critical study on the uses of personal stories, Amy Shuman writes about the promises attached to narrative practices: "Storytelling promises to make meaning out of raw experiences; to transcend suffering; to offer warnings, advice, and other guidance; to provide a means for traveling beyond the personal" (1). However, Shuman emphasizes, storytelling is increasingly unlikely to make good on these promises. In the same vein, Sujatha Fernandes writes: "Rather than being the magical elixir we imagine, might curated stories actually inhibit social change?" (3) Fernandes proposes a critical stance toward the "curated" mobilization of storytelling, because purposefully instrumentalized stories may actually conceal structural issues related to oppressive practices. Christian Salmon analyzes how the proliferation of storytelling has changed the social functions of narrative. Contemporary storytelling "tacks artificial narratives on to reality, blocks exchanges, and saturates symbolic space with its series and stories" (10). No longer primarily concerned with distribution of knowledge and past experience, it "shapes behaviors and channels flows of emotion" and establishes narrative systems that "lead individuals to identify with models and to conform to protocols" (10).

Driven by a desire to understand how widely such critical stances are adopted, we have given the project's followers the option of blowing the whistle on dubious, unnecessary, or amusing uses of narrative in media and the social sphere by sending their cases to us or marking them with the hashtag #mindthenarrative. The cases reported to us—approximately 800 at the time of writing—allow us to observe the kinds of narrative forms that draw the attention of social media users, to study the notions of narrative or narrativity that inform their reports, and to determine the

professional contexts in which the issues seem the most pertinent. We analyze selected cases on our Facebook page and archive all cases, along with all analyses of them, whether by our followers or ourselves. In relying on this crowdsourced case material for some preliminary narrative-theoretical and methodological arguments and qualitatively analyzing a few examples, we invite our narrative-theoretical colleagues to consider the possibility of reshaping narratologists' formalist focus on form into an engaged, critical practice.

We will focus on narratives of personal experience, which is the predominant currency in today's story economy. Successful viral storytelling is seen as a promise of great returns in promoting social and political change as well as brands, individuals, and businesses. Specifically, in this article, we focus on examples from the public sphere of US and Finnish politics. We claim that a better understanding of the *affordances of form* (Levine) could result in a more ethical and rhetorically sound storytelling, particularly in political contexts where the representative and normative value of individual narratives is accentuated and their contestation is a high-stakes game (see Phelan, "Narratives"). We borrow our notion of form from the influential work of Caroline Levine, and we find her notion of formal affordances useful in explaining how the "dangers of narrative," as reported by our informants and analyzed by ourselves, result from a complex entanglement between particular uses of the narrative form and the context of use. Levine's crucial modification to the prevailing notions of formalism is that social institutions and practices can also be considered forms that may, moreover, clash with textual or other representational forms. By *affordance* Levine means "both the particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford," emphasizing the portability of forms and their affordances, that is, their relative independence from contexts (Levine 6–7). The forms whose affordances we are concerned with are (1) the prototype of the story of personal experience, and (2) social media platforms as they shape the ethics and rhetoric of contemporary storytelling, particularly by affording virality—"small, unpredictable events [. . .] nudged into becoming big, monstrous contagions without a guiding hand" (Sampson 6). Moreover, as argued by Levine, "the instabilities generated by formal collisions" ultimately make for the most worthwhile object of study for a contemporary formalist (xiii), as these collisions make the interaction between text and context, representation and social forms tangible. We argue that the omnipresent urge to tell and share experiential stories results in collisions between the narrative form and other forms, such as those of the social media. Such collisions can generate unwanted or unsolicited effects that stem from the affordances of these forms. This gives rise to what we are calling the "dangers" of narrative.

The type of verbal performance most frequently reported to us as (1) a narrative and (2) harmful or misleading is *an instrumentalized story of personal experience*. Almost surprisingly,

most of the reported cases conform rather seamlessly to definitions of "narrativity as mediated human experientiality" (Fludernik, *Towards* 26) and the narrative prototype as understood by first-wave cognitive narratologists (see Herman, "Introduction" and *Basic Elements*; and Ryan, "Toward"). As defined by David Herman, a representation most commonly framed as a narrative by the receiver's cognition is a situated account that conveys an ordered temporal and causal sequence of events, a storyworld with particulars, an event that disrupts this storyworld, and the experience of what it is like for a particular individual to live through this disruption (*Basic Elements* 14).

At the same time, it is precisely this *experiential narrative prototype* that goes by the label of "compelling narrative" in today's story economy (Mäkelä, "Lessons" and "Through the Cracks"); leading storytelling consultants such as Jonah Sachs in his bestselling *Winning the Story Wars* argue forcefully for sharing one's authentic experience with well-chosen particulars and a perceivable "world disruption" or "breach" (Bruner 11). It has been enlightening to observe that it is none other than this type of narrative, promoted on every front, that our followers so often find dubious.

