1   Introducing Shared Stories

Introduction

'Sharing' and 'stories': these two terms dominate our contemporary communicative landscape. Stories remain a pervasive genre that people use to make sense of themselves and the surrounding world. Sharing has become ubiquitous as an iconic action – for example, clicking a 'share' button – which reproduces content across networks of online connections. Sharing and stories can bring people together. At the same time, because they are so powerful, sharing and stories can become a site of struggle between the people who engage with them.

Let me begin with an example of a story that was shared in online contexts. On 16 June 2016, British Member of Parliament, Jo Cox, was murdered whilst on her way to a meeting with her local constituents. Her death prompted a deep affective response, not least because of the brutal nature of the attack, but also because it took place a week prior to the controversial referendum which determined the United Kingdom's position within the European Union. The news of the attack, and of her death shortly afterwards, was reported by local and national news outlets, including reports on social media sites like Twitter. The Twitter-based broadcasts of the breaking news unfolded rapidly as the real-time events took place. For example, the Twitter account @NewsExecutive posted eight tweets in one hour, successively reporting the details of the attack, the response from the police, the arrest of the killer and the decision of some politicians to suspend their referendum campaigns. Tributes to Jo Cox began to be posted in their thousands. Some contained people's reactions to the murder, whilst others circulated links to other stories and documents about Cox's life and campaigns, such as her first speech in parliament and the last document she posted on Twitter. I, like many others, responded by reposting some of these stories on Twitter and via other social media sites. At a time when the United Kingdom was politically divided, the collective responses on Twitter to Jo Cox's death united around hashtags which expressed solidarity, such as #ThankyourMP, #lovelikeJo (launched on what would have been her birthday, 22 June 2016) and #moreincommon (a phrase quoted from her maiden speech, and used by those who shared her political commitment to remain

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within the European Union). On Twitter alone, it is estimated that over 340 000 tweets containing the phrase 'Jo Cox' or '#JoCox' were posted in June and July 2016 (Goodson and Kwasny, 2016). Collections of social media tributes, rallies and vigils that followed in the weeks afterwards are, at the time of writing, still curated on social media sites like Storify. The story of Jo Cox's death brought together many tellers, who produced and reproduced many texts as they reported and responded to the events in social media contexts, and together promoted a shared attitude towards her death.

As we move further into the twenty-first century, the scale on which stories are shared in online contexts should not be underestimated. The major social media sites, platforms and apps attract millions of members, who engage actively with content available online. Shared stories can include reported events which are retold many thousands of times. For example, on 3 November 2016, the Twitter account @POTUS (the account maintained for the President of the United States of America, who at that point was Barack Obama) posted an update as part of a shared story that celebrated the success of the American baseball team, the Chicago Cubs:

It happened: @Cubs win World Series. That's change even this South Sider can believe in. Want to come to the White House before I leave?

The tweet was reposted again at least 75 000 times, received over 4500 replies and was marked as a 'favourite' by over a quarter of a million users. The scale of these audiences is not limited to Twitter, but is typical of other social media sites and platforms. At the time of writing, it is estimated that over 300 hours of video are uploaded to the video-sharing site YouTube every minute (Smith, 2017). The scale of use is similar for content-sharing sites like Instagram, Pinterest and Tumblr, and for messaging apps like WeChat and Whatsapp. The powerful combination of sharing and stories has not gone unnoticed, and is embedded in the formats that online sites use to encourage participation. For example, at present, the BBC website publishes news reports which conclude with the invitation to 'share this story'. In 2016, the social network site Instagram introduced a 'stories' feature to boost interaction with the site as a form of 'sharing' (Newton, 2016). Likewise, the Snapchat app created 'stories' as a way in which its members could share content more publicly (Moreau, 2016). As these examples suggest, sharing and stories come together in many ways. In this book, I focus on how they are combined in a distinctive narrative genre: the shared story.

The shared story is important for several reasons. First, it is a type of narrative that has not yet been documented or defined in relation to its contemporary use. Second, there is the scale of its impact: shared stories can involve many thousands of people as they are collectively produced, consumed and reproduced.

