

This is a post-print version of a chapter published in Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives (eds. Klarissa Lueg & Marianne Wolff Lundholt; section “Counter-narratives in the political sphere”), Abington: Routledge 2020, pp. 389–401.

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429279713-36/cracks-safety-net-maria-m%C3%A4kel%C3%A4>

Maria Mäkelä, Tampere University

Through the cracks in the safety net: narratives of personal experience countering the welfare system in social media and human interest journalism¹

Introduction: a countering masterplot

Personal stories going viral in social media is a contemporary phenomenon highlighting both the rhetorical potential and the risk of misrepresentation in public storytelling that *counters* some allegedly widely-held notion. Positioning one’s story as a counter-narrative challenging a socio-political doxa is a rhetorical gesture that maximizes visibility in contemporary, social media dominated narrative environments. A case in point are stories of individual socio-economic hardship that construct the “system” as the antagonist. Stories countering the Nordic welfare state in particular call for an analysis of the logic of master and counter-narratives. References to the foolproof national welfare system as an ideologically dominant, rarely contested master narrative keep recurring in personal narratives spreading across social media in Finland and other Nordic countries.

I suggest that this binary logic of narrative truth formation in this particular socio-political setup can be approached from two points of view that are pertinent for contemporary narrative theory in

¹ This article was written in the context of research projects *Dangers of Narrative* (Kone Foundation 2017–2020) and *Instrumental Narratives: The Limits of Storytelling and New Story-Critical Narrative Theory* (no. 314768), both directed by the author. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer of this manuscript for some extremely helpful comments and suggestions.

general: (1) the affinity between the cognitive narrative prototype and the rhetorical repertoire of paradigmatic counter-narratives in social media; and (2) these stories' potential for virality and an afterlife as canonized, rarely contested narratives creating affective consensus. These viral narratives exemplify the normative functions and influence of counter-narratives, not simply as stories that may have a moral, but as narrative acts that construct the hegemonic narrative norm (the alleged "master narrative" of the foolproof national welfare system) through the gesture of countering. From a societal perspective, the study of this particular counter-narrative genre is crucial, as it may contribute to a general mistrust of public health care and social services, vital structures that remain unnarratable at heart. As Matti Hyvärinen notes in this volume, master narratives are rarely told as they are essentially more script- than story-like; they lack the necessary world disruption to become tellable. This chapter provides some empirical evidence and qualitative analysis of this dynamics of (un)narratability. I will illustrate with a couple of exemplary viral narratives and popular news stories the rhetoric of these highly narratable counter-narratives on public welfare, and the difficulty in actively promoting a positively laden master narrative of a well-functioning social structure in the story economy of social media.

The examples are derived from a corpus of "dubious narratives" crowdsourced and publicly discussed and analyzed in Finnish social media (mainly Facebook and Twitter) in the research project *Dangers of Narrative* (Kone Foundation, 2017–2020). Several of the ideas presented here are moreover inspired by discussions with the stakeholders of the project. The project aims at mapping the dominant cultural and societal ways of instrumentalizing the narrative form, particularly stories of personal experience. Inspired by the work already done on the instrumentalization of narrative and the "storytelling boom" in narrative studies (e.g. Shuman, 2005; Polletta, 2006; Salmon, 2010; Fernandes, 2017), our aim is to provide both academic and non-academic audiences with narratology-based tools for "story-critical" reading, distribution and

production of narratives. In January 2017, my research group sent out an open call on Facebook and Twitter to the Finnish audience, asking them to report “interesting, funny or dubious examples of instrumental storytelling”. Thus far we have archived approximately 700 reported cases, as well as the prefatory words by the informants elaborating on their own opinions and interpretations. This corpus, originally thought of as an informal method for popularization, consists of pieces of narrative journalism, social media updates that have gone viral, as well as advertisement and charity campaigns. In our preliminary analysis of the material, we have been able to trace some culturally dominant *masterplots*, defined by Porter Abbott as “recurrent skeletal stories, belonging to cultures and individuals that play a powerful role in questions of identity, values, and the understanding of life” (Abbott, 2002, p. 192). This chapter is not, however, based on solid quantitative analysis of masterplots as the collection and consistent analysis of data is still in progress (see Mäkelä, 2018). Instead, I will focus on the qualitative analysis of the cognitive prototypicality and the ensuing potential for virality of masterplots countering the Finnish welfare system in social media. The *Dangers of Narrative* corpus of reported stories and reports by informants, as it stands now, serves merely as a springboard for more general reflections on the rhetoric and risks of personal storytelling in contemporary narrative environments.