In our corpus, this group of stories features urban legends that end up affecting political decision-making; advertisement campaigns that exploit touching "real-life" stories; tear-jerking fundraising stories; personal conversion narratives by life coaches or proponents of alternative medicine; journalistic stories unsuccessfully or needlessly using the narrative form; Victorian benefactor narratives on politicians' public social media profiles; cases where an individual's identity has been usurped and instrumentalized for affective storytelling; counter-narratives of individuals that courageously fight the corrupt or ineffectual system (Mäkelä, "Through the Cracks"); counter-narratives appropriated from marginalized groups to support other, often antagonistic, causes (Nurminen); and long ago falsified "true stories" that are still going viral. Moreover, much of today's instrumentalized storytelling is closely related to viral marketing and campaigning (Shiller). Our corpus is in line with a doctrine that is being, if not consistently argued, at least repeatedly implied, by storytelling professionals across the spheres of life from marketing to politics: the basic elements of the story of personal experience are the seeds of virality.

But why are we calling our approach "formalist" if the (contemporary) contexts of using narrative are so crucial to our critique? In this essay, we attempt to show that the prototypical form of a story of personal experience and its potential for virality in social media networks should be a central concern in contemporary narratology precisely because the form is not politically innocent, not even when used for a "good cause." This stance results at least partly from the observations that we have made on our corpus: bluntly put, followers report the storytelling practices of like-minded people to our project (usually anonymously) almost as often as they report their ideological

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opponents. This observation may issue a challenge to hermeneutic approaches to storytelling that reject the claims of the philosophical "anti-narrativist" camp and emphasize the thoroughly contextual nature of narrative ethics.[2] This stance is summarized by Hanna Meretoja: "There is nothing in stories to guarantee that their possible ethical potential will be actualized. Narrative form does not make a narrative either inherently harmful or beneficial; instead, its ethical value is contextual: that is, dependent on how the narrative is interpreted and put to use in a particular social, historical, and cultural world" (Meretoja, "On the Use" 91–92).

It is easy to agree with Meretoja on the claim that *narrative* as a general category is not inherently ethical or unethical. This does not, however, exclude the possibility that more particular types of narrative forms may carry along with them latent, portable risks that may be actualized independent of the storyteller's intentions, and particularly in collision with other forms. In order to rehabilitate the question of form in contemporary discussions of "dangers of narrative," we will focus on demonstrating the interplay between the affordances of stories of personal experience, social media as platforms that reshape narrative rhetoric and ethics, and the multiple contexts where the affordances of these forms may be realized. We start by positioning our approach vis-à-vis previous approaches to the instrumentality of narrative and discussing how the notion of affordances modifies the outlook on the narrative form. We illustrate our approach with a brief analysis of political storytelling. This is followed by a more in-depth analysis of a campaigning story and its political risks *qua* experiential narrative prototype. We will conclude by investigating how an experiential narrative's virality affects its rhetoric and ethics and turns unverifiable experiences into emblems of a collective cultural narrative.

The Affordances of Experiential Narrative

The perception of narratives as potent instruments is nothing new in itself. There are also significant precedents for studying the *risks* involved in storytelling (see Salmon; Fernandes; and Shuman) and narrative understanding (see Sartwell; and Strawson). Our contribution to these discussions is to bring into focus those dangers of narrative that stem from the affordances of the narrative form itself.

The kinds of uses that narrative lends itself to are most compellingly theorized, on the one hand, in rhetoric, and, on the other, in psychologically oriented studies of interpersonal storytelling. In the rhetorical tradition, narrative is always seen as communicatively situated and as a means to an end. The psychological approaches, in contrast, treat narrative as a range of expressive means

that individuals can use to achieve various things, and within this paradigm the specific interest lies in how the use of personal narratives has certain identifiable functions (Iversen and Pers-Højholt). These branches of study share the insistence on the pragmatic situatedness and goal-orientedness of using narrative. We argue that the idea of the *affordances of form* could help bring together the pragmatic considerations in the aforementioned traditions with the more formalist theories of narratology. There are certain *uses* that the form lends itself to, and therefore studying the situations in which such usage becomes available and proves efficient or consequential is in our view ineluctably linked to studying form.

If we are to inquire what makes narrative particularly useful and powerful in certain situations and contexts, the notion of affordances helps us articulate the relevant questions even more precisely than before. For instance, understanding rhetoric as "the use of symbols to induce social action" (Hauser 3) makes narrative one among many such symbolic resources. If we wish to study the specificity of narrative as a rhetorical resource, follow-up questions are necessary: can we say that there are kinds of use that are particular to narrative; are there kinds of inducement that arise particularly with the use of narrative; and, are there particular social actions that narrative is particularly apt to induce (cf. Björninen, Hatavara, and Mäkelä)? The focus on the affordances of the narrative form means that the focus is on these questions by default.

An example from recent political history may help us illustrate how the affordances of the narrative form can be brought to bear on an actual narrative. Shortly after his presidential inauguration, Donald Trump raised a few eyebrows with a curious anecdote about his acquaintance "Jim," who used to be a regular visitor to Paris. This is how Trump told the story to the attendees of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in February 2017: "I have a friend. He's a very, very substantial guy. He loves the City of Lights, he loves Paris. For years, every year during the summer, he would go to Paris. It was automatic with his wife and his family. Hadn't seen him in a while. And I said, 'Jim, let me ask you a question: How's Paris doing?' 'Paris? I don't go there anymore. Paris is no longer Paris'" (Trump).

