

[Nick Couldry](#)

Digital storytelling, media research and democracy: conceptual choices and alternative futures

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DIGITAL STORYTELLING, MEDIA RESEARCH AND DEMOCRACY: CONCEPTUAL CHOICES AND ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

NICK COULDRY

NICK COULDRY is Professor of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He is the author or editor of 7 books, including most recently *Listening Beyond the Echoes: Media, Ethics and Agency in an Uncertain World* (Paradigm Books, USA, 2006) and (with Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham) *Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

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**DIGITAL STORYTELLING, MEDIA RESEARCH AND DEMOCRACY:
CONCEPTUAL CHOICES AND ALTERNATIVE FUTURES**

Introduction

Digital storytelling represents a novel distribution of a scarce resource – the ability to represent the world around us – using a shared infrastructure. As such, this distinct form of the digital media age suggests a new stage in the history of mass communication, or perhaps in the supersession of mass communication; it therefore has implications for the sustaining, or expansion, of democracy, but only under complex conditions, yet to be fully identified. This chapter seeks to clarify what those conditions are or, if that is still premature, at least to clarify what questions need to be answered if digital storytelling's social consequences and democratic potential are to be understood, not merely hyped.¹

Understanding digital storytelling as a broad social phenomenon involves moving beyond such storytelling's status merely as texts or processes of production/ distribution to consider broader "effects". I will focus on just two ways of thinking about those effects: the concept of "mediation" (Martin-Barbero, 1993; Silverstone, 1999; Couldry, 2000) and

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the concept of “mediatization” (Hjarvard, 2004; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Schulz, 2004). Digital storytelling, because of its complexity as narrative and social process, provides a good opportunity to clarify the respective advantages and disadvantages of these concepts in the course of developing our necessarily still speculative understanding of the social life of digital storytelling itself. By “digital storytelling” I will mean the whole range of personal stories now being told in potentially public form using digital media resources.

My argument at its broadest is that theories of mediatization, because they look for an essentially linear transformation from “pre-media” (before the intervention of specific media) to “mediatized” social states, may be less useful for grasping the dynamics of digital storytelling than other approaches which I identify with the uses of the term “mediation” mentioned earlier.² The latter approaches emphasise the heterogeneity of the transformations to which media give rise across a complex and divided social space rather than a single “media logic” that is simultaneously transforming the whole of social space at once. At stake here is not so much the liberatory potential of digital storytelling (although I want to clarify that too), but the precision with which we understand media’s complex social consequences. We should not expect a single unitary answer to the question of how media transform the social, since media themselves are always at least doubly articulated, as both transmission technology and representational content (Silverstone, 1994) in contexts of lived practice and situated struggle that themselves are open to multiple interpretations or indeed to being ignored. While its attentiveness to the nonlinear will be my main reason choosing ‘mediation’ as a concept for grasping “digital

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storytelling”, I will not be claiming that mediation is always a more useful term than “mediatization”. They are different concepts with different valences. At most I will be claiming that, in spite of its apparent vagueness, “mediation” has a multivalence which usefully supplements accounts of the “mediatization” of the social.

I will begin by clarifying the differences between the terms “mediatization” and “mediation” before contrasting how each would analyse digital storytelling’s social consequences. Then I will seek to reinforce my argument for the continued importance of the term “mediation” by reviewing the claims for the “community” dimension of digital storytelling that cannot be assessed through the concept of mediatization alone. I will end with some reflections on how the likely obstacles to the social role of digital storytelling might be overcome.

Conceptual Background

My argument proceeds by contrasting two wide-range concepts for grasping the social transformations actually and potentially linked to digital storytelling. Let me acknowledge immediately some arbitrariness here at the level of pure terminology, since some writers (Altheide, 1985; Gumpert and Cathcart, 1990) have used the term “mediation” to characterize precisely the transformation of societies through a linear media logic that more recently has been termed “mediatization”.³ That does not however affect the conceptual contrast I am making.

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Mediatization

Let me start from the term “mediatization” whose profile in media theory has grown considerably in recent years.

Mediatization, as developed by Stig Hjarvard and others (Hjarvard, 2004), is a useful attempt to concentrate our focus on a particular transformative logic or mechanism that is understood to do something distinctive to (that is, to “mediatize”) particular processes, objects and fields: a distinctive and consistent transformation that it is suggested can only properly be understood if seen as part of a wider transformation of social and cultural life through media operating from a single source and in a common direction, a transformation of society by media, a “media logic” (Altheide and Snow, 1979). This is an important general claim, and insofar as it involves the specific claim that many cultural and social processes are now constrained to take on a form suitable for media representation, it is based on transformations that are undeniable: there is, for example, no question any more of politicians doing politics without appearing in or on media, and no social campaign can operate without some media presence.