Abbott (2002, pp. 42–46) does not equate masterplot with master narrative. Whereas “master narrative” commonly denotes dominant ideologies and discourses, Abbott understands masterplots more in terms of highly tellable, self-replicating story genres. Following Hyvärinen’s and Abbott’s emphasis on concrete, verbalized and situated narrative accounts, I aim to demonstrate how social media as narrative environments mould personal counter-narratives into influential masterplots that have a significant potential for self-multiplication with regard to both content and form. I hope that this analysis will shed light on the ongoing, social media fuelled revolution of storytelling authority. When H. Porter Abbott wrote his *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* in 2002, masterplot-

regulating individuals playing “a powerful role in questions of identity, values, and the understanding of life” could more or less be identified as the “elite” of gate keepers, whereas in the contemporary social media story economy, increasingly dominated by anti-elite agendas, narrative authority is essentially an *emergent* phenomenon, determined by likes and shares (Dawson & Mäkelä, 2020). In such narrative environments, as I will demonstrate, counter-narratives have a considerable potential to become masterplots modeled according to “skeletal” story templates that audiences recognize practically without reading and, moreover, share on their own social media profiles without much critical reflection. The teller’s ability to position themselves as countering a commonly held elite consensus promotes significantly the social media tellability and authority of a narrative. With such contemporary narrative environments, I think that it is justifiable to speak of a “countering masterplot”.

I will first describe in short the popular understanding of master and counter-narratives reflected in public discussions and informants’ comments in the context of the *Dangers of Narrative* project. I will also provide my methodological rationale for diverging from the positively laden common use of the term counter-narrative. Then I will move on to describing the prominent masterplots countering the dialectically self-constructed master narrative of the foolproof Finnish welfare system. I will focus on a very limited set of narratives to highlight the formal features emblematic of these countering masterplots. A commentary on viral social media stories is accompanied with analyses of human-interest stories in the mainstream media. The reason for my bringing up some news stories while emphasizing social media storytelling is that the cases discussed demonstrate how mainstream media piggybacks on the personal narrative’s potential for countering and virality.

The primary theoretical and methodological contexts for my analyses are cognitive narratology and recent critical social scientific approaches to instrumental storytelling. I argue that more

narratological attention to the instrumentalization of personal counter-narratives is needed both in narrative and social media studies. Following Habermas (1989), the notions of the Nordic welfare state applied in this chapter are more rooted in the *public sphere* of the Nordic welfare state as separate from the actual socioeconomic model. More precisely, the macro-level narrative environment giving rise to instrumentalized personal stories of the failing “safety net” is what Zizi Papacharissi calls *affective publics*, “public formations that are textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked crowds” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 14). Papacharissi, as several other eminent social media scholars, speak incessantly of “storytelling” as a key feature of the public sphere formed through social media sharing, but do not ground their argument on an elaborate understanding of narrativity (see also Dawson & Mäkelä, 2020). With the following qualitative analysis of some exemplary narratives, I wish to increase the scholarship’s understanding of the viral-affective potential of specific kinds of narrative – those dealing with disruptive personal experience and explicitly countering an alleged master narrative.

The most vital consequence of the Nordic Welfare state has been political stability during the recent decades (e.g. Goodin, 1988; Piketty, 2014). This is not to say that the system itself was, indeed, foolproof; moreover, several studies and socioeconomic analyses provide ample evidence of the downfall of the Nordic welfare system caused by global neoliberalism (e.g. Veggeland [ed.], 2016). Narrative scholars can contribute to this pertinent discussion by studying the narrativization of the public sphere in this alleged socioeconomic paradigm shift: do, for example, viral personal stories of “falling through the cracks in the safety net” intensify the downfall of the system that remains, in essence, untellable?

Popular understanding of master and counter-narratives in the *Dangers of Narrative* crowdsourcing project

The discussions provoked by our popularizing analyses of “instrumental storytelling” on the *Dangers of Narrative* Facebook page (with its currently 7300 followers) have made it possible for us to observe how narrative-theoretical vocabulary catches on in social media discussions and journalistic use. Concepts that have been particularly communicable and even contagious are *master narrative*, *counter-narrative* and *masterplot*. Generally speaking, informants, social media users and journalists tend to use counter-narrative in complimentary terms, pointing to narrative practices that challenge conventional, clichéd story genres that appear as omnipresent in contemporary narrative environments; the dominant narrative formulae are, in turn, typically referred to as either master narratives or masterplots. The one clichéd narrative formula most frequently labelled by our project’s followers as either master narrative or masterplot is *inspirational conversion story*. One of its recurring subgenres is “illness as a hero’s journey”, such as wellbeing entrepreneurs’ branding of their own survival from burnout, or the miraculous recovery narratives of advocates of alternative diets and anti-medicine lifestyle. The socio-economic variant of this masterplot is the story of the creation of a unique business model through the business owner’s formative personal epiphany.

The reports received via crowdsourcing reflect a general saturation with the inspirational conversion story as well as a concern over their tendency to limit the scale of “shareable” experiences, foreground individual performance, and expand into a teachable exemplum, particularly when shared extensively online. Accordingly, the project also receives positive reports on narratives countering this masterplot, and in these reports, the term counter-narrative appears frequently. A case in point are stories of grieving, depression or illness that manage to highlight the nonlinearity of experience or the lack of an epiphany or other decisive turning point on one’s “journey”.

