There is an explosion of digital means by which people can shape and share stories about themselves. New media and new conditions of telling ‘my’ or ‘our’ story are open to more individuals and groups in society. This special section of *New Media & Society* relates to such self-representational uses of the new means.

Digital stories made by amateurs may encourage social participation in those contexts where the stories are produced and used. The kind of digital storytelling to be discussed here opens new ways of participation: in ‘story circles’ offline, as well as online peer contact on social networking sites. The following two articles discuss the emergent space of self-representational digital storytelling, with its risks and its opportunities for democracy and individual identity formation in media-saturated societies.

Although small-scale and bottom-up, these mediated self-narrative practices are prisms through which to look into the significant social consequences of new media. ‘Digital storytelling’, as suggested by Nick Couldry in this issue p. 374, means ‘the whole range of personal stories now being told in potentially public form using digital media resources’.

**THE MEDIATIZED STORIES PROJECT**

This themed section reflects an international and interdisciplinary research project on ‘Mediatized Stories: Mediation Perspectives on Digital Storytelling among Youth’. The principal objective is to explore how people – youth in particular – use self-representation in digital storytelling to shape and share their lives. The project tries to understand these processes through theories of
mediation and mediatization across media studies and the field of education. This contrasting conceptualization – kept within media sociology – is the explicit theme of Nick Couldry’s contribution to the special section. He is interested in understanding new communicative practices on a societal level and finds digital storytelling to be a valuable topic from which to explore the contrasting strengths of the concepts of mediatization versus mediation, in order to comprehend ongoing societal transformations.

Perspectives on mediation and mediatization from education studies are formulated elsewhere (Lundby, 2008). With reference to the concept of mediation as developed by Lev Vygotsky and other scholars in the Russian school of sociocultural studies, Ola Erstad and James V. Wertsch (forthcoming, 2008) discuss the work of ‘mediational means’ or ‘cultural tools’ in storytelling. Their question is how new digital media might transform the role that narratives have in our lives. Kirsten Drotner (forthcoming, 2008) tries to bridge ‘mediation’ in education studies and ‘mediatization’ in media studies. She defines media as meaning-making technologies. Digital storytelling, in her view, touches at the heart of contemporary processes enabling new forms of knowledge production, social networking and play. Drotner holds that digital storytelling raises new debates on civic participation and social inclusion, competence formation and identity work.

The Mediatized Stories project also aims to analyse the sociocultural dynamics of mediation or mediatization when people create and communicate self-representations in digital storytelling. These ‘digital dynamics’ are explored in Sonia Livingstone’s article in this issue. Teenagers’ stories and profiles in interaction on social networking sites bring us into core processes of contemporary digital dynamism.

Finally, the Mediatized Stories project studies how self-representation in digital storytelling may build competence and media literacy through informal learning in mediation or mediatization processes. As Drotner (forthcoming, 2008) points out, many youngsters are busy rehearsing for their adult existence through digital storytelling in gaming, blogging and multimodal editing of visuals, graphics and sound.

The Meditized Stories project is managed from Oslo and brings together established and young scholars across Scandinavia, the UK and USA, with contributions from Georgia and Iran. There is a range of case studies related to the project foci, from digital storytelling building self-confidence among children in ‘underserved’ areas of Oakland, CA in the American far West (Hull and James, 2007; Hull and Katz, 2006), to competing narratives of democracy between Abkhazians and Georgians on a digital discussion forum run from Tblisi, in the former Soviet far East (Erstad and Wertsch, forthcoming, 2008).
In a research initiative with such a span it might seem rather limited, or geographically myopic, to include in this *New Media & Society* themed section only articles prepared by London-based project participants. Of course, they cannot reflect the variation in digital storytelling expressions and experiences within the project in all its breadth. However, these two articles provide valuable contrast and, taken together, address most of the dimensions of the Mediatized Stories research project.

**TWO ARTICLES, DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS**

The two following articles are complementary in many respects. Nick Couldry charts a theoretical perspective while Sonia Livingstone starts with observations and interviews in teenagers’ bedrooms. Of course, they both relate to theory as well as to actual storytelling and self-representational practices. However, one starts at the macro-level and the other at the micro-level. Couldry analyses a new and emerging social and communicative space, while Livingstone looks at uses and interpretations within that space. The former discusses alternative conceptualizations, while the latter studies risks and opportunities as they play out in ‘youthful content creation’ on social networking sites.