This is a miniature narrative of personal experience. In accordance with Herman's definition, we have an ordered sequence of events and a particularized storyworld. Experiential qualities are also easy to find: on the one hand, the narrative is about an experience that made Jim change his mind about Paris, and on the other hand, it conveys Trump's experience of his encounter with Jim. Trump's reporting evokes the comfort and routine involved in Jim's yearly Paris trip: "he loves Paris," "for years, every year [. . .] he would," and "It was automatic with his wife and family." The final statement about Paris no longer being Paris hints towards the central disruptive event as experienced by Jim, but it also functions as the rhetorical resolution of Trump's narrative.

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This statement is presented as a quotation of Jim's speech: "Paris is no longer Paris." Apart from the first-person pronoun, this is also marked by a change of speaking voice when Trump says: "Paris? I don't go there anymore." Jim's reply, as mimicked by Trump, states this in a matter-of-fact fashion, as if something obvious. Yet, it leaves a lot of room for us to interpret how Jim feels about not going to Paris anymore: for instance, we can read between the lines a sense of dismay and disappointment. While nothing in the narrative tells us exactly why Jim changed his mind, neither in his own words nor in the words of the narrator, this does not make the point of the story hard to grasp—nor, indeed, the aim of Trump's performance in front of his audience. This is where the context of the particular storytelling act—its *situatedness*, in Herman's words—proves to be central to understanding the story.

At the CPAC conference in February 2017, the story was told in the context of the ongoing debate concerning international terrorism and immigration policies. A few days earlier, Trump had made a dubious contribution to this debate by referring to a nonexistent attack in Sweden ("Look at what's happening last night in Sweden. [. . .] They took in large numbers. They're having problems like they never thought possible" [CNN]). He now evokes terror attacks in Paris (November 2015) and Nice (July 2016) that are still fresh in everyone's memory: listeners are likely to recall that these attacks were avowedly planned by an Islamic extremist organization and executed by immigrants residing in France. Therefore, the obvious interpretation of "Paris is no longer Paris" is that *Paris is no longer safe*. This reading doubles as an interpretation of Jim's experiential response to the disruption of the comfortingly "automatic" annual Paris holidays.

An overtly political message of the story can also be inferred. Since Trump calls Jim a "very, very substantial guy," we can presume that the two must think alike; we know that Trump has nothing but insults for those who have any disagreement with him. The political interpretation of Trump's story about Jim is that France's immigration policy is disagreeable and that Americans would do well not to support the country and its economy as tourists. Either or both the personal safety point and the political point can be easily interpreted both as Trump's reason to tell the story in this situation and as the reason why "Jim" no longer goes to Paris.

Trump's choice to communicate these messages with an experiential narrative means that whether he intends it or not, his communication is shot through with certain effects afforded by the narrative form. As we see above, the personal viewpoint guiding Trump's narration ensures its experiential relatability. The point and purpose of the story does not emerge directly from its (actually very few) words, but in the context of use, the narrative acquires an exemplary function. The story exemplifies an experience of feeling unsafe and betrayed by politics—according to some, it was this exact experience that got Trump elected in the first place.[3] This is a good example of the

narrative form doing what it does best: allowing a brief anecdote to become a strong experiential argument, and allowing its user to connect with his presumed audience's experience.

The experiential quality in Trump's story is not a given, either, but stems from the linguistic form that allows for an ordering of events around characters. As David Herman writes, a text is *prototypically* narrative only when the condition of experientiality is fulfilled: "Unless a text or a discourse encodes the pressure of events on an experiencing [. . .] consciousness, it will not be a central instance of the narrative text type" (Herman, "Introduction" 11). While the example at hand may not be the most prototypical narrative, it is easy to *narrativize* it by imbuing experientiality and point on it (cf. Fludernik, *Towards* 32–34). Once it becomes clear that the text is an account of how Jim, who "loves Paris," comes to think that "Paris is no longer Paris," many parts of the text acquire an experiential function, as shown above.

Once this narrative function is established, the experiential qualities override others. For instance, we tend to evaluate whether narratives are relatable and believable, but spend less time considering if they are maximally informative or representative. In this case, the experientially evocative style actually coincides with the deferral of information: we are invited to wonder how Jim feels and why he feels that way *because* the text refrains from explicitly spelling out the reasons why he has stopped going to Paris. In the political context the use of narrative form affords political and value-laden statements a degree of deniability precisely due to this lack of explicitness. Neither Trump nor Jim actually says that Paris is unsafe because of immigration; neither of them directly advises Americans not to go to Paris. Yet these are the simplest and the most intuitive interpretations of the moral of the story. Fictional narrative has long been touted as the art of indirection. Yet it is also evident that experiential narrative by and large accommodates a certain indirectness that contributes to its rhetorical power. Thus, the affordances of narrative transform a relatively modest anecdote into a powerful instrument allowing Trump to tap into the experientially resonant vein of deep-seated concerns, fears, and prejudices harbored by his base and his potential re-electors.

Then when does a useful and a powerful rhetorical tool like this become "dangerous" in a formal sense, irrespective of the underlying politics? Are all successful narratives in our contemporary public sphere potentially dangerous? In a way, yes: by virtue of their inevitable incompleteness and openness to multiple alternative tellings or versions, all narratives may be seen as "narratives in contest" (Phelan, "Narratives"). Indeed, it has become one predominant function of narratives in social debate to contest how events are perceived and understood. Further, narrative is even used to relativize *factual* arguments—to argue that everything, from justifying policies to determining what someone really did or said, is a matter of perspective or presentation. However,

the "dangerousness" of narrative is not reducible to its amenability to this type of contestation. It is not reducible to its success or virality, either, although naturally any widely available and well-known text will be susceptible to multiple uses and abuses, interpretations and reinterpretations.