The project's informants and followers have not however been active in pointing out that counter-narratives also have a tendency to become formulaic and recursive in the story economy of social media – even in their very essence as *countering*. This is a hypothesis that differs from the common understanding of counter-narratives gradually gaining dominance and stabilizing as conventional discursive frameworks, that is, master narratives (Bamberg, 2004a). One example of this development is the current omnipresence of anti-self-help personal stories undermining sarcastically the inspirational conversion story, reporting lessons left unlearned when going through loss, illness or other personal hardship. Thus far, we have received only positive reports on this countering masterplot.

Social scientific narrative studies dwelling on personal stories have typically assumed an uncritical perspective on the narratives themselves. One obvious reason for this is the intimate collaboration between narrative researchers and interviewees and the discretion needed in collecting, analysing and publicly discussing personal stories whose tellers are not themselves actively seeking publicity (see Plummer, 2001, pp. 204–231; Riessman, 2008, pp. 196–199). The other, related explanation has its roots in the mid-20th century civil rights movements and critical theories celebrating the “voicing” of the marginalized (see, e.g. Fernandes, 2017). Similar kind of sensitivity has fed into discussions on counter-narratives. Michael Bamberg discusses counter-narratives mostly in terms of invoking “potentially liberating and emancipating agenda” (Bamberg, 2004a, p. 362); by the same token, Molly Andrews maintains that by way of reframing our experience with counter-narratives, “[w]e become aware of new possibilities” (Andrews, 2004, p. 1). Counter-narratives seem to be good by definition as they provide individuals with less trodden paths for experience and identity formation (see, however, Nurminen in this volume). The combative notion of countering has thus acquired a one-sidedly positive association with scholars attributing it to internal, private struggles and mostly ignoring the strategic and political public uses of counter-narratives that may have all

kinds of psychological and societal consequences – from healthy empowerment of oppressed groups to dangerous political destabilization.

A less recognized phenomenon in research are stories of individual experience that gain their rhetorical power by actively constructing their own opponent, a strawman type of “master narrative” that will never materialize and thus can never “narrate back”, so to speak. This narrative setup is, moreover, prone to dehumanizing the alleged proponents of the master narrative. As Francesca Polletta (2006) notes in her study on storytelling in social movements, positioning oneself in the social and cultural margin is in itself a narrative gesture, inviting narrative responses. Conversely, representing the mainstream invites narrative countering, not narrative echoing or support. In media environments foregrounding “compelling” storytelling, master narratives to be countered by personal storytelling appear as “official truths” forced upon the people by the elite. Next I will move on to stories countering the master narrative of the foolproof Nordic welfare system reported to and discussed in the context of the *Dangers of Narrative* project. This set of examples demonstrates how social media fuelled counter-narratives conform closely to the cognitive narratological definitions of a prototypical and thus highly tellable narrative, and how they survive and flourish in social media even when apparently limited with regard to the phenomenon the tellers, and more importantly, the sharers of the stories insist they illustrate.

Popular and viral narratives countering the Nordic welfare system

Whether in public discourse or in research, referring to the “story of the welfare state” presupposes a rather general definition of narrative, reminiscent of Lyotard’s (1979) *grands récits*. Both popular and academic discourses revolving around the alleged “success story” of the Nordic welfare system often suggest that an ideological groundwork of a political system is a master narrative that the

inhabitants of the system find difficult to counter. Furthermore, the spatiotemporal exclusiveness of the *Nordic* welfare system makes its narrativization somewhat intelligible: this “success story” as a historical account concerns only the post World War II 20th century Scandinavia and Finland.

Yet when can one actually witness this story told as a full-blown, compelling narrative?

Anticipating the centennial of Finland’s independence, novelist and theatrical director Aino Kivi launched a social media campaign with a hashtag #IWouldntBeHere, prompting users to share their stories of how the welfare state has made them who they are, in order to highlight the importance of government safety nets for different life situations and histories. The hashtag did not take off, and the ensuing storytelling was only moderately covered by the media, while being sarcastically attacked by right-wing liberals. This is no wonder, as the #IWouldntBeHere stories tended to be poor in experientiality, mostly listing infrastructures and benefits the updaters had used in the course of their lives. The campaign resulted in storytelling that only reinforced the stereotype of social democratic naiveté – citizens expressing their gratitude toward the state while appearing ignorant about the sources of government income – an element that the storytellers probably just had difficulties with factoring in, when social media prompts the user to foreground personal experience (Mäkelä, 2019), not economic-structural analysis. The example of the failure of #IWouldntBeHere attests to the ultimate untellability of the “story of the welfare state”; it may be a narrative in the extensive sense of a master narrative, or a *grand récit*, but it does not lend itself easily to local manifestations of “compelling” – that is, prototypical – stories.

