
The Story Logic of Social Media: Co-Construction and Emergent Narrative Authority

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INTRODUCTION: NARRATION BY SHARING

What happens when we share a story online? And how does that story become part of a larger narrative? This article seeks to explain how the digital architecture of social media produces narrative phenomena that complicate conventional understandings of collective voice derived from the study of literary fiction, and which require new theories of co-construction to be adapted from existing sociolinguistic approaches to narrative. Online communication has a tendency to amplify storytelling in often-unpredictable ways. In the story logic of social media, readers become sharers, and their traceable acts of reframing turn audiences into co-tellers with a potentially significant narrative authority. If storytelling becomes an art of reframing, and the rhetoric and ethics of narrative are negotiated in the paratext, our understanding of narrative agency, and of narrative itself, must be reconfigured.

An important focus of contemporary media studies is the question of how collective social action emerges from the networked interaction of individual users on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (see Milan 2015; Jackson, et. al. 2020). Significantly, media studies emphasize not the collectivity of these platforms, but their connectivity. For José Van Dijck, social media are microsystems in a larger media ecology characterized by a “culture of connectivity.” Bennett and Segerberg argue that collective social action takes on a different

dynamic in the age of digital media, which operates with a “logic of connective action based on personalized content sharing across media networks” (739), a logic that “does not require strong organizational control or the symbolic construction of a united ‘we’” (748).

Consequently, narrative co-construction in social media differs significantly from how it has traditionally been understood in social scientific narrative research: as a dialogic feedback loop between participants contributing to a joint reconstruction of past events.

Furthermore, to approach the connective logic of broader collectives emerging out of social media interactions requires a different concept of narrative than that which underpins the study of narrative fiction. Rather than structured aesthetic artefacts, narratives on social media are the product of self-organizing networks without a central design: they emerge from the logic of connective action. If readers of fiction are to be understood as co-constructors of narrative meaning, this process applies to social media to the extent that connective action must be *narrativized* in order to be understood as a larger collective narrative (see Sadler 2018). In what follows we will identify and anatomize two separate but complementary modes of narrative co-construction produced by the story logic of social media: emergent storytelling and the viral exemplum.

[#METOO AND EMERGENT STORYTELLING

In this section we use the #MeToo movement as an example of a new narrative phenomenon made possible by the technological affordances and algorithmic design of social media platforms and their interactions with the broader digital public sphere. We call this phenomenon

“emergent storytelling” because it possesses the property of emergence in the sense that the behavior of the whole cannot be derived from or reduced to the sum of its individual components: the viral interaction of individual agents generates a macro-level narrative distinct from the narrative elements observable at the micro-level.

Our point of departure is Zizi Papacharissi’s concept of “affective publics,” which she defines as “public formations that are textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked crowds” (14). The key terms in this definition are virality and affect, both of which are, essentially, non-narrative. At the same time, Papacharissi seeks to explain how the “soft structures of storytelling” provided by Twitter enable collaborative narratives to be formed through the organizational logic of hashtags. Affect drives the circulation of viral hashtags that “serve as framing devices that allow crowds to be rendered into publics; networked publics that want to tell their story collaboratively and on their own terms” (2). Missing from Papacharissi’s framework, however, is a clear understanding of what narrative means in this context.

If a hashtag both calls into being and represents an “affective public,” we could argue that it has a similar function to the plural pronoun of we-narration by virtue of aggregating the tweets of multiple speakers into a collective public voice. Collaboration seems the wrong word, however, implying a level of deliberation and organization that is absent from the asynchronous, ambient interactions of online users responding to and perpetuating viral content which Papacharissi seeks to describe. First, as crowd theory suggests, the individual agents that comprise the

collective are not rational subjects working collaboratively so much as they are sites of affective contagion from which a different kind of mass behavior emerges. Second, users might tell their story at the level of the individual tweet, but the narrative emerging on the higher level of the networked crowd has no teller: it is the narrativized product of a dynamic interaction between multiple agents, the algorithmic design of Twitter, and the news cycle of traditional media.

