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Viral Storytelling as Contemporary Narrative Didacticism

Deriving Universal Truths from Arbitrary Narratives of Personal Experience[1]

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Some forms of viral storytelling should be considered as part of the general storytelling boom of the 21st century that tends toward instrumentalizing stories of personal experience in the public sphere. While the public discourses on storytelling are being usurped by storytelling consultants that urge individuals and organizations to tell "compelling" stories of personal change, inspiration and emotional upheaval, the mechanisms of collective and co-constructive storytelling are becoming less and less reducible to individual narrative agency. This chapter presents a narrative-analytical approach to the mechanisms of social media storytelling that distil universal truths from arbitrary stories of personal experiences going viral. Not all social media activity is "narrative" or "storytelling"; the chapter suggests that viral phenomena that are particularly narrative in nature build on strong moral positioning, transform experiential, particularized narratives into shared cultural stories, and emphasize the universal in the particular. Only by looking at this collectively produced narrative didacticism can we postulate a narrative agency and authority that is emergent in nature.

Introduction: Narrative Universality Claims and the Campfires of Contemporary Story Economy

While narrative imagination is touted as the universal propensity of the human mind both in contemporary research and public parlance, social media have radically changed the rhetoric and ethics of everyday storytelling. The immediate consequence is the proliferation of singular stories of personal experience and their rhetorical amplification within the public sphere. The storytelling consultants' nostalgic cry for "compelling stories" as an antidote for information overflow, coupled with the social media prompt to "share your story" have created a 21st-century storytelling boom that heavily instrumentalizes personal storytelling (see Shuman 2005; Polletta 2006; Salmon 2010; Fernandes 2017; Mäkelä 2018). Social media's affordances for affective networking (see Van Dijck 2013; Papacharissi 2015) are key to this process of instrumentalization. When shared and accompanied by strongly polarizing signs of affect such as hearts and angry face emojis, mostly unverifiable and sometimes anonymous stories of

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personal experience have a potential to grow disproportionately representative ("This story is true in so many ways!") and lead to normative conclusions ("This story highlights an issue that we need to tackle immediately!") (Dawson & Mäkelä 2020; Mäkelä 2020;,Mäkelä et al. 2021). Any appeals to the universal campfire of storytelling are thus bound to obscure the fact that contemporary narratives of the public sphere are often carefully curated, instrumentalized, and competing in myriad ways. Then again, whereas the campfire represents, sociolinguistically speaking, the most "natural" storytelling situation with its face-to-face, naturally occurring narratives (see Fludernik 1996), the campfires of social media bring forth a radically contrasting logic of narrative communication by detaching the circulated narratives from their origins. It is somewhat surprising that this feature of contemporary storytelling is largely ignored within the discourses of the storytelling boom. The writer of probably the most read viral storytelling manual *Winning the Story Wars* (2012) Jonah Sachs, for example, is famous for his work in the service of corporate sustainability, yet resorts to a universalist rhetoric that ignores the ethical and rhetorical complexities of viral storytelling:

> great stories are universal because at their core, humans have more in common with each other than the pseudo-science of demographic slicing has led us to believe. Great brands and campaigns are sensitive to the preferences of different types of audiences, but the core stories and the values they represent can be appreciated by anyone. Universality is the opposite of insincerity.
>
> (Sachs 2012, 44)

The celebration of narrative in non-academic discourses as a universal tool and therefore essentially "natural" in the sense of mutually accessible, immediate and innocent finds ample support from contemporary cognitive studies: the campfire rhetoric of storytelling consultants, effacing individual backgrounds of storytellers and audiences as well as the varying affordances of narrative platforms, is a neoliberal, streamlined interpretation of the cognitive rhetoric on storytelling promoted by evolutionary narrative studies (e.g. Boyd 2009) and cognitive narratology (see, for example, Sternberg 2001). In the following, however, I will demonstrate how concepts and notions originating from narrative theory and narrative studies may also yield analytical applications that counteract the essentializing discourse on storytelling and its many virtues. However, this critical approach requires a non-universalizing approach to the forms of narrative agency and affect conditioned by the social media. Narrative, at best, is an artform able to pass the particular for the "universal" in the Aristotelian sense, and

therefore its didactic uses date back to the origins of language. Narratives, in their prototypical oral forms, tend toward moral positioning (e.g. Pratt 1977) and an explicit evaluation of the moral and the point of the story (Labov & Waletzky 1997). Yet the campfires of social media differ radically from the campfires of the prehistoric times as the generation of our shared mythologies is conditioned by likes, shares, and algorithms that support strong affect.