One of the key preliminary findings of the *Dangers of Narrative* project is an empirical confirmation of the cognitive narratological prototype model of narrative, emerging from the work of theorists such as David Herman, Monika Fludernik, and Marie Laure Ryan. According to Herman’s intelligible and easily popularizable definition, 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" (Herman, 2009, p. 14). The masterplots that most clearly emerge from the *Dangers of Narrative* corpus display the features listed by Herman; the master genre of the conversion story being a case in point. With Herman's definition, we can easily see what is lacking in the commendatory narratives of the welfare state and the foolproof government safety net: spatiotemporal embeddedness and disruptive experience. The cognitive narrative prototype is not at all useful in representing structures, systems, or routines. Rather, the description of structures, systems, and routines comes close to the definition of master narrative as a background structure that prompts storytelling only if it crumbles, as argued in this volume by Hyvärinen. Conversely, the common theoretical understanding of *counter-narratives*, as well as most of the examples used in scholarship analysing counter-narratives, conform closely to the cognitive prototype model. In cognitive-narratological terms, a counter-narrative is often a prototypical narrative; it urges the audience to *narrativize* (cf. Fludernik, 1996).

Hyvärinen demonstrates in his chapter how already the very act of countering fulfils the criterion of "world disruption", or "breach", highlighted by both narratological (Herman, 2009) and narrative-psychological (Bruner, 1991) definitions. Moreover, the gist of counter-narrativity dovetails with what Monika Fludernik (1996) calls *experientiality*. For Fludernik, mediated experientiality is the minimum criterion for narrativity. Eminent theorists of counter-narratives such as Andrews and Bamberg, in turn, emphasize the experiential facet in telling counter-narratives: counter-narrativity emerges from the disparity between a dominant discourse and the teller's experience. Consequently, from a cognitive-narratologically informed perspective, prototypical counter-narrativity manifests

itself as experiential to a second degree: it materializes an individual's experience of a lack of matching experiential framework.

Several socio-politically charged stories of individual hardship have provoked heated discussion on the comments sections of our analyses, with some followers even attacking our research project for taking such a critical and analytical stance toward personal stories striving to concretize social injustice and bureaucratic malpractice. At the same time, however, our narrative-theoretical criticism of some of the dominant counter-genres is firmly based on a concern expressed via crowdsourcing over the dominance of the personal story in public discussions on the (mal)functioning of social services and healthcare. Stories questioning the validity of the master narrative of the Nordic welfare system provoke suspicion in our informants mainly for six reasons:

- (1) unverifiability of the subjective account;
- (2) the storyteller's self-positioning as morally superior (as a soldier of justice, a Good Samaritan, the sole speaker of truth, or as giving voice to the marginalized)
- (3) misrepresentation of general procedures and regulations of social service and healthcare professionals;
- (4) the caricaturization of public officers, authorities, and other professionals;
- (5) the usurpation of other people's stories to serve the teller's own agenda (see Shuman, 2005 on "story ownership"); and
- (6) the disparity between the story's virality and its statistical representativeness.

The cases reported to us and the ensuing discussions with different audiences have helped our research team to locate the perceived risks precisely in the narrative gesture of countering an untellable master narrative. On a more general level, we have located many of the "dangers of

narrative” reported or hinted at by our informants and discussants precisely at the cognitive-prototypical elements: experientiality, particularity, world disruption and moral positioning (Mäkelä 2018). The above listed dangers of narratives countering the master narrative of a solid welfare system are thus masterplot specific manifestations of the general cognitive flipside of a compelling, prototypical narrative.

Particularly one meta level danger emerges from the corpus, reports, and discussions, yet it often remains unvoiced by the discussants and manifests merely in the defensive reactions of the storytellers: the social media immunity of the counter-narrative to falsification and criticism. The shield mechanism is a direct result of the stories’ anatomy as cognitive-experientially prototypical narratives: the primary reason for sharing a prototypical story is to convey “what it’s like” to be a particular person going through a disruptive experience (Herman, 2009). How does one falsify – or, for that matter, confirm – another person’s experience? A frequent line with which social services and healthcare professionals answer to story-shaped allegations of negligence starts with the phrasing “We do not want to dispute this person’s experience...” Moreover, if we are to believe Monika Fludernik when she writes that “there can [...] be narratives without plot, but there cannot be any narratives without (a) human [...] experiencer of some sort at some narrative level” (Fludernik, 1996, p. 13), it becomes evident that fact-checking is often an inconsequential measure when applied to personal stories. At the same time, however, these stories have the power to impose *moral positioning* on different actors (see, e.g. De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012, p. 98; also Bamberg, 1997 and 2004b on the three levels of positioning: story, interaction, and social norms).