It is clear the concept of mediatization starts out from the notion of replication, the spreading of media forms to spaces of contemporary life that are required to be re-presented through media forms:

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As a concept mediatization denotes the processes through which core elements of a cultural or social activity (eg. politics, religion, language) assume media form. As a consequence, the activity is to a greater or lesser degree performed through interaction with a medium, and the symbolic content and the structure of the social and cultural activities are influenced by media environments which they gradually become more dependent upon. (Hjarvard, 2007, p. 3)

However, the theory of mediatization insists that from this regular dependence of zones of social or cultural activity on media exposure wider consequences follow, which taken together form part of a broader media logic: “by the logic of the media we understand their *organizational, technological, and aesthetic* functioning, including the ways in which media *allocate material and symbolic resources* and work through *formal and informal rules*” (Hjarvard, 2007, p. 3, original emphasis). Winfried Schulz (2004) in his helpful discussion of “mediatization” theory, including by German speaking scholars, breaks the term “mediatization” down into four “processes” (extension, substitution, amalgamation and accommodation) but, in doing so, confirms indirectly the linear nature of the logic that underlies theories of mediatization. How else, for example, can we understand the notion of “substitution” (Schulz, 2004, pp. 88-89) which implies that one state of affairs has become another because of the intervention of a new element (media)?

As I explain later, my reservations with the theory of “mediatization” begin only when it is extended in this way to cover transformations that go far beyond the adoption of media forms or formats to the broader consequences of dependence upon media exposure. The

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latter will include transformations in the agents who can act in a particular field, how they can act, with what authority and capital, and so on. These latter types of transformation may require different theoretical frameworks, such as Bourdieu's field theory (1993), if they are to make detailed sense; if so, their causal workings will not be analyzable under one single "logic" of "mediatization", since Bourdieu's account of social space is always multipolar. I will come later to some other limitations of the term "mediatization".

However I would not want to deny the advantages of the term "mediatization" for media theory. "Mediatization" encourages us to look for common patterns across disparate areas. Mediatization describes the transformation of many disparate social and cultural processes into forms or formats suitable for media re-presentation. One example might be in the area of state/ religious ritual: when we see weddings or other ceremonies taking on features that make them ready for re-mediation (via digital camera) or imitating features of television versions of such events, this is an important shift and is captured by the term mediatization. Another more complex example is the mediatization of politics (Meyer, 2003; Strömback, 2007). Here the argument is not just about the forms of political performance or message transmission, but about the incorporation of media-based logics and norms into political action. In the most extreme case, media, it has been argued, change the ontology of politics, changing what counts as political action, because of the requirement for all effective policy to be explainable and defensible within the constraints of media formats (Meyer, 2003). Prima facie an example of this is the argument in a recent book by a retired British civil servant, Christopher Foster (Foster, 2006) that, under Britain's New Labour government, "Cabinet" meetings have been profoundly

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changed by the media pressures that impinge on government: becoming much shorter, and changing from being open deliberations about what policy should be adopted to being brief reviews of the media impact of policies already decided elsewhere.

But as this last example suggests, there is a blurring masked by the term “mediatization”. Are such changes to the running of government in Britain just the result of media’s influence in the political domain? Or are they linked also to political forces, to shifts in the power that national governments have in relation to external markets and other factors (compare Leys, 2001) which have narrowed the scope of national political action and deliberation? Surely “media logic” and “political logic” are not necessarily binary opposites that are simply substitutable for one other; instead they interpenetrate or cut across each other. Saskia Sassen’s recent work (2006) offers an important entry-point into the spatial complexity of these interactions between media, state and economy within “globalization”.

This reinforces the broader problem with mediatization theory already suggested: its tendency to claim that it has identified one single type of media-based logic that is superseding (completely replacing) older logics across the whole of social space. While this is useful when we are examining the media-based transformation of very specific social or institutional practices, it may in more complex cases obscure the variety of media-related pressures at work in society: for example, practical necessities which make media exposure useful, but not always essential, for particular actors; the role of media skills in the capital of particular agents as they seek in various ways to strengthen their

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position in a particular field; the role of media as networks whose influence does not depend on the logics embedded in media contents but on the reshaping of fields of action themselves (Benson and Neveu, 2005). These are influences too heterogeneous to be reduced to a single “media logic”, as if they all operated in one direction, at the same speed, through a parallel mechanism, and according to the same calculus of probability. Media, in other words, are more than a language (or “logos”) for transforming social or cultural contents in one particular way.