Much rather than a product of our joint brain architecture, the alleged universality of stories going viral in the public sphere is the result of a clash between the affordances of narrative form and the affordances of social media (Mäkelä et al. 2021). At the core of the storytelling boom, we may find what the first wave cognitive narratologists such as David Herman (2009), Monika Fludernik (1996) and Marie-Laure Ryan (2007) would call a *prototypical narrative*: a situated account of what it feels like for a particular person to live through a disruptive experience in a storyworld conveyed through particulars. As such, then, the most tellable of stories – a "compelling story" in consultant jargon – is the very opposite of universalism: it conveys a particular experience in particular circumstances, and moreover, is inclined to foreground the unexpected, the out-of-the-ordinary. Paradoxically however, in social media, the universality of the story's moral depends precisely on its personality, alleged authenticity and particularity.

This leap from experientiality and particularity to representativeness is enabled by the affordances of social media storytelling: besides the proliferation and amplification of personal narratives, another consequence of social media for the contemporary story economy is a singular narrative's radical detachment from its original source – the particularized teller or experiencer of the narrative. If "compelling" enough, a narrative of personal experience is usurped by the agential assemblages (see Chapter 1 by Hayles and Chapter 3 by Roine & Piippo in this volume) of algorithms, platform affordances and user collectives, and transformed into a co-constructed, stripped-down, "skeletal" and thus easily shareable and adaptable masterplots (see Abbott 2008a), conforming to the polarized expectations of different social media audiences.

In the following, my aim is to flesh out the relationship between narrative didacticism, narrative universalism and the viral story logic of social media, with a particular attention to the reshaping of narrative rhetoric and ethics in contemporary narrative environments where your story is never truly yours. I ask how the story logic of social media is able to give rise to claims

of "universal truth" based on arbitrary narratives of personal experience. Unlike Hanna-Riikka Roine and Laura Piippo in this volume, I do not consider the loss of traceable narrative agency in viral storytelling to be a reason to abandon a focus on the particularly *narrative* logic of some – not all! – viral phenomena. This choice of mine is, first and foremost, methodological. Roine and Piippo are unquestionably right in their insightful synthesis of the complexities of human–technical assemblages as the ultimate force spreading and interpreting content in digital environments. Yet as a narrative theorist, not specializing in algorithms but narrative structure and its uses, I find it useful for the interdisciplinary fields of both narrative and social media studies to be able to analyse some facets of digital meaning-making agency while necessarily bracketing some other facets for the sake of precision and methodological yield.

A limited focus on narratives of personal experience moreover connect the story logic of social media to the contemporary storytelling boom as a cultural dominant that transforms experiential particulars into cultural and political, often polarized doxa. The contemporary *story economy* can be considered to form a crucial part of phenomena that have previously been conceptualized as the *attention economy* (e.g. Terranova 2012) and *emotional capitalism* (Illouz 2007), all three phenomena sharing storytelling, social media, and the affects of the neoliberal subject as their core features.

What is Viral Storytelling? From Immediate Experiences to Moral Positioning

The narrative appropriation of the personal and the particular in social media is most simply exemplified by the memetic reuse and spread of stories of personal experience in forms that condense the moral of the story in a sloganish one-liner. A well-known example from the Finnish public sphere would be the widespread social media appropriation of the comment made by the party secretary of the nationalist True Finns party Riikka Slunga-Poutsalo in a tabloid interview in 2015. As a response to accusations concerning the party's association with right-wing extremist groups, the secretary recounted a hearsay story of a Kosovan asylum seeker being told at the social insurance office to just live on welfare benefits and forget about employment. The secretary concluded her narrative by uttering the meme-friendly words: "Whether the story is true or not, that's another thing. This is how people experience things." The statement continues to live on in public parlance and especially social media, mainly for the purpose of tagging a narrative or a comment as completely subjective and therefore unreliable.