The conspicuous clickbait quality of the headlines of some of the reported news stories attests to the familiarity of the masterplot of “individual versus the faceless system”, albeit the examples vary with regard to the gravity of the embedded allegations:

The Social Insurance Institution gave conflicting advice – without welfare, 18 year old girl was forced to cancel her graduation party (News website of the national broadcasting company *Yle*, June 6, 2017)

Employment agency urged a dead woman to get a job (Tabloid *Ilta*, November 16, 2017)

Wrong medicine took a boy into psychiatric ward for years – at the age of 16, he managed to expose the nationwide oppression and humiliation of children in institutions (News website of the national broadcasting company *Yle*, September 15, 2018)

These and many other similar stories have been reported in crowdsourcing by members of the very same professional groups that are positioned as antagonists in them: social services and healthcare professionals. In their anonymous reports, they often point out the constant disparity in such narrative setups as an inevitable result of professional confidentiality. The discredited professionals in these stories will have no narrative way of their own to counter such confrontational representations of their work. Doctors and social workers are not allowed to share stories that would provide affective ground for social media users and material for “case” and feature journalism. What is more, they are not even able to comment on individual cases in public.

One illustrative case reported via crowdsourcing is a web column with a fair amount of social media shares entitled “My ill friend” and written by a celebrity journalist of the national broadcasting company *Yle*. The story consists of a long quotation from the anonymous “friend”, recounting her ample and in every way horrendous experience with public healthcare. The editorial framing by the journalist consists merely of informing the readers about the friend’s condition (type one diabetes) and the given consent to publish the story. The previously listed problems of unverifiability, self-positioning, misrepresentation of general procedures, caricaturization of healthcare professionals, story ownership, and claims for representativeness loom large here.

“[...] Doctors at the public health-care centre are somehow more scatterbrained, not focusing on the patient at all. They don’t have a clue who I am and what’s wrong with me. Often the

schedules are made so tight that they have barely looked at my patient file before I enter the examination room. Most of the short, 15 minute session is spent by my recounting the facts about myself. And time's up!

The same evening, the same physician can be much more competent at the private clinic. Value for money. [...]

In the public healthcare, I've witnessed this "that one has money, she should use the private clinic" attitude. So I've actually started to style myself to look poorer when I go to see a doctor. Better not carry a Chanel bag on your sholder. [...]

I gave my blanked to this old lady, when she was praying for a warmer. I was scolded for doing this because it was forbidden. [...] An angly glare at me, angry yelling at the granny. That's quite embarrassing, no matter how old or demented you are. [...]" (Translation MM)

Although published on the website of the publicly funded national media company, the story is framed and presented similarly to a social media share, inviting further shares – in fact, it is even likely that the text has originally been a Facebook post. The crushing critique of the public welfare is from time to time interrupted by intensely emotional passages focusing on the teller's loneliness and fear of death as a person who suffers from several grave illnesses and has no family to support and comfort her.

The whole is a disturbing mixture of strong normativity, sweeping generalizations and intense subjectivity, yet precisely because of that it steers clear from criticism and falsification. It is difficult to imagine a readerly position from which the teller's experience could be outrightly disapproved. Yet the story positions if not all, then at least most doctors working in the private sector as ignorant opportunists, the teller herself as a Good Samaritan, the system itself as generally corrupt, and moreover, takes the liberty of interpreting the experiences of several other patients whose stories are embedded in the teller's. Details of embodied experience, prompting affective response in the audience, mix with iterative narration and normative claims, resulting in a story that suggest every visit to the public healthcare to be a traumatic experience, and not just to the teller, but for others as well. The case is exemplary of an argumentative use of narrative: a normative

claim is presented through an exemplum (or in this case, exempla), which, mutatis mutandis, is again used to verify the normative claim, as if the “lesson” would be a natural consequence of the story that was selected to illustrate the claim in the first place. Anna De Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou maintain that precisely because of this narrative’s double standard, it is often more difficult to argue against an exemplum than against rational argumentation (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012, p. 98). Then what is the teller opposing, finally – and how might the journalist justify the sharing of the story? The time of publishing for this column four years ago dates back to time when the new Finnish government started to plan a new healthcare reformation that would include a lot of privatization, a project that was immediately countered by strong opposition that appealed repeatedly to the master narrative of the foolproof, equal public welfare system. This context, and the master narrative along with it, is implied in the “Story of my ill friend”.

How could the healthcare professionals ever reply to these story-shaped allegations? Whenever a viral social media story reaches the news, the officials and welfare professionals repeatedly play the stock role of reiterators of the same comment: “I/we cannot comment on this particular case, but normally we...” Against the backdrop of these storytelling limitations, viral social media narratives and journalistic “human interest” stories foreground the disruptive experience of the individual. This happens to such a degree that any attempt at elaborating on the routine procedures or setting this one case in proportion to its representativeness, or the moral lessons derived from it in a larger, systemic context, will fizzle out.