Emergent storytelling, then, is an evolving nonlinear process of affective virality that requires competing concepts of narrative at different levels in a complex system to understand its political valency and social meaning. These concepts are: (1) shared stories; (2) cultural narratives; and (3) narrativization. To understand the #MeToo movement as emergent storytelling we must address how these competing concepts of narrative are linked to the different affordances and rhetorical functions of the hashtag. As Michele Zappavigna (2018) points out, the hashtag functions as both inline metadata (a bottom-up user generated system of classification) and as metadiscourse (user commentary on the tweet it tags). The act of tagging enables users to frame the content of their tweet, establish an evaluative stance on the hashtagged topic, and address an imagined audience. This is what Zappavigna calls ambient affiliation because the users are not directly connected or in conversation, and their tweets are asynchronous.

The concept of *shared stories* is developed by Ruth Page in her 2018 book, *Narratives Online*, to understand ambient affiliation in narrative terms. The shared story, according to Page, is “a retelling, produced by many tellers, across iterative textual segments, which promotes shared attitudes between its tellers” (18). Sharing refers both to telling a story and to distributing it across broader networks. Shared stories are essentially online versions of small stories that circulate in a culture of connectivity. In the context of Twitter they are characterized by multiple

tellers adopting perspectival stances on unfolding events and by a perpetual reframing of existing content through the use of hashtags as a rhetorical resource.

Page distinguishes the weak narrativity of individual tweets from the broader use of narrative in discursive psychology which refers to cultural patterns or scripts rather than textual artefacts, although she points out the value of this looser sense for understanding the macro-social significance of shared stories. In similar fashion, we use the term cultural narrative here to refer to large-scale scripts that belong to a collective group and frame broad social perspectives on events as well as underpinning the structure of individual narratives. Regarding the #MeToo movement, a shared story is not so much multiple tellers tweeting about the same event, as in unfolding news stories or real-time commentary on television shows, but individual tweets about a user's experience which when tagged create multiple tellers for the shared experience of sexual harassment and assault encoded as a prototypical narrative in the phrase #MeToo itself. In this way, the hashtag is a cultural script providing a frame for individual tweets, but it also functions as a shorthand for the macro-level viral movement itself.

What enables this cultural narrative to emerge is the process of narrativization whereby the nonlinear recursivity of viral circulation is subjected to the causal logic of narrative. This process is facilitated by the interface design of the Twitter platform because the search function and trending algorithms arrange the asynchronous tweets of ambient users into a sequence that invites a sense of narrative progression. News media fosters this narrativization by reporting the viral activity as an event and framing it as a social movement, and this creates a feedback loop in which this viral activity becomes understood at the macro-level as part of a cultural narrative attached to the longer history of feminist activism.

To understand emergent storytelling as narrative co-construction, however, we must point to more than just multiple tellers contributing to a collective narrative. In the study of narrative fiction, theoretical debate about we-narration as a category of narrative voice revolves around the plural pronoun: is it a single homodiegetic narrator speaking on behalf of others, or is it a number of voices speaking collectively? Similarly, we might ask: what subject utters the phrase #MeToo? To answer this question involves addressing the multiple pronominal functions of the hashtag itself: the first person voice (rendered here in the grammatical object position of “me”) is simultaneously an individual co-teller (at the micro-level of the single post, in which the hashtag has a metadiscursive function) and a plural subject (at the macro-level of the “movement,” in which the hashtag has a metadata function). In other words, ‘I’ (or ‘me’) means ‘we.’ This is because in the complex system of Twitter, individual users function less as autonomous rational individuals than as affective nodes in the network and actants in a larger digital assemblage.

In a recent article about the “Je suis Charlie” slogan, Robert Payne (2018) draws upon both the assemblage theory of Deleuzian approaches to networked affect and studies of algorithmic culture to argue that virally circulated hashtags generate new affective modes of citizenship through a contingent encounter between users and the invisible design of social media platforms that employ data mining to facilitate their connection. According to Payne, the Je Suis Charlie hashtag is a performative utterance producing an ostensibly universal subject position that calls into being the users who identify with it in the act of tagging. For Payne, while users experience a sense of agency through habitual acts of circulating and reacting to online material, “their very ontological status as users is an emergent property of the shifting dynamics of the digital assemblage” (286). Building on Payne’s work, we argue that the emergent subject called into

being by the utterance “MeToo” is both a gendered subject and a narrating subject because the phrase itself is predicated on the implicit report of an event: “(this happened to) MeToo.”