We will follow Levine in thinking that we should focus on the collisions of forms and ask what happens to their affordances in these collisions. Our analyses demonstrate that the affordances of social media have a tendency to amplify and repurpose the affordances of personal storytelling, giving rise to risks that go beyond both the tellers' agendas and the simple volume of media exposure. We wish to emphasize the uncontrollability of narrative rhetoric and ethics that arises at the confluence of narrative and the forms aiding its social distribution. This uncontrollability may lead to another collision—one between these storytelling-related forms and the *social forms* that the political storyteller aims to support and promote. Thus understood, the formalist stance strongly suggests that the dangers of narrative are not simply a matter of narratives being open to interpretation and reframing.

Forms in Collision: Narrative of Personal Experience, Social Media Exemplarity, and Forms of Welfare Politics

In all its efficiency, Trump's viral story of his friend Jim is emblematic of a general shift in the affordances of storytelling that turn narratives of personal experience into vessels of a post-truth mentality: relatability, experiential positioning, and a graspable moral of the story outweigh referentiality and representativeness. In Trump's case, this may be the desired outcome, but perhaps not all political causes are best served by such rhetorical effects.

Next we will move on to an analysis of a more full-fledged and in every respect prototypical narrative of personal experience instrumentalized in the service of political campaigning: a Facebook status update by Finnish Green Party MP Emma Kari. By exchanging Trump for a young, liberal, and leftist female politician, we should be able to address the frustration that many of our informants, clearly representing the reference group of educated young liberals, express when encountering heavily instrumentalized personal storytelling within their own political camp. The analyzed case is a story of the MP's encounter with a "lost boy" of the 1990's Finnish economic recession, now a homeless drug addict. Our project has used this story extensively in popular talks and in training various professional groups as an example of the text type we call the *viral exemplum* (see Dawson and Mäkelä 18; and Mäkelä, "Lessons"). We have treated it as a textbook case of a "compelling story" optimized for social media visibility, which, in large part because of its

viral success on social media, becomes unduly representative and gives rise to a narrative rhetoric that to some degree collides with political forms the storyteller alleges to promote. The post was originally used in the 2017 municipal elections by the Green Party as part of a series of texts centered around the topic of "lost boys," mainly referring to school dropouts and declining literacy. This particular story went viral by Finnish standards (13,000 likes and 1,500 shares). In the same campaign context, posts focusing on statistics and suggestions on concrete political measures to combat the negative trend were far less popular. Here we present a slightly abbreviated translation of the post:

> Today I stood on a stage at a mall in Pori and talked about boys. I talked about how we haven't awoken to the fact that boys are dropping out. [. . .]
>
> When I stepped down from the stage, a man walked to me. He had lost his teeth because of amphetamine, he was glancing furtively and his clothes smelled like dirt. "You talked about me. I'm one of those lost boys." I startled. [. . .]
>
> He talked fast, almost running out of breath. Maybe he thought that he needed to talk fast because I would soon stop listening. [. . .] He told me about shame and the feeling of being humiliated. Classes at school felt like bullying. [. . .]
>
> Problems kept piling up and nothing worked out. [. . .] Finally he just gave up. Now there's no home and no hope for the future. "My life is over, but you save the rest of those boys," he said. I promised to do whatever I could. "That's probably not enough, though," he said. That hurt.
>
> Walking to the bus, I thought how he had also been someone's little boy. He had a mom who kissed his toes. He had a dad who tickled his tummy. He was loved. He was taken care of. I thought of all those boys who were losing their grip. Maybe if there had been someone to catch them in time, their lives would be very different now. It's easier to raise unbroken children than to fix broken adults.
>
> It seems obvious to me that we need to take better care of our boys.

The informant who sent the story to *Dangers of Narrative* expressed her frustration with what she considers a recurring story formula, "stories of how [a politician] encounters some underprivileged individual somewhere but miraculously manages to encounter this person as an equal and take mercy on them." The informant also points to the fact that such stories are impossible to falsify or verify: "Can be true, or can just as well be a colored version." By sharing the story of her transformative encounter, the MP is primarily sharing *her experience of another*

person's experience, and as such, the narrative positions itself beyond fact-checking and is not susceptible to critique the way a concrete proposal for political action would be. It is difficult to disagree with the MP's story and its moral, encapsulated in the closing gnomic statement and evaluation: "It's easier to raise unbroken children than to fix broken adults. It seems obvious to me that we need to take better care of our boys."

The narrative logic here is that of the exemplum, as described by sociolinguists Anna De Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou: the story allegedly presented as an illustration of an argument takes the place of the argument, scarcely leaving room for countering (98). As argued by social media scholars such as Zizi Papacharissi, Ruth Page, and others, social media is a platform for sharing *affect*. The primary social sphere for contemporary storytelling is what Papacharissi has labeled *affective publics*, "public formations that are textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked crowds" (14). We introduce a pragmatic and pedagogical application of the cognitive narratological definitions of narrative *experientiality* (Fludernik, *Towards*) and *qualia* ("what is it like" [Herman, *Basic Elements*]) for a critical analysis of *narrative exemplarity* in social media.[4] What does the MP's experience, or her version of the "lost boy's" experience, exemplify? A critical look at the prototypical elements of a story of personal experience provides a limited but precise approach to *affective experientiality* as an affordance of social media storytelling.