The personal counter-narrative’s virality and resistance in social media

All this is not to say that stories of individual experience could not contribute to much-needed changes in societies today as they have always done (see also Fernandes, 2017, p. 3). The question that I am concerned with here is that the story logic of social media crucially alters the dynamics between established, dominant master narratives and private, particular counter-narratives as commonly conceptualized in narrative studies. Researcher of social politics Sujatha Fernandes discusses strategic and often carefully-planned (“curated”) campaigns that feed on individuals’ life-stories and harness them for promoting political agendas in the age of affect-driven social media “consumption of others” (ibid., p. 2). Her critical approach to the general story positivity and her attempt at demonstrating the “affinity between stories and late capitalist culture” (ibid., p. 3) is highly compatible with mine, yet the focus is slightly different. Fernandes provides a comprehensive genealogy of the storytelling boom and analyses the multiple ways with which charitable attempts at “giving voice” in the contemporary story economy are consumed by a neoliberal ideology. The “dubious” narratives crowdsourced in the *Dangers of Narrative* strongly support the claims made by Fernandes: celebration of individual virtues, empowerment, ethics of encounter and entrepreneurship overshadows such political aspects as class and other supra-individual structures in the masterplots under which the majority of reported stories fall. The social political concern of my analysis, the undermining of the Nordic welfare model, is thus closely related to the overall development that Fernandes openly criticizes. Yet unlike Fernandes who focuses on carefully curated storytelling as a contrived voicing imposed on the marginalized by the elite, my own approach here is an attempt to complement Fernandes’ story-critical approach by paying attention to the seemingly spontaneous grassroots political storytelling and the somewhat haphazard activism emerging around these stories in social media.

An insufficiently researched feature of contemporary storytelling is the effects of virality on narrative rhetoric and ethics. The strong public resonance with the experiential narrative prototype

is at least partly compatible with Tony Sampson’s definition of virality emphasizing “vibratory events” created by shared affect: “small, unpredictable events can be nudged into becoming big, monstrous contagions without a guiding hand” (Sampson, 2012, p. 6). Although stories of personal experience that counter the alleged master narrative of the flawless welfare safety net highlight the dramatic experiential “breach”, or “world disruption”, in the life of an individual, they are originally “small” in terms of representativity and authority. They are “unpredictable” in terms of narrative agency – virality can turn *anyone* into a national narrative authority on social services within a few minutes (see also Munster, 2013, p. 100-103). Moreover, the narrative hype around one singular story is short-lived (see Nahon & Hemsley, 2013, 28). These countering masterplots become representative and authorial mostly “without a guiding” hand, and as they aim to represent the social margin, their virality is not primarily dependent on public influencers (see also Vosoughi et al, 2018; cf. Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). Admittedly, however, and as demonstrated by some of my previous examples, gatekeepers such as news media have a crucial role in reinforcing the countering masterplot.

Now I will look a bit more closely at a recent social media post that was not directly reported to us via crowdsourcing but encapsulates effectively the affinity between the experiential narrative prototype, a personal narrative’s strategic positioning as a counter-narrative, and the viral potential of these narrative elements. The story’s exceptional, and from the perspective of the storyteller herself, probably also somewhat unprecedented virality aptly demonstrates how the story logic of social media makes small stories big, makes them resistant to criticism, and contributes to counter-narratives’ building up into masterplots. Another reason for my singling out a story outside the original crowdsourced material is that it was extensively discussed on our Facebook page after I published a popularizing analysis of it. Third reason for selecting this particular story is its self-

positioning as a “shareable story” (Page, 2018) with a campaigning element, as well as the fact that it received some news coverage.

Ethically speaking, public posts by private citizens gaining unprecedented social media visibility issue a serious challenge to narrative research. Should they be regarded and conceptualized as public discourse, comparable to opinion pieces in the gate-kept media? Or should the researcher rather be extra sensitive with regard to the story logic of social media where stories get out of proportion so quick and unexpectedly? I think that both stances are fathomable, and therefore every case requires individual evaluation. In the *Dangers of Narrative* crowdsourcing project, the public posts that we comment on will need to have gone viral and gained unexceptional visibility or media coverage. Typically, these are the stories that provoke the most heated discussions on the comments section, reflecting, among other social and cultural aspects, the viral personal story’s immunity to criticism, established by the story logic of social media. We have preferred not cite the comments section directly as one can never be sure if the commentator is fully aware of the publicity of the comments. This exemplary story ends with an explicit prompt to share (“Feel free to share”). As a literary scholar, I analyze and comment on the text, not the teller behind it; moreover, our project is not doing fact-checking, but mainly pointing out the possible pitfalls (or sometimes benefits) of a narrative’s rhetoric and afterlife in social media.

This Facebook story that received 6,3 thousand shares has a title “This is how the Finnish welfare state cares for its youth in Anno Domini 2019”, explicitly marking the master narrative to be countered by the personal story. The “evaluation” part of the story (Labov, 1972) is thus foregrounded, while at the same time the narrative is framed as best fits the genre of a personal Facebook post: it conveys an immediate experience, its “what it’s like” quality. This happens in the very first sentence after the title: “I’m just so confused about the officials’ actions concerning a

minor, that I really need to tell this to you as well.” The narrative recounts in a detailed manner a one night episode during which the teller ends up accommodating two teenagers returning from a party, the other one having allegedly been kicked out of his/her parents’ house and being a frequent resident in a Red Cross reformatory. First, the teller recounts in a poignantly sarcastic manner her experiences with a Red Cross worker who refuses shelter from the teenager due to a curfew. Then the teller moves on to describe in length the interaction with a social services emergency duty officer over the phone:

The duty officer said that all children and young have a home to go to in Finland. We drifted into a discussion on how this in fact is not the case. This took a long time and really started to stretch my patience. That was after all a social worker on the line, shouldn’t every officer know people have problems. [...]