Third, it is influential, for it appears to promote a particular way of representing events, people and places: one that emphasises common ground. Because of their scale and influence, shared stories are often complex, and they may be resisted, reshaped and negotiated by the many tellers involved in their co-production. Shared stories can focus on any kind of topic and can be found in many kinds of online contexts. In this book, I concentrate on examples of large-scale shared stories about events that were reported in the mainstream and social media. I focus on shared stories as they were (re)produced and consumed in four international social media contexts: Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These four sites have been established for over a decade, and their use and format have evolved in ways that are embedded in the contemporary history of social media. Focusing on these sites allows us to examine shared stories in relation to well-recognised, mediated forms and contexts. It also contributes to the wider debates about the socio-cultural politics and purposes that the use and design of these sites might serve. A central tenet of this book is that shared stories are never neutral or straightforward. The choice to examine shared stories on these four sites thus opens up questions about their different ideological implications. The questions that I tackle in this book are:

- What is a shared story?
- How can we analyse shared stories?
- How are shared stories shaped by the mediated contexts in which they occur?
- Whose interests do shared stories serve?

Mediated Narrative Analysis

The focus of this book on sharing and stories pushes forward the frontiers of what I call 'mediated narrative analysis'. This takes its name as an echo of Scollon's (2002) seminal work on mediated discourse, later developed as mediated discourse analysis (most notably by Norris and Jones, 2005). As Jones and Hafner (2012, p. 2) point out, a medium is something that stands between people and facilitates their interaction. Similarly, I am interested in three ways in which stories, as a form of interaction, mediate and are mediated. First, stories mediate between the people who produce, consume and reproduce them. Second, shared stories are mediated by various technological resources used in the contexts of production and reception. Third, mediated discourse as a form of analysis moves from examining concrete interactions to considering the constitutive role that these interactions might have in their social and cultural context. Similarly, my approach to shared stories moves from the detailed analysis of the particular textual, mediated forms of shared stories to question what these stories do and how they are mediated by their various socio-cultural contexts. By emphasising the three aspects of the mediated discourse (first, the ways in which shared stories mediate their tellers; second, how they are mediated by

their online contexts; third, their mediated position between the tellers and their social contexts), I want to draw attention from the outset to the human agency and social implications of the shared story, rather than necessarily foregrounding the technological nature of the shared story as the sole object of study for this book.

That said, this book is distinctive in its focus on the online contexts in which shared stories are produced, consumed and reproduced. In this sense, mediated narrative analysis as a theoretical enterprise can be thought of as emerging from the steady body of work that has examined the narratives produced through mediated discourse such as the print and television news (Bell, 1991; Montgomery, 2007; Van Dijk, 1991). More recently, in my own work (Page, 2010, 2012a; Page and Thomas, 2011), alongside other scholars in computer-mediated discourse analysis, I have begun to explore the narratives found in online contexts. This includes studies of blogs (Hoffmann, 2010; Walker Rettberg, 2014), consumer reviews (Vasquez, 2014), health websites (Thompson, 2012), employee testimonials (Maagaard, 2014), SMS messages, YouTube videos (Georgakopoulou, 2008, 2015) and social network sites such as Twitter (Dayter, 2015) and Facebook (Giaxoglou, 2015a, 2015b; West, 2013, 2015). For the most part, the studies thus far have tackled relatively small-scale examples of storytelling in specific, online contexts. Shared stories differ from the storytelling observed in this earlier research in terms of the shared story's potential to proliferate into very large numbers of interactions involving thousands of tellers. As large, multifaceted objects of study, shared stories present a new challenge for the methods of mediated narrative analysis. My approach to shared stories moves mediated narrative analysis forward, first by developing our understanding of a new genre – shared stories – and second by drawing together an innovative combination of the methods used to analyse it.

In so doing, mediated narrative analysis echoes a second, important aspect of mediated discourse. Like Scollon, I position mediated narrative analysis as a nexus of interconnected theoretical frameworks. Scollon drew on interactional sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, conversation analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis. His work was taken up more widely to incorporate other frameworks – such as social semiotics and multimodality – in recognition that the relationship between interactions and social meanings was not achieved by verbal communication alone. Likewise, mediated narrative analysis is an inevitably and deliberately interconnected project that draws on insights from a number of frameworks within discourse analysis, including Critical Discourse Analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, social semiotics and narrative analysis, and combines them with other methods and models in order to deal with the scale and nature of the shared stories told in online contexts. This combination of methods is necessary in order to explore shared stories in their observable forms (for example, the visual and verbal content and context) as a type of social

practice, and as such it questions their function within wider socio-cultural contexts.