A parallel example from Sweden would be the viral story of the "Jimmie Moment" originated by physician Kajsa Dovstad in her guest column to *Göteborgs-Posten* and referring to the party leader of the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats Jimmie Åkesson and his political credo. Dovstad recounted her late-night experience of trying to buy "traditional" Swedish food in Gävle, populated with Middle Eastern grocery stores. Dovstad wrote: "I am in Sweden, in a Sweden that does not feel Swedish. And I don't like it. A Jimmie moment, as my friend would say." This concise, storified neologism – the "Jimmie moment" – went viral both in the anti-immigration and anti-racism camps of social media: the conservative and radical anti-immigrationists appropriated this novel and yet easily malleable masterplot to recount their own "similar" experiences of culture shock and estrangement in their native country, whereas the anti-racists turned the masterplot around to recount their "anti-Jimmie moments" of opening their eyes to the growing xenophobia in Sweden.

However crafty the original narrative behind the viral phenomenon, and however apparent the ethos of the original storyteller, the narrative's viral afterlife turns it into common property. Admittedly, the meaning of a narrative – particularly that of a written one – was considered disconnected from the authorial intention for the long 20th century of literary studies, and increasingly conditioned by the contexts and the horizons of expectations of interpretive communities. Yet in social media storytelling, the use of narratives is characterized by a much more significant distance from the original storyworld, teller, and the narrative occasion (cf. Phelan 1996, 120–2) than in more traditional forms of storytelling, while at the same time, all the liking and sharing we do is part of the "natural" continuum from naturally occurring face-to-face storytelling to our social media identities. A narrative theorist is thus forced to ask: to what extent can we even speak of viral *storytelling*? Do narrative studies methods, mainly developed for the analysis of literary fiction, face-to-face communication and interviews, be of any help in the analysis of viral storytelling? As Roine and Piippo argue in this volume, "tying authorship up with distinct agents is not, in digital environments, accurate or beneficial, as it emphasizes human activity at the expense of the nonhuman agencies of digital technology" (p. 000). Instead, Roine and Piippo promote an approach to social media storytelling that would account for the myriad visible and nonvisible mechanisms making content available and guiding interpretations of it, human and nonhuman. A narrative theorist is however hard-pressed to imagine what this kind of a complex, multi-layered agential analysis of a particular case of viral storytelling would look like.

By arguing against the homocentricity of much of the linguistic or literary research on social media storytelling, Roine and Piippo position themselves among those scholars of virality that consider platform architectures as key to why virality occurs in the first place – other positions highlighting, by contrast, either the role of influencers and mainstream media as gatekeepers, or the virality potential of a particular type of content – emotional relatability, eventfulness, or importance in a specific contest (Munster 2013; Nahon & Hemsley 2013; Stage 2017). Another take would concentrate less on the agents and more on the consequences of virality; as intelligibly formulated by Tony Sampson, "small, unpredictable events can be nudged into becoming big, monstrous contagions without a guiding hand" (Sampson 2012, 6).

Sampson's formulation, in turn, dovetails with notions of complexity and emergence that have recently gained ground in narrative theory. The problematic relationship between full-blown and tellable narratives requiring, in Porter Abbott's words, a "centralized controlling instance" and complex, emergent phenomena such as evolution or climate change that proceed "without a guiding hand" has been explored in narrative theory (Abbott 2008b; Walsh & Stepney 2018; Grishakova & Poulaki 2019), yet little attention has been devoted to the emergent qualities of social media agency. In our recent article, Paul Dawson and I argue for the pertinence of emergent authority in social media (Dawson & Mäkelä 2019); next I will try to demonstrate how viral storytelling as a social media activity that lacks traceable narrative agency can nevertheless be analysed in narrative terms. Understanding agency in terms of emergence does not exclude human action, nor does it even foreground non-human action; as recently summarized by Marie-Laure Ryan, "[e]mergence, in its strongest form, is a property of phenomena that we do not fully understand: how the individual elements of a system organize themselves into larger functional patterns without the top-down guidance of a controlling authority" (Ryan 2019, 42).