I asked if the duty officer really didn’t know what to do in this situation. I asked the officer how it was possible not to have a protocol for this and not having experience of similar situations. The duty officer replied, that [s/he] didn’t know how to proceed and had never encountered anything like this.

The phone conversation resulted in the conclusion that the only option was for me to take the youth to stay over. I was wondering how can it go like this? [...]

Just when the teens had gotten into bed, the officer calls me back to inform me that child welfare is working on this. So they are actually calling me at 1 am to let me know that the child welfare will be calling me back during the same night. I told them that here’s where I’m drawing the line. [...] The duty officer sounded surprised after hearing I wasn’t willing to stay up all night.

One more time, to be clear, I tell the officer that I’m just a random innocent aunt, not working in a night shift, unlike you guys at the other end of the line. [...]

Anyway, I just wanted to sleep, and now I’m alone responsible for this teen, a stranger, abandoned by the world, in Finland, and it’s 2019.

How abandoned can the youth be in this country? [...] There are so many stories of vulnerable young people ending up being abused or mistreated in one way or another. Is that the point when the officers eagerly rush to help? Oh well, I sure know that this is just daydreaming. (Who would even tell about maltreatment if the adults haven’t been interested in the first place?) (Translation MM)

Toward the end of the long story, the reader gradually learns that the post has been written during the same night as the events took place, and the post ends with an intensely emotional paragraph,

switching from a moral register to an experiential one: “I’m so tired I’m crying. [...] If I’m the only adult who a youth can ask help from, I just can’t turn my back and sleep. That’s for sure.” In social media storytelling, experientiality, simultaneity and testing the limits of tellability (“I shouldn’t be telling you this”; “I don’t know why I’m telling this to you”) together form the core parameters of narrative rhetoric. The “art” of social media storytelling results from a careful manipulation of these parameters, all the while coming across as a completely spontaneous urge to “share”. (Mäkelä, 2019.) The teller of this viral narrative succeeds precisely in this.

Accordingly, the reception of the story in social media and also in a news report was overwhelmingly positive, and the teller received more than 1,6 thousand thank you notes for being a Good Samaritan from Facebook users on the post’s comments section. Several commentators recounted their own, similar experiences or hinted at such. I tracked down a couple of shares that were critical, mostly concentrating on the problematic issues of verifiability, caricaturization, misrepresentation of protocols, moral self-positioning, and the case’s representativeness with regard to the general state of the Finnish child welfare services. I will argue neither against nor for the story’s representativeness with regard to social workers or the welfare services, but rather flesh out shortly the social media fuelled narrative dynamic that turns experientiality into representativeness and further into normativity. The cognitive prototypicality is key to the story’s social media success, but it is also key to its rhetorical pitfalls in a larger sociopolitical context.

Due to the particularizing nature of prototypical narrativity, the story focuses on individuals and the ethics of encounter – not structures, procedures, and their possible underlying deficiencies. The post comes across as targeted against, not only one duty officer, but a Red Cross worker and all the other parents who are not “there” for the teenagers – “there” being limited to the spatiotemporal coordinates of this particular story. The story disambiguates the multifaceted problems related to

issues such as custody, or the rights and duties of child welfare officials by drawing sympathy for the teller and antipathy for the social worker, in an affectively irresistible and unequivocal manner. The ethics of encounter is streamlined into an allegory of the welfare state that leaves its youth to the predators. The plethora of comments that the post received reflect a general disenchantment with the welfare system, while inspiring scarcely any suggestions on how to improve the system – in all its ethical complexities and variations in the customer base. Yet this is a problem we might have with any story conveying what it’s like to live through a world-disrupting experience. It is the social media likes and shares that feed into a disproportionate exemplarity. In this allegory constructed primarily in the reception of the story, an exceptional, exemplary individual saves the day when the public welfare system in its entirety fails.

I have labeled this type of “shared story” the *viral exemplum* (Mäkelä, 2018; Dawson and Mäkelä, 2020). The logic of the viral exemplum is that of a chain reaction from experientiality through representativeness to normativity. When shared, a relatable individual experience becomes representative in a concrete, material sense. As Anna Munster points out, the virality of a random experience may be explained by its “singular generality”: the experience is attached to a singular agent, yet the experience is easily generalizable – it could have befallen anyone (Munster, 2013, p. 101). Thus, although some sharers of the story had similar stories of their own, the “representativeness” of the story primarily results from the affective prompt to share. Furthermore, representativeness creates normativity as the affective consensus created by liking and sharing sets up an ethical norm. In this process, repetition replaces authority. My tentative hypothesis is that the viral exemplum generates *emergent authority*, and as such, it is always already an act of countering some allegedly established authority. The narrative-rhetorical dynamics of experientiality-representativeness-normativity establishes viral emotional stories as normative exempla. Their ultimate “truth” lies in the affirmation of affective doxa instead of, or beyond, referentiality.