The interconnected approach of mediated discourse lends itself well to narrative analysis, which over the last five decades has developed extensively within the humanities and social sciences. As a transdisciplinary project, narrative analysis has opened up many avenues of inquiry, but these have for the most part evolved as distinct research traditions. There have been clear separations between literary-critical narrative theory (taking artistic examples of storytelling as its object of study), discourse analytic approaches to narrative (which focus on 'everyday', often conversational examples of storytelling practice) and the study of narrative in discursive psychology (where the interest lies in narrative as a mode of thought). The analysis of shared stories in this book is most strongly centred in the discourse analytic approach to narrative. However, in line with the nexus of practice at the heart of mediated narrative analysis, I also draw on concepts from these other fields, as they help elucidate the forms and functions of the shared story. In this chapter, I begin with an overview of the definitions of narrative that are found in the different traditions of scholarship, and explain how they are important for understanding shared stories.

What Is a Story?

The first challenge when analysing shared stories is to establish the object of study. In order to do this, we need to understand what a story is. A shared story is a type of narrative. However, the term 'narrative' is used in broad and narrow senses in both everyday and academic contexts. For researchers working in the various research traditions, the different uses of the term can be important. In discursive psychology, for example (as in the work of Bruner, 1986, 1991), 'narrative' is taken to refer to cultural patterns or scripts. As such, it is used quite loosely and does not refer to a specific textual artefact, but rather to a shared set of assumptions. The story-like nature of cultural patterns is perhaps best summarised in Lyotard's (1979) use of the term 'grand narratives'. This broad sense of the term 'narrative' appears in day-to-day contexts, too, such as news headlines and institutional reports. For example, Greg Jericho uses the phrase 'economic narrative' in a *Guardian* article:

Good debt? Hopefully this means the end of the dumbest economic narrative of our times. (*Guardian*, 14 December 2016)

These 'narratives' are not specific, verbal accounts of a particular set of events, but rather a general way of describing events or patterns of social-cultural behaviour. For shared stories, this macro-social meaning of 'narrative' is useful as a way of describing some of the social patterns of belief that stories help to

constitute (for example, that certain people will behave in a particular way, or that certain outcomes are to be expected).

However, the broad use of 'narrative' does not stand up to the rigour of linguistic inquiry. The analysis of shared stories is rooted in the empirical analysis of concrete examples of interaction. To understand shared stories, we need a narrower definition that allows researchers to identify the textual objects that count as a 'narrative'. In academic contexts, the narrowest definitions of 'narrative' were proposed within narrative theory. Narrative theory emerged as a distinct field within structuralist approaches to literary criticism in the 1960s. In this theoretical paradigm, it was important to separate 'narrative' as the underpinning event structure from the various ways in which said underpinning events might be told. Porter Abbott (2002, p. 16) puts it like this: 'story is an event or sequence of events (the action), and narrative discourse is those events as represented'. However, later critics contested the rigid separation of these levels (Herman and Vervaeck, 2005) and the pre-existence of a recoverable 'original' story (Hutcheon, 2006). Similarly, in this book, I avoid the narrowness of the structuralist definition and will use 'narrative' and 'story' interchangeably.

In discourse analytic approaches to narrative, there are also narrow definitions of a narrative as a particular kind of text. Whilst the scholars working in literary-critical narrative theory attempted to set out a universal model that would account for all narratives, the texts from which they generated their models were rather more modest in range, focusing primarily on examples from literature and folklore. Reacting to this, the sociolinguist William Labov claimed that we would know more about such complex narratives once 'the simplest and most fundamental narrative structures' were taken into account: oral narratives of personal experience (Labov and Waletzky, 1966, p. 12). Labov and his colleagues analysed stories told by African American adolescents, elicited through sociolinguistic interviews about what he claimed were 'universal centers of interest' (Labov, 2013, p. 4), such as matters of life and death. Based on these examples, he defined narrative as 'one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually happened' (Labov, 1972, pp. 359–360). Like the structuralist narratologists, Labov's definition of narrative emphasised events (as opposed to description), which are reported in a sequence. But his definition was more narrow still, suggesting that the reported events are sequenced so as to match iconically the order in which the 'real-world' events occurred. Whilst eventhood and temporal sequence remain key characteristics which set narratives apart from other kinds of texts, the limits of these minimal, narrow definitions soon became apparent.