Monika Fludernik proposes, on the basis of studies by William Labov and others on "natural" or conversational narratives, that the crucial feature of narrative is not a sequence of events but rather the experiencing subject and the fact that the events or states of affairs mean something to her on an emotional level (Fludernik, "Natural Narratology"). Hence Fludernik's claim that "there can therefore be narratives without plot, but there cannot be any narratives without a human (anthropomorphic) experiencer of some sort at some level" (*Towards* 13; cf. Herman, "Introduction" 10–11). The difference with regard to classical definitions of narrative is one of emphasis: structuralists' definitions gave primacy to events, Fludernik's to their emotional significance. That is, she views *evaluation* as a defining criterion for narrative. Evaluation is understood by Labov as "the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its raison d'etre, why it was told" (366). The point may vary from the unusual nature of the events to the fact that the narrative makes the teller appear in a favorable light (Labov and Waletzky 30). For Fludernik, what's important is the teller's retrospective evaluation of the events, which makes the experience relevant to her and to her audience (i.e., contextually tellable): "All experience is therefore stored as emotionally charged remembrance, and it is reproduced in narrative form because it was memorable, funny, scary, or exciting" (*Towards* 29).

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Since Fludernik's model is based on natural narratives, it is well-equipped to handle the personal narratives shared in social media. It also allows us to see how the growing popularity and cultural relevance of social media has rendered some features of personal narratives problematic. Everyday narratives of the Labovian kind that people typically share with friends and family actually end up doing something quite different when shared in social media or printed in the newspaper as human-interest stories. In social life, these narratives serve an important function, as Mary-Louise Pratt argues: "[The speaker's] point is to produce in his hearers not only belief but also an imaginative and affective involvement in the state of affairs he is representing and an evaluative stance toward it" (136). Experiential, evaluated narratives engage the audience differently from texts whose relevance is the Gricean "maximally effective exchange of information" (136). They invite an affective response and call on the audience to judge the events depicted. Moreover, it is affective *consensus* that is sought. Our corpus features several narratives told by or featuring a Good Samaritan outraged by the maltreatment of a powerless person by another person or a government agency. These kinds of stories tend to incite public outrage or even hate campaigns on social media. While the evaluation and solidarity-seeking attaching to narratives of personal experience are invaluable in allowing us to connect with and draw support from loved ones, in the wider social sphere they seem, rather, to divide. This has to do with the fact that narratives convey a moral stance: "a disposition towards what is good or valuable and how one ought to live in the world" (Ochs and Capps 45). Moreover, narratives of personal experience are often, though certainly not always, characterized by moral certainty: the teller emerges as morally superior to the other characters (47). Labov and Waletzky found that the tendency to present oneself in a good light compared to the other parties involved was prominent in narratives of personal experience (34). We believe that this particular feature—the moral positioning of characters—is repurposed when experiential narratives begin to circulate in social media. A positioning of the characters achieved in the situated performance of storytelling geared to eliciting sympathy and understanding from the immediate audience will simply feed the snap judgment machine of social media.

In sum, narrative experientiality in its prototypical form readily lends itself to moral positioning, but when brought together with the forms of social media, the moral overtones of narratives are amplified—most obviously via emotional reactions invited by the platforms and via sharing, which often doubles as a sign of approval or disapproval. This explains the most crucial collision of narrative and political forms in our example. The overlapping masterplots (see Abbott 46–49) are those of conversion and Victorian philanthropism, with the storyteller positioning herself (through sharing her compassionate experience) as a benefactor, and the homeless drug

addict (through vicarious narration of *his* experience) as a deserving individual. Thus the telling of the story in an affect-generating way is itself understood as a form of acting on her promise to "do whatever I could" for the "rest of the boys." Yet the political form of action promoted by Kari is not individual charity, nor ethical evaluation of individuals highlighted by her own narrative positioning (see Björninen, Hatavara, and Mäkelä 444–46), but a structural change that would make it easier for the welfare state to "catch the lost boys in time."

While Kari's call for action to "take better care of our boys"—and not just this one "boy"— taps into the emotional logic that goes hand in hand with the politics and ethics of the welfare state, the underlying Victorian masterplot of the transformative encounter between the benefactor and the deserving individual takes our political imagination and the dynamics of affective engagement back to times predating public welfare. Contrary to the ethics of encounter and recognition, political structures that ensure equal opportunity and social welfare aim at narrative blindness and erasure of moral positioning on the level of individuals. In high tax rate countries such as Finland, the stock roles—merciful benefactors who "stop to listen," deserving poor who share their tragedies for political inspiration—are ultimately at odds with the established social forms of welfare and other structures promoting equality. Yet the storytelling boom is making the masterplot of benefactors and deserving poor more and more conspicuous across contexts, from journalism to political campaigns to activism. Not that such tearjerker stories haven't always featured in democratic political discourse; but the narrative affordances of social media endow affective narrative rhetoric with politically representative and normative powers—thus making rhetorically constructed narrative positions politically exemplary.