Therefore even a falsified “original” experience in social media may lead to normative conclusions and political action. Many viral exempla in social media attest that a (prototypical, compelling) narrative’s natural dynamic is from the margin to the center; therefore the story logic of social media favours a spiralling movement, outward from a small centre – the (countering) personal story.

Conclusion

Then what are the sharers of these stories actually sharing? I find it hard to believe that all sharers of the story actually maintain that the lives of Finnish youth are depending on individual charity. As argued by José Van Dijck (2012, pp. 44–45), sharing is the new norm, marketed by Facebook as a development toward more empathetic societies. As evinced also in linguistic-narratological research by Ruth Page, “shared stories” are based on “an assumption of commonly held beliefs” (Page, 2018, p. 18 *et passim*). Yet these beliefs, manifesting as, and even generated by affective responses, can be surprisingly contingent on one singular story. Therefore the common moral ground of social media storytelling is not always to be located at a dominant master narrative but can, in fact, be found in the very narrative act of countering. The sharer of the story does not share information, but rather a righteous ethical response to the narrative act of countering.

The ideal of the foolproof, solid welfare system is almost by definition anti-narrative. It lacks moral positioning reducible to individual agents: the blind system does not tell a deserving individual from a non-deserving. It is not interested in the taxpayers’ good will or character. When working, it lacks world disruption – indeed, it strives to be its opposite. Citizens countering the master narrative of a foolproof welfare system are not, in most of the cases, willing to get rid of the system altogether. Nevertheless positioning oneself as the underdog facing an inhumane system is what

works in narrative terms, particularly in social media. The strong, individuating experientiality and stark moral positioning in these stories risk representing the society as a battle between the good (us) and the bad (them), a story that is difficult to re-counter with a compelling narrative.

References

Abbott, Porter (2002). *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Andrews, Molly (2004). "Opening to original contributions: Counter narratives and the power to oppose." In Michael Bamberg & Molly Andrews (eds.), 1–6.

Bamberg, Michael (1997). Positioning between structure and performance. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 7(1–4), 335–42.

Bamberg, Michael (2004a). "Considering counter narratives." In Michael Bamberg & Molly Andrews (eds.), 351–371.

Bamberg, Michael (2004b). Positioning with Davie Hogan. Stories, tellings, and identities. In C. Daiute & C. Lightfoot. (Eds.), *Narrative analysis. Studying the development of individuals in society* (pp. 135–57). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bruner, Jerome (1991). "The Narrative Construction of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 18:1, 1–21.

Dawson, Paul & Maria Mäkelä (2020). "The Story Logic of Social Media: Co-Construction and

Emergent Narrative Authority.” *Style* 54:1, 21–35.

De Fina, Anna & Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2012). *Analyzing Narrative. Discourse and Sociolinguistic Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Fernandes, Sujatha (2017). *Curated Stories: The Uses and Misuses of Storytelling*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Goodin, Robert. E. (1988). *Reasons for welfare. The political theory of the welfare state*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. by Burger T. with the Assistance of Lawrence F. Polity Press, Cambridge.

Herman, David (2009). *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Oxford and Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.

Labov, William (1972). *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lyotard, François (1979). *La Condition postmoderne*. Paris: Minuit.

Mäkelä, Maria (2018). “Lessons from the Dangers of Narrative Project: Toward a A Story-Critical Narratology.” *Tekstualia* 2018:4, 175–186.

Mäkelä, Maria (2019). “Literary Facebook Narratology: Experientiality, Simultaneity, Tellability.”

Partial Answers 17:1, 159–182. Munster, Anna (2013). *An Aesthesia of Networks. Conjunctive Experience in Art and Technology*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Nahon, Karine & Jeff Hemsley (2013). *Going Viral*. New York: Polity Press.

Page, Ruth (2018). *Narratives Online: Shared Stories in Social Media*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Papacharissi, Zizi (2015). *Affective Publics. Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Piketty, Thomas (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Plummer, Ken (2001). *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage.

Polletta, Francesca (2006). *It Was Like a Fever. Storytelling in Protest and Politics*. London: University of Chicago Press.

Riessman, Catherine Kohler (2008). *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi & Singapore: Sage.

Salmon, Christian (2010). *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind*, transl. by David Macey.

London and New York: Verso.

Sampson, Tony D. (2012). *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Shuman, Amy (2005). *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy*.

Van Dijck, José (2013). *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Veggeland, Norald, ed. (2016). *The Current Nordic Welfare State Model*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.

Vosoughi, Soroush, Deb Roy & Sinan Aral (2018). "The Spread of True and False News Online." *Science* 359.6380: 1146–51.