The problem is not that mediatization theorists do not recognize the breadth of these changes; they certainly do, and this is largely what grounds their claim for the broad implications of the term. The problem is that the concept of “mediatization” itself may not be suitable to contain the heterogeneity of the transformations in question. There are two ways in which this argument might be made more fully. One would be by considering in detail how the basic insights of mediatization theory can be developed within a version of Bourdieu’s field theory (compare Couldry, 2003b). This line of argument would, however, take me some way from the specific issues raised by digital storytelling. The other way of arguing for the limits of the term “mediatization” which I will pursue here is by exploring the virtues of the complementary approach to media’s social consequences that following other writers I gather under the term “mediation”. Do media (and specifically digital storytelling, to which I come in detail later) have social consequences which have not been – and could not readily be - captured by the theory of mediatization, and which are better encompassed by the concept of “mediation”? This is what I will argue.

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Mediation

Media processes involve a huge complexity of inputs (what are media?) and outputs (what difference do media make, socially, culturally?), which require us to find another term to differentiate the levels within and patterns across this complexity. According to a number of scholars, that term is “mediation”.⁴ ‘Mediation’ as a term has a long history and multiple uses: it has for a very long time been used in education and psychology to refer to the intervening role that the process of communication plays in the making of meaning. In general sociology, the term ‘mediation’ is used for any process of intermediation (such as money or transport). My concern here is however with the term’s specific uses in media research. Within media research, the term “mediation” can be used to refer simply to the act of transmitting something through the media, but here I have in mind a more substantive definition of the term which has received more attention in media research since the early 1990s. One crude definition of “mediation” – in this substantive sense - is: the overall effect of media institutions existing in contemporary societies, the overall difference media make by being there in our social world. This only gestures in the right direction without helping us differentiate any of mediation’s components; indeed it gets us no further definitionally than the catch-all use of the term “mediatization” I rejected a moment ago. A more useful approach is via John B. Thompson’s term “mediation” (1995) – as it happens, he avoids the term ‘mediation’, because of its broader usage in sociology (see above). Thompson notes that:

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By virtue of a series of technical innovations associated with printing and, subsequently, with the electrical codification of information, symbolic forms were produced, reproduced and circulated on a scale that was unprecedented. Patterns of communication and interaction began to change in profound and irreversible ways. These changes, which comprise what can loosely be called the “mediation of culture”, had a clear institutional basis: namely, the development of media organisations, which first appeared in the second half of the fifteenth century and have expanded their activities ever since. (1995, p. 46, added emphasis)

This is helpful because it turns the general question of media institutions’ consequences into a series of specific questions about media’s role in the transformation of action in specific sites, on specific scales and in specific locales.

There is, it might seem, a risk that “mediation” is used so broadly that it is simply a substitute for the “media saturation” about which many writers within and outside media research have written, most notably Baudrillard (1983). But while the idea of “media saturation” does capture the media density of some contemporary social environments, it does not capture the multi-directionality of how media may be transforming society. This is where I turn to Roger Silverstone’s definition of “mediation”, the approach for which I want to reserve my main use of that term. Here is Silverstone:

Mediation, in the sense in which I am using the term, describes the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalised media of communication (the

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press, broadcast radio and television, and increasingly the world wide web), are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life. (Silverstone, 2002, added emphasis).

Silverstone explains the nature of this dialectic in a later essay: “mediation requires us to understand how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other” (Silverstone 2005, added emphasis: see also Madianou, 2005). This helpfully brings out how any process of mediation (or perhaps “mediation”) of an area of culture or social life is always at least two-way: “media” work, and must work, not merely by transmitting discrete textual units for discrete moments of reception, but through a process of environmental transformation which in turn transforms the conditions under which any future media can be produced and understood. “Mediation” in other words is a nonlinear process.