In the context of “we-narration,” the question is how does the first-person voice of the experiential self who narrates the content of a tweet relate to the emergent subject position rendered into being by the hashtag itself? In our intuitive sense of #MeToo, there is an affiliative alignment between the two in which the pronoun refers simultaneously to the individual speaker and the collective utterance emerging from the aggregate of multiple acts of tagging. Some typical replies to Alyssa Milano’s initial tweet on October 15, 2017 – “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” – are quoted anonymously here:

#metoo Standing in line for food when a man took unwanted pictures of my chest. I was shocked. Later my mom and aunt said I deserved it.

#MeToo. A college prof once told me “boys will be boys” when a classmate sexually assaulted me.

With these two tweets, the hashtag provides a contextual frame which lends authority to the individual experience by assimilating the first-person voice into that of a larger networked crowd through a viral process of repetition. We can see that both tweets merge the personal with the political by narrating two events: the assault and the dismissive response to its first “offline” telling.

#metoo and I never told anyone because I thought it was my fault for sending the wrong signals . . .

In this tweet the phrase “#metoo” itself stands in for the event, the details of which are less significant than the user’s reluctance to tell her story out of fear for her own culpability, demonstrating she had internalized the assumptions underpinning the dismissive response mentioned in the previous tweets. In each of these tweets the singular narrating “I” becomes an extension of the emergent subject already called into being by the hashtag, a plural subjectivity encoded in the phrase “MeToo,” which becomes a lyric refrain across millions of tweets. If we approach hashtags as a rhetorical resource, we can see how individual users rely upon the connective logic of social media to give narrative shape to their own shared stories.

Not all #MeToo tweets are stories of sexual harassment or assault, of course. They may be general comments, both positive and negative, about the movement itself. In this case, the first-person subject of the utterance may not necessarily align itself with the collective subject who utters “me too,” but nonetheless contributes to the larger emergent narrative of the movement itself as an evolving news story. This brings us to the use of we-narration in a more oblique sense: the ubiquitous phrase “we need to change the narrative.” In public discourse, this is a rhetorical exhortation for collective political intervention, which employs the definite article but which refers to no textual artefact and to no individual teller. In 2018, the activist Tarana Burke delivered a speech at *Variety* magazine’s annual Power of Women event, in which she said: “I’m so desperate to change the narrative about the #MeToo movement before it’s too late.” Burke’s point was that “the narrative” has been one of bringing down powerful men by exposing their actions rather than one of effecting cultural change by listening to and believing women. The narrative being referred to here is not so much a co-constructed story as a general perspective framing the #MeToo movement.

Burke has been credited for anticipating this movement because she used the same phrase on MySpace in 2006 as part of a campaign to provide support for victims of sexual violence, and particularly women of color. In seeking to reframe the cultural script of #MeToo to foreground her original emphasis on empathy and empowerment, Burke appears indirectly to question the value of call-out culture on social media, which has become a defining feature of fourth wave feminism (see Munro). At the same time she appears to link it more closely to what Tanya Seriser calls the genre of the “speaking out” narrative developed by second wave feminists. We can see here that the contested cultural narrative of the #MeToo movement co-constructed by users, readers, and commentators is the story of a viral movement framed by what Prudence Chamberlain (2017) calls the “wave narrative” of feminist history.

The emergent subject constituted by the hashtag #MeToo is grammatically defined by a rhetorical affiliation between self and other grounded in the flow of affects, and the viral repetition of this subject’s utterance constitutes a plural narration of the collectively experienced recurring problem of sexual harassment and assault. The emergent behavior becomes legible as collective political activity through a process of narrativization facilitated by the digital architecture of Twitter and the reporting of news media according to a cultural script.