In both the literary-critical and sociolinguistic traditions of narrative research that developed in the decades following the work of the structuralists and of Labov, there was a broad move away from 'all-or-nothing' attempts to

classify narratives (where a text is either classified as a narrative or it is not) and towards a more flexible recognition of the diverse forms and functions of narrative. This is framed within debates about narrativity, as a scalar concept where a text can be perceived as more or less like prototypical examples of narrative. From a literary-critical perspective, perceptions of narrativity are associated with a number of factors which are part of an open-ended, 'fuzzy' list (Ryan, 2007). These include:

- textual features such as tense and aspect (Herman, 1997);
- structural elements such as the logical connections evoked between reported events, where there is a preference for causality above temporality alone (Onega and Landa, 1996);
- the extent to which events are combined in a 'plot' with a clearly marked beginning, middle and end (Ryan, 2007); and
- the subject matter of the story, which centres on trouble but is resolved later (Polanyi, 1985).

These factors allow us to make contrasts between texts which appear more or less like a prototypical narrative. The greater the presence of the features in the list, the more prototypical the narrative. Some texts would not count as narratives at all. Not all posts that are published on social media sites are story-like. For example, the following tweet posted by the Chicago Cubs' Twitter account on 20 March 2017 is a greeting:

Wishing a happy 40th birthday to everyone's favourite Grandpa, David Ross!

Without any reported events, the greeting does not meet even the minimal forms of narrativity. Where posts do contain reported events, the events can be reported in different ways. For example, comparing @POTUS' tweet with the account of the Chicago Cubs' success as reported in the English Wikipedia article for the club, we can observe a number of differences.

Tweet:

It happened: @Cubs win World Series. That's change even this South Sider can believe in. Want to come to the White House before I leave?

Extract from Wikipedia:

The Cubs won back-to-back World Series championships in 1907 and 1908, becoming the first major league team to play in three consecutive World Series, and the first to win it twice. Most recently, the Cubs won the 2016 National League Championship Series and 2016 World Series, which ended a 71-year National League pennant drought and a 108-year World Series championship drought, both of which are record droughts in Major League Baseball.

The Wikipedia report appears more like a prototypical narrative, using past-tense verbs, and includes a longer sequence of events that has a

Table 1.1 *Narrative dimensions and possibilities*

Dimension	Possibilities
Tellership	Whether a story is told by a single teller or multiple tellers
Tellability	The value of a story as highly worth telling or seemingly irrelevant
Embeddedness	The extent to which a story can be detached from or embedded in its context
Linearity	The structural qualities of a story as closed, temporal sequence or open-ended and multilinear
Moral Stance	The narrator's attitude towards reported events, which may be certain or fluctuating

Adapted from Ochs and Capps (2001), p. 20.

beginning, a middle and an end. The 'trouble' of the Cubs' former lack of suc-
cess in the World Series Championship is more clearly stated and resolved in
the Wikipedia article. In comparison, the tweet is much less like a prototypi-
cal narrative. Although the tweet includes a reported event, it is partly narrated
in the past tense ('it happened') and partly in the present ('Cubs win'), as if
reported in real time. These examples show us that in social media contexts,
some texts may not be narratives at all (like the greeting from the Chicago
Cubs), some may resemble prototypical narratives (like the Wikipedia article),
and some may have only weak narrativity but still include events reported in
time, and so may still be classed as narratives (like @POTUS' tweet).

The shift to a more flexible approach to narrative allows the shared story
to incorporate examples that are not just plot-like, past-tense reports of trou-
blesome events. Indeed, the shared stories in this book are quite different to
the literary examples examined in narrative criticism and the narratives of per-
sonal experience scrutinised by Labov. They are not what would be consid-
ered a 'prototypical narrative'. The mediated narrative analysis of shared sto-
ries thus builds on a key trend in discourse analytic approaches to narrative
which sought to position prototypical examples within a broader spectrum of
storytelling practices. There are two turning points in the development of dis-
course analytic narrative research that inform my approach to shared stories.
The first is the move towards a dimensional approach to narrative, as set out
in Ochs and Capps' (2001) work. Ochs and Capps recognised that there are
many forms in which a story might be told. In broadening the foci for narrative
analysis, they did not just focus on the various patterns that could structure the
narrative text, as did literary-critical theorists interested in narrativity. Instead,
they considered the sequential organisation of events as one of five dimensions
which can be used to compare the qualities of different narrative examples.
These dimensions are tellership, tellability, embeddedness, linearity and moral
stance (summarised in Table 1.1). Because they are taken up in the discussion

of the different shared stories in the later chapters of this book, I will briefly introduce each here (fuller discussion can be found in Page, 2012a).