Can we build on Silverstone’s insight into the dialectics of mediation, and so reinforce the contrast with the purely linear logic of “mediatization”? Arguably Silverstone’s term “dialectic” is too friendly to capture all aspects of mediation’s nonlinearity. It disarms us from noticing certain asymmetric interrelations between actors in the media process, and even the impossibility of certain actors or outputs influencing other actors or outputs. Rather than seeing mediation as a dialectic or implied conversation, it may be more productive, I suggest, to see mediation as capturing a variety of dynamics within media flows. By “media flows”, I mean flows of production, flows of circulation, flows of

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interpretation or reception, and flows of recirculation as interpretations flow back into production or flow outwards into general social and cultural life. We need not assume any “dialectic” between particular types of flow, still less does it assume any stable circuit of causality; we must allow not only for nonlinearity but for discontinuity and asymmetry. More specifically, this adjustment allows us to emphasise two possibilities only hinted at in Silverstone’s definition of mediation: first, that what we might call “the space of media” is structured in important ways, durably and partly beyond the intervention of particular agents; and second that, because of that structuring, certain interactions, or “dialectics” - between particular sites or agents - are closed off, isolating some pockets of mediation from the wider flow. This point will be important later. The media sphere is extraordinarily concentrated in crucial respects; indeed the very term “the media” is the result of a long historical construction that legitimates particular concentrations of symbolic resources in institutional centres (Couldry, 2000 and 2003a). With this qualification to Silverstone’s notion of dialectic, however, “mediation² remains an important term for grasping how media shape the social world which, as we shall see, usefully supplements the theory of mediatization, in contributing to our understanding of “digital storytelling”.

It is time now to consider how these different approaches to understanding the broader social consequences of media – mediation and mediatization – might contribute distinctively to grasping the potentials, and limits, of new media and specifically digital storytelling.

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Digital Storytelling as Mediatization

Any account of digital storytelling's long term consequences in terms of mediatization must start from the claim that there are certain consistent patterns and logics within narrative in a digital form. In principle this is difficult, since the main feature of a converged media environment is that narrative in any original format (from spoken story to elaborate hypertextual commentary to photographic essay) can be widely circulated through a single "digital" site. But let me simplify the argument by limiting "digital storytelling" to those online personal narrative formats that have recently become prevalent: whether multimedia formats such as MySpace and Facebook, textual forms such as blogs, the various story forms prevalent on more specialist digital storytelling sites, or the many sites where images and videos, including material captured on personal mobile devices, can be collected for wider circulation (such as YouTube). Is there a common logic to these formats, a distinctive "media logic", that is consistently channeling narrative in one particular direction?

Some important features of online narrative forms immediately spring to mind, important that is by contrast with oral storytelling. These features stem in various ways from the oversaturation of the online information environment: first, a pressure to mix text with other materials (sound, video, still image) and more generally to make a visual presentation out of narrative, over and above its textual content; second, a pressure to limit the length of narrative, whether to take account of the limits of people's attention when reading text online, or to limit the file size of videos or sound tracks; third, a

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pressure towards standardization because of the sheer volume of material online and people's limited tolerance for formats, layouts or sequences whose intent they have difficulty interpreting; fourth, a pressure to take account of the possibility that any narrative when posted online may have unintended and undesired audiences. We are, I suggest, at too early a stage in the development of digital storytelling to be sure which of these pressures will prove most salient and stable, or whether other unexpected pressures will overtake them in importance. But that there will be some patterns is unquestionable; whatever patterns become standard will be consequential in so far as having an online narrative presence itself becomes expected of well-functioning citizens. That people are already making such an assumption emerges from recent press reports that employers are searching blogs and social networking sites for personal information that might be relevant to judging job applicants' suitability.

However this last case also brings out the complexity of the transformations under way. If digital storytellers assume their public narratives will be an archive that can be used against them in years to come, they may adjust what stories they tell online. Indeed the evidence of David Brake's recent study of MySpace users [in this book] is that young people are already making similar adjustments of content, not merely style, for more immediate reasons, to avoid giving compromising information to people at school or in their local area who may be hostile or dangerous to them. This is an important finding, since it brings out precisely the complexity of causal influences at work here. It is not simply that young people already have in fixed form identifiable stories of themselves they want to tell, and that the digital format imposes certain constraints on those

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particular stories, producing an adjustment we can register as an effect of “mediatization”. Instead young people are holding back personal material that might in theory have gone into their MySpace or Facebook site. This problematizes any idea that social networking sites represent simply the mediatization (and publicization) of formerly private self-narratives although journalists have drawn precisely this conclusion. On the contrary we might argue young people, by holding back personal narratives from such sites, are protecting an older private/public boundary rather than tolerating a shift in that boundary because of the significant social pressures to have an online presence.