Thus, the conflict between the form of the experiential narrative and the pursued political form of action arises only if the narrative is taken to be exemplary, and the exemplary reading is greatly favored by the story logic of social media. However, in this case, and in "engaging" political storytelling at large, the seeds of virality can be detected on the level of the experiential narrative itself: the reception of Kari's narrative as "representative" is already anticipated both in the represented storyworld and the narrative discourse, thus making the most out of the viral affordances of a personal narrative. Even the disadvantaged person, the unknowing protagonist of a viral narrative, makes a claim for representativeness by acknowledging himself as "one of those lost boys." The exemplarity of his life story is further reinforced by the MP's narration, which takes advantage of free indirect discourse to schematize (see Fludernik, *Fictions*) the uniqueness of experience into an exemplum of social descent without a clearly marked source of utterance: "Problems kept piling up and nothing worked out. [. . .] Finally he just gave up. Now there's no home and no hope for the future."

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In terms of both political rhetoric and narrative ethics, the penultimate passage starting with "Walking to the bus, I thought how . . ." is clearly the most problematic part of the narrative. Entangled as it is in schematizing free indirect discourse and embedded in the evaluatory reflection of the storyteller, it is hard to tell where the description of the man's childhood ("he had also been someone's little boy") originates from. Is it a representation of what the man said to Kari, is it Kari's own middle-class projection of a happy childhood, or is it a rhetorical gesture enhancing the storyworld disruption in a narrative of social descent? When shared by social media followers, the embodied particulars in the embedded or projected story of the "lost boy's" childhood start to *mis*represent social exclusion and abuse as a storyworld disruption on an individual level. This does not align with the politics the story presumably tries to advocate: the political left in Finland, with which MP Kari is more or less affiliated with, has consistently argued that statistics tell the opposite and that political change requires recognizing the structural heritability of social disadvantage. The very things that make the story "compelling" and successful on social media end up overriding the factual basis on which the politician's agenda lies. The rhetorical and ethical dangers of such stories go beyond the misdirection of political imagination and pertain to the individual level as well. As Amy Shuman aptly states in her critique of vicarious storytelling and empathy: "The appropriation of stories can create voyeurs rather than witnesses and can foreclose meaning rather than open lines of inquiry and understanding**.** Appropriation can use one person's tragedy to serve as another's inspiration and preserve, rather than subvert, oppressive situations" (Shuman 5).

In our example, the appropriation concerns not only the narrative identity of the "lost boy," but also his body, his interiority, and details of his family history. The narrative is shot through with embodied detail: consider the contrast between the bad teeth and the dirty clothes of the "lost boy" and the tickling of the toes and kissing of tummy of the boy not yet lost. As emphasized by both Herman and Fludernik, narrativity requires particularity, and experience is, if anything, embodied. According to Fludernik, the concrete specificity of narratives reflects human embodiedness; her narratology is "natural" in the sense of being "embodied." Narrative operates on an everyday human scale, which distinguishes it from abstract generalizations such as those produced by scientists. It is the human-scale particularity—the sensuous detail and the specificity of time and place—that correlates with narrativity (Fludernik, *Towards* 12–13, 29–30) . Affect can be considered "the link between how we think and how we act" (Papacharissi 12), and is the main propellant behind the chain reaction from visceral responses to political action that we often witness, and even experience, on social media.

Such embodiedness and immediacy is precisely the reason why politicians are urged to tell touching stories of embodied encounters that, in a sense, turn political representativeness into flesh

and blood. In the context of politics, the storyworld particulars become rhetorically and ethically significant when they are endowed with representativeness and normativity. This endowment takes place in the clash between the affordances of a personal story and those of social media platforms, which together give rise to the logic of viral exemplarity: a chain reaction from experientiality to disproportionate representativeness and normativity. This collision of forms also results in uncontrolled, emergent narrative rhetoric and authority.

The Story Logic of Social Media: From Experientiality to Representativeness and Normativity

We will conclude by looking at yet another example from the US political public sphere. One of the most memorable viral scandals of recent political history, known as the "Lincoln Memorial Confrontation of 2019," was brought to our attention via our crowd-sourcing call. The originary "text" in the case was a minute-long video clip showing a face-off between a teenage boy wearing the "Make America Great Again" cap of Trump supporters and a Native American elder at the Lincoln Memorial during the Indigenous Peoples March in January 2019. In the media aftermath, other videos and eyewitness accounts entered the fray as contesting stories about what actually took place (cf. Phelan, "Narratives"). In the prolonged public debate, the lives and identities of both the student Nick Sandmann and the Native elder Nathan Phillips were instrumentalized on both sides of the political divide: first by left-wing liberal politicians, activists, and influencers supported by media such as *The Washington Post* and *CNN*, and next, following the familiar logic of partisan backlash, by conservative outlets and Trump supporters. In the contemporary US political public sphere the case is emblematic of conflicting "cultural narratives"—those deep-seated and widely circulated storylines that underlie many narratives and influence their reception (Phelan, *Living* 8–9). We will limit our analysis of this complex and in many ways highly ambiguous case to its prototypically narrative resource of embodied particularity and its collision with the affordances of social media storytelling.