THE VIRAL EXEMPLUM: EMERGENT NARRATIVE AUTHORITY

Next we turn to a phenomenon of viral storytelling that may be conceptualized as the rhetorical antipode of narrative crowdsourcing campaigns such as #MeToo. We refer to individual, often “prototypical,” stories of personal experience with compelling narrative elements such as particularity and world disruption (see Herman 2009) that, through viral sharing, acquire cultural

significance in unpredictable and sometimes disproportionate measure. The key narrative logic is that of a chain reaction from experientiality (see Fludernik 1996) to representativeness and normativity. In social media, a typically unverified and unverifiable individual story of personal experience may escalate into a narrative of collective emotion by acquiring cultural authority through the iterative sharing of this single story across personal networks, as well as through consequent media coverage. We call this narrative phenomenon the “viral exemplum”—first, to emphasize its origin in the digital public sphere and its capacity for rapid, often uncontrollable and unanticipated distribution (see Sampson 2012); and second, to draw parallels with this contemporary narrative practice and earlier forms of narrative didacticism through exemplary narratives.

In the following, we will make a case for *emergent narrative authority* as a key characteristic of the story logic of social media. As already noted, virality is itself nonlinear and nonnarrative, and it is precisely for this reason that the narrative rhetoric and ethics of the viral exemplum differ so radically from the rhetoric and ethics of offline, printed, or oral storytelling. One of the defining features of the story logic of social media is the detachment of narrative authority from narrative agency: in contrast to classical definitions of narrative rhetoric, narrative constellations emerging from viral sharing are by default nonreducible to identifiable agents and situations to which narrative-ethical accountability could be attached. In social media studies, the unprecedented nature of these discursive contexts is often described in terms of “context collapse” (Marwick & boyd 2010). The concept of viral exemplum is our attempt at explaining how uncensored collective storytelling may, instead of fostering pluralism, give rise to strong narrative didacticism and moralism attached to homophilic clusters that create an exclusionary “we.”

The narrative environments of social media are crowded with tellers that have no a priori authority. While the crucial role of “influencers” as central nodes in social networks is well recognized (e.g. Nahon & Hemsley 2013), a recent, comprehensive study by Vosoughi et al. (2018) on the virality of true and false news convincingly demonstrates not only that “falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth” but also that virality resulted more likely from the activity of regular Twitter users than from visibility provided by influencers with extraordinary reach. Thus we may conclude that the narrative authority with which some individual narratives are endowed when they are elevated as experiential, representative, and moral exempla is emergent by nature: it is “more” than the sum of its “parts” as it transforms an affective chain reaction into incontestable doxa. Moreover, with the concept of viral exemplum we hope to highlight the fact that in social media the original source of a viral narrative can be anyone and anything (see also Munster 2013)—no a priori authority is needed for the story to be received as a universal, “higher” truth. It is precisely this emergent nature of narrative authority—the peculiar nature of online collective storytelling—that makes today’s exemplum different from pre-Enlightenment narrative didacticism. Albeit amplified by word-of-mouth circulation, Jesus’s parables, legends of saints, and stories of mythically exemplary characters such as Alexander the Great relied on fixed, widely recognized authorities and systems of belief. The mechanics of viral exempla, by contrast, transform random and even untraceable individual experiences into collective affective norms.

We will demonstrate the story logic of experientiality–representativeness–normativity by analyzing collective storytelling around the viral video that ignited a scandal known as “The MAGA Hat Kid & Native American Veteran Controversy” in the United States and was reported globally in January 2019. The minute-long footage shows a teenager wearing the “Make

America Great Again” cap and staring smirkingly at an elderly Native American playing a drum. The context given in the initial posts and news coverage was that a group of high school students from the Covington Catholic School in Kentucky had attended the anti-abortion March for Life in Washington, many of them wearing the pro-Trump MAGA caps, and the footage showed them confronting the Indigenous People’s March at the Lincoln Memorial afterwards. The video first trended on Twitter and was soon promoted by the CNN with the title “Teens Mock Native Elder.” The original, highly elliptic video posted on Instagram by one of the participants of the Indigenous People’s March conveyed no information about the causal chain leading to the confrontation, showing only a close-up of the smiling teen and the Native elder, the two standing a little too close to one another, thus suggesting an antagonistic situation. The original video was viewed more than 2.5 million times and retweeted more than 14,400 times over one weekend. The viral sharing of the video as well as the news coverage both fueling and being fueled by this virality was sustained by moral outrage over this particular teen’s racist behavior toward the Native American, who was moreover identified by the CNN as a “Vietnam Veteran.” In another video clip that was being shared in support of the accusations, the Native elder tells that he heard the students chant “Build that Wall.”