Ochs and Capps' (2001) schematic outline projects the differences in the various narrative dimensions as series of a scalar contrasts between binary alternatives. As the glosses in Table 1.1 indicate, tellership contrasts the degree of involvement from the narrative interlocutors, tellability is a relative judgement of value (the story is more or less worth telling) and embeddedness compares the extent to which the narrative text is detachable from its context. Linearity contrasts the structural aspects of the narrative. Moral stance is constant or variable. Ochs and Capps (2001) argued that Labov and his successors tended to privilege narrative examples which combined factors from the same end of the spectrum for each dimension. This resulted in a focus on single-teller narratives about highly tellable topics (usually dangerous events or conflicts), which are relatively decontextualised, have a clear moral stance and have a defined macro-level linear structure. Without question, these kinds of narratives continue to be important (Labov, 2013). However, as De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012, p. 9) point out, the focus on more prototypical examples has influenced the choice of subject matter in narrative research to the neglect of atypical examples. The analysis of shared stories in this book is a further attempt to redress the neglect of narrative examples that fall beyond the early Labovian paradigm.

In turning my attention to shared stories as an 'atypical' form of narrative, I also build on a second, key turning point in discourse analytic narrative research: the small stories paradigm. Small story research positions itself as a strategic shift, an 'antidote to canonical research' (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 377) in which the analytic focus is turned towards 'a gamut of underrepresented narrative activities' (2008, p. 381). It is thanks to the work of those scholars within this paradigm that we have begun to know much more about the range of storytelling practices that fall outside the canonical end of the narrative spectrum, examples of which include breaking news, hypothetical stories and projections of future events (Georgakopoulou, 2007), refusals to tell (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008), narrative stance-taking (Georgakopoulou, 2013a) and conversational shared stories (Georgakopoulou, 2005, 2007). These small stories are highly embedded in their interactional contexts, often falling on the periphery or margins of the main topic of the talk. In line with the emphasis on their emergent, interactional contexts, small stories are often co-constructed rather than the accomplishment of a single narrator. They are typically fleeting rather than fully developed with a 'completed' linear structure, and like other kinds of 'small talk' (Coupland, 2000), they often report events which are mundane and everyday in nature rather than landmark examples of tellable topics. The description of these examples as 'small' thus operates on two levels. As Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008, p. 381) put it:

These tellings are typically small when compared to the pages and pages of transcript of interview narratives. On a metaphorical level, though, the term locates a level and even an aesthetic for the identification and analysis of narrative: the smallness of talk, where fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world can be easily missed out by an analytical lens that only takes fully fledged ('big') stories as the prototype from where the analytic vocabulary is supposed to emerge.

The bold juxtaposition of 'small' and 'big' in this description is rhetorically useful for giving impetus towards the exploration of atypical narrative examples. However, atypical narrative examples can vary considerably and may not all be 'small' in the same way, either in size or in subject matter. As I have suggested from the outset, shared stories can be very large in size and can, as a form of social practice, be the means by which tellers engage with large concerns beyond mundane and everyday matters. On one hand, the small story paradigm serves as an important point of reference for the analysis of shared stories, for even very large datasets may contain a myriad of small moments of narrative interaction. However, the large scale and highly tellable nature of shared stories suggests that a small story approach needs to be complemented with other methods when integrated within mediated narrative analysis.

My study of shared stories is in line with a dimensional approach to narrative and the small stories paradigm as a contextual approach that analyses the narrative as a form of social practice. I propose that any account of shared stories must take into consideration the co-tellers and the local and socio-cultural contexts in which the storytelling takes place. In keeping with Ochs and Capps' (2001) work and the small story paradigm, I take a flexible approach to defining the shared story as a narrative which retains eventhood as a core component but does not anticipate that the reports of the events need form a past-tense, complete sequence that reaches a point of resolution. In line with mediated narrative analysis, I am specifically concerned with examining how the contexts of interaction, as forms of co-tellership and embeddedness, mediate and mediatise (Agha, 2011) the shared story. However, unlike the small stories that are concerned with the more fleeting, ephemeral and aesthetically small moments of narration, shared stories open up the possibility of examining the wider variety of a-typical interactions that are now emerging in online contexts alongside their 'small' counterparts. In a culture of connectivity where 'small stories', like the tweet from @POTUS, can be shared many thousands of times and become part of larger, public interactions, the principles of small story research now need to be brought into conversation with other narrative approaches. This is all the more important given that the socio-cultural hierarchies between the tellers of stories and the mediated forms of narration blur a sharp contrast between the 'everyday' lay person, who can interact with stories online, and the use of social media to document large-scale matters of public concern.