Not all viral content is narrative and not all social media activity thus necessarily storytelling. Eminent social media theorists such as Zizi Papacharissi repeatedly use the word "storytelling" to denote any affective co-creation on social media, yet it would be useful to better elaborate on the differing degrees of narrativity in our social media activities. Consider, for example, the archetype of a viral phenomenon: a cat video. Reactions to cat videos are without a doubt affective and embodied, and sharing them creates a network of collective affect that is being transformed and refined into culturally recognizable feelings that range from rapture to joy and

amazement and find their expression in comments and shares. Indeed, the recent waves of cognitive narrative studies have highlighted embodied experientiality as the key ingredient to narrativity, and even recent narrative complexity theories consider embodied experiences to be the main trigger for narrative sensemaking (see Grishakova & Poulaki 2019, 15). Yet we may well ask if sharing cat videos has anything to do with storytelling, and I would maintain that intuitively speaking, no. The lack of narrativity does not come down to the lack of experientiality in the original video material nor in the paratexts such as shares, comments, and likes; what is usually lacking in cat videos going viral is moral positioning and a search for a "teachable moment." Sharing a cat video rarely implies representativeness: the point of sharing the video is not to argue how cats, in general, *are*. Even less there is normativity in it: we do not share a cat video to propagate a world view or a moral position – such as advocacy of stern discipline for cats. In other words, viral storytelling – at least in its prototypical form – elevates particulars onto the level of universals, while not all viral material ends up in such didactic use.

Narratives that have prototypical elements in the cognitive-narratological sense, such as temporal causality, human qualia, storyworld particulars, and breach in the expected script (see Bruner 1991; Hyvärinen 2016), tend to be shared and read as *exempla*. According to sociolinguists Anna De Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2012, 98), the logic of the exemplum and its inherent narrative-argumentative double standard dominates our everyday storytelling: stories of personal experience are recounted *as manifestations* of some pre-given, generally accepted truth or a normative stance ("let me tell you about cats – I'll give you an example from my own experience … "), while at the same time these stories are presented *as evidence* on that very same maxim ("this is what happened with me and my cat, and I guess that's how cats are"). Precisely because of this rhetorical double standard, argue De Fina and Georgakopoulou, narratives of personal experience are notoriously difficult to argue against while at the same time they are effective in displaying and maintaining moral stances.

Virality amplifies the logic of the exemplum. The vicious cycle from particulars to universals and back is amplified on every share that adds up to the gestures of narrative positioning and reinforces the moral of the story. This reinforcement is achieved by claiming ownership of the shared story by way of connecting it to the user's own experience. The Swedish "Jimmie moment" story meme is a perfect example of this story logic. A general truth about Sweden forgetting its cultural roots and causing estrangement in its native citizens takes the form of a storified meme, which again gives rise to new exempla and new expressions of confirmation

of this "truth." One explanation for the success of the "Jimmie moment" is precisely that it offers an easily adaptable masterplot, a rough story format with a familiar structure of conversion or epiphany that is moreover verbalized as a general doxa ("a Sweden that does not feel Swedish"). However, as previously argued, the rhetorical detachment of the story meme from its original authority and setting in social media unleashes it for unorthodox and parodic uses.

This affordance for counter-narrativity by positioning was what happened with the Finnish story meme ("Whether the story is true or not […] this is how people experience things"), as the original ethos, considered as paranoid and xenophobic, was turned against itself in the social media appropriation of the narrative. Again, what is crucial for the normative use of the story meme is the moral positioning already present in the original narrative, highlighted by the memorable evaluation. The "original" story about the Kosovan immigrant may itself have been a viral narrative among anti-immigrationists, yet what truly went viral was the narrative positioning, reimagined. As in the case of the "Jimmie moment," these contrasting narrative positionings can only be considered "storytelling" against the backdrop of canonized "cultural narratives" (e.g. Phelan 1996, Dawson and Mäkelä 2020) affecting on the background, as shared cognitive schemata, ideological stances and conventions of telling. In viral storytelling, moral positioning is thus a key mediator between narrative particulars and universals. Could this narrative logic even partly explain the growing polarization of contemporary "cultural narratives" in the public sphere (see, e.g. Bail et al. 2018)?

"This." – Or, the Teachable Moments of Social Media

Ultimately, the narrative didacticism characterizing viral storytelling is a result of an emergent collaborative narrative effort, where small narrative gestures such as short tags, framings and reactions contribute to the claims for the representativeness and universality of the original material. As argued in recent small stories research, social media is making such small gestures of narrative positioning increasingly tellable and multipliable (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008; Georgakopoulou 2013; Georgakopoulou 2017). Instead of fostering narrative diversity (everyone telling "their own story"), social media storytelling favours narrative positioning with small gestures of affect (see also Page 2018). A narrative most likely to go viral is the one offering a moral position so easily multipliable that the accompanying word "This." suffices. Idiosyncratic or ambivalent narrative content does not spread as easily as stories that conform

to familiar patterns and positionings. Viral storytelling therefore relies heavily on presupposed narrativized knowledge, such as cultural masterplots enforcing preexisting ideologies and opinions. In their black-and-whiteness, these viral narratives not only consolidate the affective consensus of the like-minded, but often hand a loaded gun to the hands of the political opponents, as simple positionings are easy to turn around. Moreover, while a narrative of personal experience *qua* experience has a significant potential for virality and functions as the first step followed by massive leaps to representativeness and normativity, the particulars of a personal experience are easily contested if the motivation is to reject the story completely. Yet both the affective consensus and the backlash by positioning are not reducible to any identifiable narrative agent – and therefore the moral authority they depend on is emergent.