The original framing of the one-minute video was reiterated uncritically in the leading news media under headlines such as “Students in ‘MAGA’ Hats Mock Native American After Rally” (*Washington Post*, Jan 19, 2019). Yet it was particularly the narrative environments of social media that started to treat the narrative collectively extracted from the video as “representative” and the boy as an “exemplum” of contemporary white supremacy. The Tweets quoted in the news were by influencers with tens of thousands of followers, but these influencers reflected as

well as inspired the general rhetoric that developed as a viral affective chain reaction. Here are some of the most-cited Tweets building up the social media controversy:

This is Trump's America. And it brought me to tears. What are we teaching our young people? Why is this ok? How is this ok? Please help me understand. Because right now I feel like my heart is living outside of my body. (Alyssa Milano, Twitter Jan 19, 2019, 35 138 likes, 11 388 retweets)

This is appalling. The ignorance. The gall. The disrespect. It's shameful. And sadly on brand. When something like this isn't even surprising, it's evidence to our place in the cycle of recreating our darker chapters. That Native American man showed incredible strength and dignity. (Chris Evans, Twitter Jan 19, 2019, 212 917 likes, 34 437 retweets)

The online journal *Slate* based its own immediate analysis of the incident (Jan 19, 2019) on the claims of historical, political, and cultural representativeness invoked, maintained, and amplified on social media, most notably Twitter. In her article "The MAGA Teenager Who Harassed a Native American Veteran Is Still Unnamed, but We've Seen His Face Before," Ruth Graham compares the imagery of the viral video with other iconic moments of American racism and the high school student's expression to Brett Kavanaugh, repeating the visual juxtapositions that were being spread as social media memes.

The social media co-construction, framing the one-minute video as a "narrative" of the centuries-long colonial oppression, escalated into normative attitudes toward an unknown high school student and even aggressive calls for action by left-wing liberals and their followers on an enormous scale. The MAGA hat was appropriated as the metonymic key to the allegorical reading, and this memetic function was cemented in hashtags and repetitive headlines. Just as the cap indisputably represents a political stance and hence attitudes that are downright

discriminating, the short amateur video was, correspondingly, understood to “represent” the harsh contemporary political divide in the United States.

Within a couple of days, however, social media was full of additional material suggesting that the Catholic students were probably not the aggressors in the messy situation at the Lincoln memorial that involved, it turned out, a radical group called Black Hebrew Israelites verbally attacking both the teens and the Indigenous People’s March. There was no evidence of the boys chanting “Build That Wall”—rather they were reported singing their school chants to frustrate the attacks of the Hebrew Israelites. The additional video material moreover shows the Native elder walking to the teens and not vice versa. Further inquiries by *The Washington Post* revealed that the elder was never in Vietnam, but was a Vietnam-era veteran, and so on.¹ The news coverage by *CNN*, *Post*, and *NYT*, among others, was repeatedly revised within a couple of days as contradicting information was flowing in, and some influencers were deleting their tweets or publicly apologizing for drawing hasty conclusions based on a viral video. However, as often happens in similar social media narrative cycles, many of the tellers involved kept to their opinion about the “deep truth” of the incident even when the original framing of the particular event was, if not outright falsified, at least compromised. By now, the case – as well as the identities of both the teenager and the Native elder – have been heavily instrumentalized on both sides of the American political divide, and backlashes are still following each other.

This case demonstrates the radical scale mismatch typical of social media co-construction of experientiality, representativeness, and normativity. A minor incident or one subjective interpretation of an unverifiable event emerges as “representative” and ends up in the service of a

¹ For a comprehensive account of the documented events at the Lincoln Memorial, see

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/01/media-must-learn-covington-catholic-story/581035/>

heavy-handed morality. In this particular case, the original “narrative” is a weak one at that: granted, a world disruption and the ensuing experiential intensity can be read in the situation as depicted by the video: the MAGA hat and the drum provide metonymic particularity for a narrative reading. Yet the “narrative” emerging from the backlash as well as the changes in the “narrative” reported and commented on by the media became radically detached from the original text and its perceivable features. This larger narrative is a similar kind of cultural narrative to the one emerging from the #MeToo movement: it cannot be traced to any one individual teller but emerges as a collective, widely shared construction explaining and synthesizing individual stories that are, in comparison with the cultural narrative, often much more fragmented, elliptic, and ambiguous. Social media as narrative environments materialize and thus produce the representativeness of one individual narrative by concrete liking and sharing, and in ways that are also materially irrevocable.