The original video clip was posted by one of the participants of the Indigenous Peoples March, and its viral publicity was boosted, it later turned out, by fake Twitter accounts with tens of thousands of bought followers (see Potter 80–81). The viral phenomenon developed over a single weekend, with 2.5 million views and 14,000 shares. Unlike our previous examples, which involve Trump and Kari presenting a single experiential narrative to an audience in a clearly identifiable situation, the "narrative" here is far from prototypical. The most comprehensive popular analyses of the controversy highlight that while many established media produced intensely political readings

of the incident, they had little narrative detail to work with.[5] The footage shows a smirking, MAGA-capped Sandmann facing Phillips, who is drumming and chanting rhythmically, the two of them standing awkwardly close to one another in a noisy crowd of other high school boys. It is hard to describe the teenager's facial expression as anything but "ambiguous" (Townhead). It is equally difficult to tell whether the Native elder feels intimidated by the situation, and whether we are witnessing an antagonistic confrontation or a random, benign encounter among different types of group gatherings. What is ineluctable is the strong physical and identifiable presence of the two individuals. CNN viewers were soon encouraged to interpret every micro-gesture on the faces of two strangers, to search for signs of either recognition and respect or lack thereof. Additional footage and information from the Indigenous Peoples March surfaced, but by then the social media consensus of left-wing influencers, the liberal media, and many regular social media users had condemned the actions of the Covington High School students as hateful and discriminating.

According to Fludernik's experiential definition, narrativity requires "a human (anthropomorphic) experiencer of some sort at some narrative level" (*Towards* 13). In contrast to our previous examples, in this case the originary text gives only minimal cues for constructing experientiality. Thus, the scandal highlights the fact that social media platforms are conducive to *vicarious* experientiality—through their affordances, they lend themselves to expressing one's own experience of another person's experience. The social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter prompt the user to share a moral reaction that is relatable and acceptable to one's peers, and hence results in a viral afterlife of experiences that are, essentially, *narrative projections*. Whereas Trump and Kari's narratives are clearly situated (told in a specific situation to a specific audience for some purpose) and present at least an adequate amount of experiential detail, here the experiential narrative prototype is read into minimal particulars with the help of collectively projected cultural narratives—those concerning division, discrimination, entitlement, and social injustice in the American society.

As narrativization requires particularity and favors individualization, Sandmann was to receive the majority of the critique on social media: several influencers, from journalists to Hollywood celebrities, portrayed him as an emblem of "Trump's America" (a quote from Alyssa Milano's tweet about the incident). Peculiarly enough, although in line with cognitive scientific notions of the Theory of Mind, Sandmann's face in particular became the metonymy of American moral decay brought about by Trump's discriminatory rhetoric and reactionary administration. Scholar and television host Reza Aslan infamously called Sandmann's face "punchable" in a tweet. Ruth Graham of *Slate* magazine analyzed the video under the title "MAGA Teenager Who Harassed a Native American Veteran Is Still Unnamed, but We've Seen His Face Before."

However, as is the case with the MP and the "lost boy," while the social media rhetoric and logic encourages an exemplary reading, the embodied particulars, and with them the "story ownership," persist. These particulars still belong to individuals who have not consented to being used as exemplars of a narrative or societal positions. Here, again, we witness a collision of forms that pertain to contemporary storytelling prototypes and environments: narrative experientiality requires particularity, but individuating narratives, framed by second-degree evaluation by those who have the power to frame the story, end up exemplifying or "telling" about major political and historical struggles. The political issues at stake are structural and therefore not narratable in the prototypical sense. As a result, a high school student from Kentucky was singled out as representative of how society treats minorities, while the right-wing backlash, relishing all the subsequent, complementary footage and information that complicated the interpretation of the first video, eagerly smeared the narrative identity of Nathan Phillips.

As the analyses of the Lincoln Memorial controversy continue to point out, in political conflicts the dispute about narrative particulars often moves onto a kind of metalevel: coverage of the media's coverage of the confrontation. In this case, the meta-debate "quickly and predictably degenerated into unreliable partisanship" (Townhead). The polarized debate shows that both liberal and conservative media strove to get the final word on what the case was about, what it represented, and what it exemplified. The left-wing liberals' hasty interpretation of the image of the "MAGA kid" as an emblematic icon of Trump's America and white privilege may have had the effect of somewhat undermining their cause (Townhead). Yet of course the choice to view the event in this way is justified: it is a historically salient fact that the arc towards a disastrous dehumanization of entire populations begins with small humiliating gestures done with impunity by those protected by privilege. The cautionary and interventionist rhetoric incited by the case must be understood in this context. Nathan Phillips, a human rights activist with ample evidence of being discriminated against on various occasions, supported the exemplary reading of the messy confrontation at the Lincoln Memorial by himself reporting to the press that he heard the schoolboys chanting "Build That Wall." From the point of view of story ownership, Phillips is more than entitled to have his version heard, yet this version gives little moral support to online backlash against those involved, such as the repeated collective demands for doxxing Nick Sandmann and the other boys (i.e., publishing personal information with malicious intent) in the name of fighting racial injustice. The conservative media linked the event to cultural story arcs, too. It has become a recognizable strategy of right-wing commentators and defendants of Trump's White House to control the coverage of controversial events by reframing the case as quickly and vehemently as possible (Wilson). This usually involves diverting the attention from the events to the alleged biases of media coverage.