The Mediatized Stories project is about self-representational digital storytelling. From this perspective, there are some fascinating differences between the two articles. While Couldry does not apply the concept ‘self’ or the word ‘representation’, the term ‘storytelling’ does not show up in Livingstone’s contribution. Further, Couldry does not apply ‘identity’ or ‘youth’, while this is what Livingstone’s article is all about. Accordingly, the informal learning aspect of the Mediatized Stories research is considered by Livingstone through frequent references to media literacy and ‘internet literacy’, while this aspect is barely touched upon by Couldry. Livingstone is talking specifically about teenagers; Couldry is not age-specific when he writes about digital storytelling practices. Livingstone does not even apply the key terms ‘mediatization’ and ‘mediatized’, which are exactly the concepts that Couldry debates throughout his article. While being within the same frame of the Mediatized Stories project, the two British colleagues focus and frame their contributions to this special section quite differently. Couldry’s perspective is on the mediation of digital storytelling, on the broader social consequences of new digital media. Livingstone focuses on presentation and representation of self. She looks at how these inherent interests of young people are being played out online.

The two authors focus on different forms of new media. While Livingstone studies recent social networking sites (boyd and Ellison, 2007), Couldry refers to the now classic form of short, personal stories made by amateurs with standard digital equipment (Hartley and McWilliam, forthcoming).
ARENAS OF ‘DIGITAL STORYTELLING’

The ‘classic’ form of ‘personal stories now being told in potentially public form using digital media resources’ – to re-cite Couldry’s definition of digital storytelling in this issue (p. 374) – was developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling (www.storycenter.org) in California. These are short, two to three-minute mini-films usually based on still photos brought into a multimedia format, with a textual narrative that is read with the narrator’s own voice. Typically, they are autobiographic representations of self in relation to family, friends, community and suchlike.

Joe Lambert, one of the founders of the Center for Digital Storytelling, considered what he called the ‘Digital Tsunami’ breaking above the California coast (Lambert, 2006: 9). This was the early 1990s. It is no accident that it happened then and close to Silicon Valley, where so much of the innovation in digital hardware and software took place (Lundby, forthcoming). By the mid-1990s, multimedia technologies became available to amateurs. People could be encouraged to make short personal stories, and they were: the Center introduced workshops, developed a certain core methodology and advised of the ‘Seven Elements’ of story structure and design in digital storytelling (Lambert, 2006). The ‘how to’ advice was even brought together into a Digital Storytelling Cookbook (Lambert, 2007). These principles have proved their adaptability, as they are followed almost slavishly in similar storytelling projects throughout the globe. This sustainability does not imply that there are no critical questions to be posed, e.g. on the idea inherent in the Center slogan that if you ‘listen deeply’ you will be able to ‘tell stories’.2 Personal stories do not just happen; they are constructed. Some aspects are brought to the fore while others are kept hidden.

The core of the workshops is not the technical introduction to the (standard, off-the-shelf) software that they apply. The main focus is the ‘story circle’ (Lambert, 2006), where ideas are shared and the supervisor(s) and fellow storytellers help to build the story in maybe no more than two to 300 words. Typically, John Hartley and Kelly McWilliam (forthcoming) entitle their edited collection on ‘Digital Storytelling Around the World’ as Story Circle. It has certainly spread around the globe, although primarily to (media)-rich and digitally saturated areas such as Australia, Scandinavia and the USA (Lundby, forthcoming). A main and early export was to Wales. In 2001 the photographer and journalism teacher Daniel Meadows, inspired by the Center in California, initiated the ‘Capture Wales’ project in cooperation with BBC Wales (Meadows, 2003). A series of digital stories have been shown on regional television and several hundred have been made available at the BBC Cymru (Wales) website (www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales).

Throughout a 15-year history, the Center for Digital Storytelling has initiated some 12,000 digital stories.3 Many more are produced outside the
sphere and control of the Center. Hartley and McWilliam (forthcoming) point out that this kind of digital storytelling is an emergent form and a new media practice, as well as a movement. However, Hartley (forthcoming, 2008) raises pertinent questions regarding its ability to be scaled. Although proliferating and popular, he argues that such classic digital storytelling will remain a small-scale phenomenon compared to the large-scale practices of television and other main media industries.

The two authors in this themed section actually write about different forms of digital storytelling. The type that Sonia Livingstone discusses, albeit without using the term ‘digital storytelling’, is definitely a scaling up of the concept. Livingstone’s study moves within the terrain of ‘web 2.0 storytelling’ that Kirsten Drotner (forthcoming, 2008) maps out. Among all web 2.0 practices, Livingstone focuses on social networking sites.

Since Couldry refers to the practices which have sprung out of the Center tradition, the two articles in this special section lay out two contrasting forms and practices of digital storytelling. Both types are ‘personal stories now being told in potentially public form using digital media resources’. They are both making ‘user-generated content’, although in different ways and for different publics.

To Drotner (forthcoming, 2008), the term ‘digital storytelling’ covers processes of social narration through digital means. This wider definition need not imply personal or self-representational stories. Much blogging, personal homepage production or social networking may not be digital storytelling in a stricter sense. ‘Profiles’ may be self-related, but not necessarily representing the self in a more reflexive way.