We start to see here how the transformations under way around digital storytelling cannot be contained within a single logic of mediatization, since involved also are logics of use and social expectation that are evolving alongside digital narrative forms: we are closer here to the dialectic which Silverstone saw as at the heart of the mediation concept.

Digital Storytelling as Mediation

If, as I earlier suggested, we can understand mediation as the resultant of flows of production, circulation, interpretation and recirculation, then there would seem to be three main angles from which we might approach “digital storytelling” as mediation:

1. by studying how digital storytelling’s contexts and processes of production are becoming associated with certain practices and styles of interpretation (stabilities in the *immediate and direct context* of storytelling);

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2. by studying how the outputs of digital storytelling practices are themselves circulated and recirculated between various sites, and exchanged between various practitioners, audience members and institutions (stabilities in the *wider flows* of digital stories and the resulting personal and institutional linkages, flows which the possibility of digital storytelling while on the move, using mobile phones and other mobile digital devices, complicate considerably);
3. by studying the *long-term consequences* of digital storytelling as a practice for particular types of people in particular types of location, and its consequences for wider social and cultural formations, even for democracy itself.

Needless to say, these are areas where extended empirical work must be done. The third perspective in particular (“long-term consequences”) involves considering the wider interactions, if any, between particular storytelling practices and general media culture. When a practice such as digital storytelling challenges media’s normal concentration of symbolic resources so markedly, analysing the consequences for wider society and culture is of course difficult, but it cannot be ignored in case we miss the possibility that digital storytelling really does contribute to a wider democratization, a reshaping of the hierarchies of voice and agency. The resulting issues, while they encompass issues of media form (and therefore mediatization), go much wider and can therefore only be captured, I will argue, by the dialectical term “mediation”.

We can learn a lot here from the work of the American sociologist Robert Wuthnow on the social and ideological consequences of the book (Wuthnow, 1989). Wuthnow in

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Communities of Discourse analyses the factors that contributed to major ideological shifts such as the Reformation and the birth of modern democratic politics. He sees the medium of the book and the new information networks it made possible as essential to these long-term changes. But what makes Wuthnow's account so interesting is that his argument does not stop there – if it did, it would be an old-style technological determinism.

Wuthnow argues that we cannot understand the impact of the book, over the longer-term, unless we look at a number of contingent factors, some environmental, some institutional and some at the level of what he calls “action sequences” (1989, 7). Factors Wuthnow identifies include, first, the development of settings for communication other than the book (such as the church, the school, the political party), second, the many interlocking social and political processes that created new contexts for cultural production more generally, and, third, the ways in which new circuits for the distribution of ideas, such as the journal, emerged over time and then became gradually institutionalised in certain ways.

Wuthnow's rich historical account clearly invites us to think not only about the detailed processes necessary for the book to be stabilized in cultural life in a certain way, but also about the unevennesses (to use Silverstone's term again) of any such process. We might add another factor, implicit in Wuthnow's account: the emerging processes of hierarchisation that developed through the above changes. Think of the literary public sphere for example, and the social exclusions on which it was famously based, the 18th century coffee-house versus the market-square (Calhoun, 1992; Stallybrass and White, 1986). Wuthnow asks us to think systematically about the types of space in which

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particular symbolic practices (in his case, the regular practices of reading and discussing printed materials in pamphlet, newspaper or book form; in ours, the practice of exchanging digital stories) become under particular historical circumstances embedded more widely in individual routines and the organisation of everyday life.

Wuthnow's emphasis on institutional spaces (such as the church or school) far beyond the immediate moments of media production, circulation or reception, is inspiring for research on digital storytelling; first, for drawing our research into the wider territory of education and government; and second, for its emphasis on space, more precisely on the complex historical conditions under which new social spaces emerge that ground new routines. We could approach the same question from a different disciplinary angle by drawing on the geographer Henri Lefebvre's concept of "social space". As Lefebvre puts it provocatively:

The social relations of production have a social existence to the extent to which they have a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing that space itself. (Lefebvre, 1990, p. 129)

If Lefebvre is right and all social and cultural change involves transformations of "social space" in this sense (think of the normalization of television as a domestic medium through its embedding in the space of the home), then any successful embedding of digital storytelling in the everyday life of mediated democracies will involve a similar spatial transformation, with resulting spatial asymmetries too.