An illustrious case of the emergent moral authority and the other side of the coin, the narrative backlash by way of upending the positioning of narrative, is the notorious viral video scandal known as the "Lincoln Memorial controversy," or the "Covington Kids Controversy" (see Dawson & Mäkelä 2020; Mäkelä et al. 2021). At the same time, this case demonstrates how experientiality and storyworld disruption can be projected into a minimal content if the social media invitation to a moral positioning is strong enough. A one-minute video clip, shot at the Indigenous People's March at the Lincoln Memorial in January 2019, caused an almost unforeseen upheaval on the social media profiles of US citizens, and the viral phenomenon was uncritically reinforced by the leading non-conservative US media (CNN*, Washington Post*, *New York Times*). The footage shows a high school teenager wearing a "Make America Great Again" cap of Trump supporters, face to face with a Native American elder playing a drum. The video was launched and promoted by a couple of fake social media accounts, but it was actual users, ranging from ordinary citizens to high-end celebrities and journalists, representing the liberal left, who took care of the spreading of the video as an alarming exemplum of the growing racism and the return of white supremacism in the United States politics. The enraged Twitter responses (Alyssa Milano: "This is Trump's America"; Bernice King: "This is ugly, America") read the ambivalent expression on the teenager's face as the face of a backward Nation who can only confront its past with ridicule and contempt.

As in such typical cases of viral exemplum (Mäkelä 2018; Dawson & Mäkelä 2020; Mäkelä et al. 2021), here too the leaps from (projected) experientiality to representativeness (our nation) and normativity (outright death threats to this random high school student) were enormous yet incredibly quick. Again, the perfect opportunity was laid out for the conservative

backlash, which proceeded by first finding contrary evidence from additional footage, then sharing the student's official statement recounting the events from his perspective, and finally celebrating the fact that Democrats are spreading fake news. The social media story wars over the viral video are still present in the polarized political setup of the United States, while on the way, both the life and "narrative" of both the high school student and the Native elder have been repeatedly instrumentalized for this purpose or the other.

Sociologists Francesca Polletta and Nathan Redman (2020) have recently reviewed several studies concerning narrative persuasion in politics, partly in order to challenge the general assumption of narrative universals overcoming political differences, fueled by today's storytelling industry. Focusing on storytelling that attempts to change the audience's opinion on structural problems in society, they found out that stories of personal experience and other exempla that rely on individual characters rarely change the audience's political opinions. Depending on what Polletta and Redman call "background stories and stereotypes" and what we might just as well call cultural narratives, masterplots, and easily adaptable narrative positionings, "a story may be heard as emotionally touching or as manipulative and inauthentic" (ibid.). In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate how this narrative dynamic is amplified by the narrative affordances of social media that are not reducible to the rhetoric and ethics of identifiable storytellers but result from the assemblage of narrative prompts by platform affordances, the "original" content and user collectives.

Indeed, the logic of narrative universalism has changed from Aristotelian tragedy, or the medieval exempla. A narrative's potential to yield a moral lesson is no longer considered to be dependent on the laws of probability or necessity, or based on the pre-existing authority of the classics, the church, or the sovereign. Contemporary narrative didacticism is based on the illusion of immediate, personal experience and fuelled by the narrative affordances of social media. A weapon of heavy-handed morality, a story of personal experience going viral is nevertheless free of responsibility, ethical, referential or otherwise. The chain reaction from experientiality to representativeness and normativity creates emergent narrative authority, and thus fosters narrative agency that cannot be held accountable for fact-checking or respect for story ownership. Yet narrativized hate campaigns repeatedly target individuals that have little to do with the narrative assemblages that have construed them as heroes or villains. Therefore, if anything, viral storytelling is a dubious art of disproportion.

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