News stories that are potentially damaging to conservative or right-wing causes are reframed as attempts to denigrate the current Republican-led politics and question the legitimacy of Trump's presidency. This defense has been used in myriad cases ranging from the fairly insignificant "Sharpiegate" (Ryan) to the historic impeachment hearings (Phelan, "Assessing").

While lacking in narrative prototypicality, in many senses the case of Nick Sandmann and Nathan Phillips is a textbook example of what our project has labeled the *viral exemplum*. The concept has caught on effectively in our popularizing work on social media in Finland, and its circulation has led to several new reports on such "dubious" uses of narrative, where the experientiality and particularity of a single narrative clash with both the forms of social media experientiality *qua* affective sharing and with the generally normative, polarizing rhetoric of the public sphere. In sum, we define the viral exemplum as the chain reaction, typically fueled by social media shares, from narrative experientiality to representativeness and normativity. Spurred in the first place by experientiality, this chain works in such a way that even when challenged by subsequent evidence, the initial interpretation and affective reactions may persist and lead to normative conclusions and political action. When shared on social media, a relatable individual experience becomes representative in a concrete, material sense. Furthermore, representativeness creates normativity as the affective consensus created by liking and sharing sets up an ethical norm. The logic of the viral exemplum thus radically alters the narratological settings of the ethics and rhetoric of storytelling, sometimes turning good intentions into unsolicited narrative effects. We have argued elsewhere (Dawson and Mäkelä) that at the heart of the story logic of social media, we may detect *emergent* narrative authority, created by the non-narrative affordances of "distributed linearity" and "ambient affiliation" of individual users, to quote Ruth Page's apt descriptions (20, 129). In the *Dangers of Narrative* project, our pragmatic take on the reported "dangers" has led us to examine the crucial link between individualizing, particularizing narratives; their sometimes unpredictable and uncontrollable afterlives on social media; and the resultant clashes with the original aims of both tellers and sharers, political or otherwise.

Conclusion: Toward Story-Critical Application of Narrative Studies

Exemplary narratives of individual hardship are used in the place of informed critique of societal issues because stories of individual experience captivate audiences and are easy to recall and share, while non-narrative insights about structural issues behind poverty or inequality may go ignored, even by leading politicians. It has long been acknowledged that the narrative form complicates the

distinction of fact and fiction, but the role of both factuality and fictionality in narrative clearly requires further theorizing in the contemporary story-positive culture (see Nielsen and Gjerlevsen; and Björninen). We are also facing a surge of real-life examples showing that this distinction between fact, fiction, and lying is not sufficiently cared for (Hyvönen). Furthermore, while the narrative form is ideally suited to conveying human experientiality, by the same token it is used with little success in attempts to represent the complexity of social interactions or material processes, such as climate change. Narrative tends to subordinate this complexity to an experiential point of view and bring the issue at stake to the scale of human perception, action, and goals (Bergthaller; and Raipola).

 This essay has been an attempt to describe, through a couple of case studies, that "danger" of narrative that most clearly emerges from our crowdsourced corpus: that of a story of personal experience gaining disproportionate representativeness and normativity through affective sharing. The narrative phenomenon that we call the viral exemplum, which ought to be understood as a collision of forms rather than a form in itself, contributes to post-truthfulness in the contemporary public sphere as it shields itself from fact-checking and criticism on three levels—those of experientiality, representativeness, and normativity. First, personal experience itself is resistant to falsification. Second, the experience of representativeness—of this particular story being "true in so many ways"—is cemented by the consensus of the "affective publics." Never mind if Trump's friend Jim does not exist; the collective experience of European metropoles becoming more unsafe is surely true. Third, the sense of a good cause, created by the affective consensus, eclipses even the well-founded criticism of individual stories told in service of this greater purpose. Our ultimate goal in this essay is to demonstrate how "story-critical" tools based on narratological expertise can be used to elaborate on the risks of storytelling perceived by non-narratological audiences. We have used examples and methods that have proved adaptable to a wide range of popular uses, from social media commentary to the training of journalists. We believe that a pertinent task for contemporary narrative scholars is to instrumentalize their expertise of form to get a firm hold of the storytelling boom.

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[2] The anti-narrativist tradition in philosophy is often constructed as comprising, e.g., White; Sartwell; and Strawson. On this tradition and its critique, see Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn*; and Hyvärinen. Anti-narrative arguments are often of a distinctly formal type. For example, Galen Strawson argues against the fundamentality and preferability of narrative as a cognitive form that figures behind certain strategies we use to make sense of our lives and identities (428).

[3] This became a dominant theme in the aftermath of Trump's election. On the morning following Trump's victory, CBS reporter Norah O'Donnell encapsulated this by saying, "This is not about the cracked ceiling [Hillary Clinton becoming the first female US president], it is about the cracked window in a woman's car in the rural Midwest" [CBS].

[4] We are not able to dwell on the conceptual distinctions between affect and experience here, nor on the double nature of experience as *Erlebnis* (as an "immediate," unreflected encounter with the world) and *Erfahrung* (as socially and discursively embedded and articulated). For a recent elaboration see, e.g. Backman 2018.

[5] See, e.g., Townhead; and Flanagan.

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