**REPRESENTATION OF SELVES: MEDIATION OF STORIES**

Within the web 2.0 landscape, in this issue Sonia Livingstone examines re-presentations of selves among youth. Nick Couldry goes into a broader space when he discusses the mediation and mediatization of digital storytelling. The two authors use different entrances to the contemporary complex of communicative changes that relate to the merging of the modern, reflexive self (Giddens, 1991; Taylor, 1989) with new narrative outlets in ‘self-made media’ (Hartley, forthcoming, 2008). The media that are applied in different forms of amateur digital storytelling are not really ‘self-made’, but these industry-made digital tools open more and ‘user-generated’, ways of expression. They enable ‘personal media practices’; new ways of ‘being in mediated spaces’ (Lüders, 2007). The ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault, 1988) open doors for the individual’s self to emerge in public. Today, for many people, social networking sites and ‘story circle’-based digital storytelling are the scenes for ‘the presentation of self in everyday life’ (Goffman, 1959). Digital storytelling is another outlet for
building identities through ‘creative explorations’ (Gauntlett, 2007, forthcoming, 2008).

Selves are constituted through interaction with others (Mead, 1934), as Sonia Livingstone reminds us in her article. Interaction on social networking sites ‘reveals the self embedded in the peer group, as known to and represented by others’, she writes (p. 400). This brings Livingstone to a rather restricted notion of mediation. With Stig Hjarvard (2006), she understands mediation as the communication where the message as well as the relation between sender and receiver ‘are influenced by the affordances and constraints of the specific media and genres involved’ (p. 396). This notion of mediation focuses on representations and influences through acts of communication. This is a narrow or focused definition compared to the all-encompassing understanding of mediation that Couldry advocates in this issue. Following the late Roger Silverstone (2002, 2005), Couldry looks on mediation as broad-ranging and complex transformative processes which are both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded.

Weighting the relative strengths of the concepts of mediation and mediatization on the emerging space of digital storytelling, Couldry debates with Hjarvard, who is also a member of the Mediatized Stories project. As Hjarvard limits the meaning of ‘mediation’, so Couldry limits the uses of ‘mediatization’ to a linear, single transformative logic where processes take on a form and a format suitable for media representation. However, Hjarvard defines mediatization as long-term processes and transformations where institutions or social and cultural fields of activity in society ‘assume a media form’, and where media themselves develop into strong institutions (Hjarvard, 2004, 2007, forthcoming, 2008). This broad conceptualization of mediatization does not seem too far from the broad understanding of mediation, although Couldry, in his article, argues that there are significant differences. How to grasp conceptually the transforming phenomenon of digital storytelling, ‘mediatized stories’, is still open to debate (Lundby, forthcoming, 2008).

PARTICIPATION, AUTHORITY AND DEMOCRACY

The potential – and possibly the power – of digital storytelling increases with multimodality (Hull and Nelson, 2005) and interactivity (Friedlander, forthcoming, 2008), as well as with the easy and accessible ‘user-generated’ production forms that characterize these new media. New forms of social participation that are encouraged by digital storytelling relate to creating stories as well as sharing them in smaller or larger publics. In the cases of self-representational digital stories, the public or ‘readers’ may be very close to the producers and switch roles. What are the implications for participation? The potential of digital storytelling in democratic processes on different levels of society is at issue.
Such participation is related to patterns of authority: Digital storytelling not only bypasses set forms of authority, but also invites new forms. In digital narrative, the relation between authorship and the authority of author and text is at stake (Friedlander, forthcoming, 2008). The participatory potential in self-representational digital storytelling may challenge established patterns of authority based on various forms of institutional legitimacy. At the same time, storytellers may have the means to develop new forms of authority. Authority is based on the legitimacy of symbolic power. Symbolic power can only be exercised if it is recognized, as Bourdieu (1992) states. The authority of digital storytelling depends on whether such stories and storytelling become recognized.

Here come the opportunities and risks, the potentials and threats that Nick Couldry and Sonia Livingstone discuss in the following two articles. Couldry acknowledges the claims that Joe Lambert (2006) makes for the democratic potential of digital storytelling. However, Couldry has fears – for reasons he spells out in his article – that digital storytelling will not achieve the recognition necessary to gain social and cultural authority. Livingstone goes deeper into opportunities (for identity, intimacy and sociability) and risks (regarding privacy, misunderstanding and abuse) in her study of teenagers’ content creation and social interaction on networking sites. We need multiple approaches – micro and macro, empirical and theoretical – in order to understand more of the emerging phenomena of digital storytelling, and to evaluate whether, and if so how, digital self-representation transforms into ‘mediatized stories’.

Notes
1 The project lasts from 2006 to 2010 and is based at the University of Oslo, with funding from the Research Council of Norway. See www.intermedia.uio.no/mediatized/
2 When accessing the Centre website, one is not allowed to proceed before being met by the logo with the slogan 'listen deeply, tell stories'.
3 Personal communication with Joe Lambert, 12 December 2007.

References


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