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Translating Wuthnow's argument to the early 21st century context of digital storytelling, we can ask a series of questions about 'mediation' beyond those asked above:

4. what patterns, if any, are emerging in the institutional settings in which digital storytelling is now taking place? Who is included in them and who isn't?
5. What types of resources and agents are typically drawn upon in creating and then sustaining effective sites of digital storytelling, and how in detail are effective contexts for the production and reception of digital stories created? (Equally what factors typically undermine those sites and contexts?)
6. Are any new circuits for the distribution of digital stories and social knowledge developing through and in relation to digital storytelling sites? What wider profile and status do those circuits have?
7. What broader links, if any, are being made between the field of digital storytelling and other fields of practice – education, civic activism, mainstream media production, popular culture generally, and finally politics?

We can focus these questions a little more sharply. Wuthnow explains his larger argument as one about how ideas work: they do not work by floating freely, but instead they need to “become embedded in concrete communities of discourse” (1987, p. 552). There is a striking intersection here with Etienne Wenger's (1998) concept of “communities of practice”. Wenger uses the term “community”, he says, as “a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth

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pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence” (1998, p. 5, added emphasis). For Wenger, “communities of practice are the prime context in which we can work out common sense through mutual engagement” (1998, p. 47): put another way, Wenger is concerned with the social production of value and authority, and these must be crucial to the broader processes of ‘mediation’ in which digital storytelling will come, if it does, to matter.

It is these points – the building of community through the construction of value and the giving of recognition (compare Honneth, 2007) – on which I want to focus in the next section, since they are crucial to digital storytelling’s claims to reenergize community and possibly even democracy. This discussion will take us further into the territory of mediation and away from the territory, independently important though it is, of mediatization.

Digital Storytelling and the Conditions of Democracy

Robert Dahl in his theory of polyarchy - a cautious account of the preconditions of a democracy that does not yet exist - prescribes that “citizens should possess the political resources they would require to participate in political life pretty much as equals” (Dahl, 1989, p. 322). Among the resources which Dahl thinks it most important to distribute more fairly for this purpose are not only economic resources but also “knowledge, information and cognitive skills” (1989, p. 324). It is in relation to the latter that digital

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storytelling is potentially relevant, but to see this, we need to supplement Dahl's account with Nancy Fraser's more recent demonstration of the interconnection between the distribution of resources and the distribution of recognition as dimensions of justice (Fraser, 2000, p.116). Correcting injustices of recognition means counteracting "an institutionalized pattern of cultural value that [constitutes] some social actors as less than full members of society and prevents them from participating as peers" (2000, p. 113), but crucially as Fraser argues this involves a redistribution of resources too.

We can complete the link to digital storytelling by noting that the extreme concentration of symbolic resources in media institutions constitutes an important dimension of social power precisely because it institutes an inequality of social recognition in Fraser's sense: as a result, we can talk not only of the hidden injuries of class (Sennett and Cobb, 1972) but also of the "hidden injuries of media power" (Couldry, 2001). Digital storytelling in principle represents a correction of those latter hidden injuries since it provides the means to distribute more widely the capacity to tell important stories about oneself – to represent oneself as a social, and therefore potentially political, agent – in a way that is registered in the public domain. Digital storytelling is perhaps particularly important as a practice because it operates outside the boundaries of mainstream media institutions although it can also work on the margins of such institutions; for the latter, see Nancy Thumim's work on how power asymmetries are worked out in digital storytelling sponsored by media institutions such as the BBC (Thumim, 2006). In that sense digital storytelling contributes to a democratisation of media resources and widening the conditions of democracy itself. Digital storytelling vastly extends the number of people who at least in

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principle can be registered as contributing to the public sphere, enabling, again in principle, quite a radical revision of both of Habermas' accounts (the earlier pessimistic and the later, more optimistic accounts) of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989, 1996).

We need to understand in more detail how, given the previous analysis, the practice of digital storytelling can be understood to work in this broader way. Here the words of the leading exponent of digital storytelling Joe Lambert, founder of the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley (www.storycenter.org) provide some inspiration.

Lambert's book *Digital Storytelling* (now in its second edition: Lambert, 2006) discusses the background to the practice of digital storytelling in a way that relates interestingly to the history of mass media: needed, he argues, is not just an expansion of digital literacy but a greater faculty for listening to others' stories (2006, pp. 16, 95) that contrasts explicitly with the normal context for consumers of broadcast media. The aim of digital storytelling is not to produce media for broadcast, but to produce "conversational media": 'much of what we help people create would not easily stand alone as broadcast media, but, in the context of conversation, it can be extraordinarily powerful' (2006, p. 17). Lambert has a sharp sense of the hidden injuries of media power; "we can live better as celebrated contributors, we can easily die from our perceived lack of significance to others, to our community, to our society" (2006, p. 3). Digital storytelling is offered as a technique for increasing understanding across generations, ethnicities and other divides, and as a tool in activist organizing, education, professional reflection and corporate communication (2006, pp. 111, 112, 114, 165).