Yet there are crucial differences between emerging narrativity in the #MeToo movement and the narrative co-construction generated by a single viral story as regards narrative authority. In the case of #MeToo, with the sheer amount of personal narratives pointing toward the same “centre” – non-individuating structural oppression – narrative authority is not threatened if an individual story is falsified, and correspondingly, the collectively produced narrative does not demonize individuals so as much as systems maintaining harmful cultural narratives. Conversely, in the case of the viral exemplum, the rhetoric and the ethics of storytelling become radically detached from the original story yet its actants are nonetheless still held accountable. In social media storytelling, narrative power resides with the re-teller *qua* re-framer of the narrative, and narrative authority can emerge “out of thin air,” as a collective, noncoordinated framing. By stating this, we are not making a comment on the unequally distributed storytelling rights in the

United States or elsewhere; instead, we describe a storytelling mechanic that generates narrative authority in social media, regardless of how progressive or reactionary the “cause” behind the collective narration.

In the case of the MAGA hat kid and the Native elder, media and experts soon discovered that the visibility of the original video was boosted by fake Twitter accounts with tens of thousands of bought followers. Yet the manipulation of two or more Twitter accounts and artificial amplification of the story’s visibility in its launching state do not explain the narrative rhetoric and ethics that make it possible for high-profile media, celebrities, and ordinary social media users to publicly represent a random high school student with a conservative background as an epitome of white supremacy and scapegoat for the racist, colonial history of the United States. Algorithmic manipulation can be successful only if the conditions exist for individual stories to be assimilated into and framed by existing cultural narratives, particularly those which are attached to hyper-partisan political stances. The resultant emergent narrative authority is at the same time a noncoordinated co-construction and emergent in the sense of reaching beyond the a priori authority of any interpretive community.

[H1]CONCLUSION: THE NARRATIVE “WE” OF SOCIAL MEDIA

This article has been an attempt to describe and theorize two divergent but complementary story logics of social media: that of emergent storytelling, in which the aggregate of multiple hashtagged tweets becomes narrativized as an event and framed by a cultural narrative; and that of the viral exemplum, the co-construction of a single narrative as extensively representative and normative through viral sharing. Both are forms of collective storytelling, yet bear little resemblance to either the forms of “we-narration” in literary contexts or the forms of co-narration studied in sociology or sociolinguistics. While literary fiction may feature “plural,

collective characters and narrators” (Bekhta 2017, 165), the collectivity of social media storytelling is not determined by pronominal reference—although the strong rhetorical use of “we” in individual updates and shares often highlights the community-forming function of certain cultural narratives emerging from collective storytelling. In research on conversational storytelling, the concept of “narrative co-construction” typically highlights the embeddedness and relationality of storytelling acts in a limited and definable social situation (see, e.g., Squire et al 2014, 28–30). In social media, by contrast, narrative situations take shape over time through a process Page calls “distributed linearity” and emerge from the “ambient affiliation” of individual users. As Stefania Milan (2015) writes, in describing the dynamics of cloud protesting, social media provide the material framework for semantic units that “are incessantly reproduced, modified, and shared to produce a scattered user-generated narrative that is in constant evolution” (6).

Media scholars have long highlighted the central role of affect in the spread of stories online. If affect is an embodied precognitive and prelinguistic relational force which becomes articulated as emotion, and if affect, rather than memetic units themselves, is the vital currency of virality, a contagious flow of intensities between subjects, then our very understanding of what constitutes both singular and plural narration becomes radically reconfigured and perhaps collapsed in digital environments: emergent narratives circulate within and through collective selves rather than being produced by narrative agents.

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