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Digital storytelling is a tool with such diverse uses that it almost certainly cannot be understood as having any one type of consequence or even form. I want to concentrate however on the claims made by Lambert for digital storytelling's links to democracy, particularly the practice of "storycatching" which through meetings of "storycircles" in particular communities catch stories which otherwise would not be exchanged. The aim is, in part, political: "to engage us in listening to each other's stories with respect and then perhaps we can sort out new solutions . . . by reframing our diverse connections to the big story" (2006, pp. xx-xxi); "as we envision it, storycatching will become central to planning and decision making, the foundation upon which the best choices can be made" (2006, p. xxi). It would be a mistake to pass by this (for some, utopian) vision since it addresses the disarticulation between individual narratives and social or political narratives that Alain Touraine has expressed in almost apocalyptic form:

we are witnessing the end of the close correspondence between all the registers of collective life – the economic, the social, the political and the cultural – that were once unified within the framework of the nation. (Touraine, 2001, p. 103)

Others (Bennett, 1999; Turner, 2001) have expressed similar concerns in less dramatic terms. Storycircles, seen from a sociological point of view, are a practical setting, easily replicable, for mutual exchange of stories that tests out the degree to which we find each other's lives incommensurable with our own and that, since each of us is differently

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inserted in the various “registers of collective life”, the degree to which the multi-level contradictions within our own lives are resolvable.

In so far as the digitalization of storytelling is offered as a means by which to address a fundamental problem in contemporary democratic societies, how are we to understand Lambert’s claim and the sociological conditions through which it might be realizable? More specifically, which concept – “mediatization” or “mediation”? – is more useful for grasping the dynamics of such processes? Mediatization is concerned with the systematic consequences of the standardization - of media formats, and reliance on access to media outlets - for particular areas of contemporary life. It is clear that, if digital storytelling becomes standardized in particular ways, this might be significant, but there is no strong reason to believe in advance that such standardization would be more consequential socially than other factors within storytelling: experiences of group formation, exchange and learning, and so on.. More consequential, I suggest, are questions we might address through a concern with “mediation”: questions about how the availability of digital storytelling forms enable enduring habits of exchange, archiving, commentary and reinterpretation, and on expanding spatial and social scales than otherwise possible; questions about the institutional embedding of the processes of producing, distributing and receiving digital stories.

We need, in other words – if we are to take Lambert’s vision of digital storytelling’s potential contribution to democracy seriously, as I believe we should – to follow closely not just the forms and styles of digital storytelling and not just who is involved in what

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locations are involved in digital storytelling, and where, but in what wider contexts and under what conditions digital stories are exchanged, referred to, treated as a resource, and given recognition and authority. The fear – articulated abstractly in my earlier adjustment to Silverstone’s notion of the dialectic of mediation – is that digital storytelling is, and will remain, a largely isolated phenomenon, cut off from broader media and the broader range of everyday life, both private and public/political: remaining, to put it crudely, a phase that individuals and groups ‘go through’, not recognized more widely in the regular distribution of social and cultural authority or respect. The hope – strongly articulated as a vision by Joe Lambert – is that, from out of local practices of making, exchanging and collecting digital stories, wider networks and habits will stabilize, just as they did around the practice of reading, with consequences for the distribution of power in intensely mediated but also increasingly unequal societies.

Let me conclude this chapter by moving beyond conceptual survey to discuss, albeit speculatively, what approaches (practical, imaginative) might be relevant to avoiding this isolation of digital storytelling from its wider social potential?

Conclusion

At this point you might expect me to offer a series of practical proposals for channeling resources into digital storytelling practices and networks. While such resources may well of course be useful, and provide a valuable form of public subsidy at a time when even in

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the UK, one of its historical homes, the concept of “public service broadcasting” is under challenge (Ofcom, 2007), I want to point to a different type of deficit that threatens to undermine the social potential of digital storytelling over the longer term. This is an imaginative deficit, a failure to see the interconnected nature of a contemporary crisis of voice affecting political, economic and cultural domains in neoliberal democracies and which underlies the risk that islands of good digital storytelling practice will remain isolated, disarticulated from each other and from wider social change.

I call that underlying crisis a “crisis of voice” and I can only sketch here (for a longer, but still preliminary account, see Couldry, forthcoming). What are the elements that must be seen as interconnected, if we are to grasp that crisis of voice? First, an uncertainty about the meaning and feasibility of democratic politics. Beck (2000) in social theory, Fraser (2005) in political theory, and Sassen (2006) in social and political science have all questioned to what extent democratic politics must now be conducted in spaces beyond the nation state. Within the nation-state, it is increasingly uncertain whether neoliberal democracies can continue to deliver opportunities for anything approaching democratic participation (electoral participation in countries such as the UK is at dangerously low levels), where the dynamics of policy influence in today’s “market-driven politics” (Leys 2001) lies largely beyond national governments, generating problems with mechanisms of representation (as delegation) which spill over into broader problems of representation (as symbolization).

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A second uncertainty affects economics, where the absolute prioritization of market logics has been challenged by critical economists who question whether neoliberal doctrine sufficiently recognizes people as agents with an individual voice: this takes various forms, whether Amartya Sen's (2002) insistence on an ethical dimension in economics or the "happiness" research of Richard Layard (2006) and Robert Lane (2003). Meanwhile, the marginalization of workers' voices in market logics creates increasing tensions, expressed aphoristically in complaints about "work/life balance" and practically in the silent sanction of redundancy and "flexible" labour markets.

Third, a crisis of voice can also be discerned in mediated public culture. While interactive formats and online spaces have *prima facie* brought audience/user "voice" into the heart of media production, much popular culture resolves itself into two modes where voice is illusory: celebrity culture (a discourse, however multi-directional, about centralized human reference-points, driven by market needs) and "reality" programming, a pedagogic mode which generates and sustains social norms of performance and desire. The role of popular culture in promoting social norms is in itself not new of course; what is new is that such norms are played out, often mockingly, through the bodies and emotions of "ordinary people", who are both objects of instruction and apparent subjects of empowerment.

These three crises within political, economic and cultural domains need to be seen as connected to the same underlying condition of neoliberal democracies, that is, the normative prioritization of market over social values. That is why there is one larger

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crisis, not three unconnected ones. Resistance to these contradictions must start with the reaffirmation of voice (that of individuals and groups) within the management of the social. By recognizing the multiple threats to voice, we are in position to see more clearly the problematic bases of recognition (Honneth, 2007) in contemporary societies and so the difficulty of sustaining any broader notion of democratic culture (Dewey, 1945) in neoliberal regimes.

It is within this wider, indeed multidimensional, deficit of recognition (in Honneth's sense) that the social and technological possibility of digital storytelling emerges as both disruptive and potentially hopeful. Digital storytellers, after all, can be many types of people: media consumers, local media producers, vulnerable people with unmet needs, employees with concerns to express about their working conditions, citizens who feel they are not being heard. These "types" of storyteller may, of course, intersect in one and the same person, since all of us at different times are vulnerable, employed or in need of employment, or citizens; that is Dewey's point about the necessary multidimensionality and multilocality nature of genuine democracy. The idea of digital storytelling – the idea that each person has a voice and a story, and that there could be a place where that story is gathered with other stories for exchange and reflection – that principle is a major challenge to the conditions that I have described symptomatically as a crisis of voice. But this potential of digital storytelling can only become fully visible once we see that the lack of democracy in the workplace, political disenchantment, and the false offers of interactivity in much popular culture are part of the same crisis and challenge.

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For that, we must go beyond analyzing digital storytelling as the linear replaying of a single 'media logic' and see it as part of a more complex nonlinear process of "mediation". But adjusting our conceptual tools is only the start. To see the longer-term potential of digital storytelling in its wider social context, we must imagine a new calibration between social and market forces, political form, and the distribution of narrative resources – a calibration that no doubt will require an extended political vocabulary – just as, in order to achieve the full social potential of the printed book, it was necessary to imagine the institutions of modern representative democracy. The point, of course, is not that by itself digital storytelling could be the catalyst of such major change, but rather that it is only in the context of change on that scale that the potential of digital storytelling as a social form can be fully grasped.

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² As we will see, there is some definitional violence here, since some theories of "mediation" are closer to "mediatization" in their emphasis on a linear logic of transformation.

³ As noted by Schulz in his discussion of mediatization (Schulz, 2004, p. 92).

⁴ I want to acknowledge the influence in the following paragraphs of my conversations between 2001 and 2006 with the late Roger Silverstone whose breadth of insight will, for a long time, be greatly missed.