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Facebook Narratives

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I accept the argument that storytelling is a basic human impulse and suggest that Facebook provides a new medium through which individuals can articulate and share their stories and experiences. I describe how the 'narrative turn' in social studies research situates narratives as a process of cultural reproduction and drawing on this perspective, argue that the affordances of Facebook shape stories in ways that reinforce particular cultural meanings.

DEFINITIONS AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The Russian formalist Vladimir Propp has been widely credited with the brokering of new ideas that influenced contemporary narrative research. First published in 1928, Propp's analysis of fairytales proposed a finite set of narrative plots lying at the root of all stories. Propp's attempt sought to demonstrate that irrespective of the number of possible stories individuals could ever invent, plots themselves would always be limited in number. Propp's theory thus sought to describe a basic grammatical structure, a core set of rules, which could generate an infinite number of stories. Interest in narrative extended to the social sciences and later the sociolinguists Labov and Waletzky (1967) explored the structures of oral narratives. Again, they argued that stories had a core grammar, a syntax that could be identified, and that by first studying simple narratives, more complex stories could be similarly theorised. The work of such scholars, along with that of Bakhtin (1928/1986), fused connections between literature, spoken language and sociological studies. Thus, a third way of

looking at narrative evolved, which considered the purpose of narratives in our everyday life and how we use stories to tell the world back to ourselves. The transition of narrative study from literature to social sciences, which has been described by some as 'the narrative turn', is one which allows us to think about social life as a set of actions and events that we can report upon through particular narrative forms. The study of narrative, passed on through language and literature has an even longer history, going back to the bible, the Koran and other religious texts, preceding even Propp's work, who followed the formalists and Russian structuralists (see Czarniawska 2004). In this chapter though, we consider the history of narrative research from the mid 20th century, before exploring how it has been used and could be used, to explore one of the most recent text types, from the social network site of Facebook.

CRITICAL ISSUES AND TOPICS

In this section I discuss how narrative has been theorised as part of the social science narrative turn. I discuss important examples of theories from a range of disciplines in three broad but over-lapping sections, acknowledging firstly the idea of narrative as a human impulse; secondly as an act of identity and thirdly as an indicator of culture, or Discourse.

Narrative as a primary act of mind

In her study of the novel, English Literature scholar, Hardy (1975: 4) reflected the zeitgeist influence of social psychology on her discipline, describing narrative as a 'primary act of mind' going on to argue that it is

> crucial in life and … our ordinary and extraordinary day depends on the stories we hear. One piece of news, a change of intention, even a revision of memory, a secret, a disclosure, a piece of gossip may change our lives.
>
> (Hardy 1975:16)

Here Hardy talks about stories not just as elaborated literary texts, but as scraps, as 'gossip', suggesting the idea of narrative fragments. This drive to story our lives is seen by education researchers Sikes and Gale as definitive:

> Human beings are storying creatures. We make sense of the world and the things that happen to us by constructing narratives to explain and interpret events both to ourselves and to other people.
>
> (Sikes and Gale 2006 online)

Ethnographic linguist, Hymes (1996: 118), similarly highlights how the quotidian underpins the stories we tell, that the everyday is structured by our stories and that we modify the way we see our lives in every telling and re-telling; it is an iterative process. This telling and re-telling, is something which the work of Bakhtin also emphasizes. He talks about how we voice, re-voice and even ventriloquise the words of others, weaving the meanings of those we have heard and read, within our own utterances. In this way we are seen to take on the voices of our culture; the language we speak is infused with cultural meanings that bring with them the stories of each other and of our own biographies (Bakhtin 1981). Bakhtin's study of the novel, like Hardy after him, connects the written language of novels with the culture from which they have arisen.

Clearly then, narrative is not just of literary interest, it has become established as an important object of trans-disciplinary study – as a source of data, as lens through which to regard data, and as a vehicle for the presentation of data (e.g. see Bold 2012).

Narrative and identity

Narrative has also been a crucial foundation for much psychological theory; the elicitation of biography and dreams in spoken form are the staple of Freudian therapy, for example. The psychologist Bruner (1990) discusses how in telling stories of our lives, we do not simply re-tell, uncover or explain, but that the self-narrative process is essentially creative. He is not referring to the act of creation as a purposeful misrepresentation of ourselves or events in our lives – though misrepresentations may of course become part of our repertoire and reflect something of our reality – but rather, the idea of creation refers to our post-modern struggle to interpret 'what is true or real'. For Bruner, our lives are constituted by the narratives we create or to which we subscribe, so that through our stories we construct not just our reality, but who we are. Bruner describes how stories are less about 'uncovering' past events, and more about a process of construction. He explains, 'We seem to have no other way of describing "lived time" save in the form of narrative' (2004: 692). Further, evoking the work of Bakhtin (1981), Bruner describes biographical narration as being more than about the individual, it is a social practice, a collaborative process, where each story is 'enmeshed in a net of others' (Bruner 1990: 113). The cultural context of our stories is thus constituted by the voices of others and by the wider cultural Discourses[i] of the context; in this way the autobiographical stories we create are co-constructed by those around us. Likewise, Bakhtin's work reminds us that all our words come from others; and that even, ' The ideological becoming of a human being … is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others' (Bakhtin 1981: 341). Across the social science disciplines then, we see narrative theory becoming embedded into the way social science researchers and theorists make sense of their data.

Giddens emphasises both the individual and social importance of the process of storytelling, describing it as an essential part of establishing who we are, creating ourselves in particular ways for ourselves and others,

> A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor - important though this is - in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self.
>
> (Giddens 1991: 54).

Here we see Giddens discuss narrative as 'the reflexive project of the self' (32), and like Bruner, he sees individuals' narratives as essentially embedded within wider societal Discourses of, for example, romantic love (Giddens 1992). He sees how individuals provide accounts for themselves that 'make sense' alongside taken for granted culturally accepted broader narratives. Giddens' work suggests narrative research provides insights into how people see the world and their place within it; by making sense of people's stories, we gain insights into societal and cultural values and norms. Langellier and Peterson (2004) describe how the act of telling a story is an act of performance, that articulating stories for others, can for example, help us demonstrate how we position ourselves and others in the world. They discuss the process where recounting family stories within families help us talk particular roles and histories into place, establishing and re-establishing each person in their family 'role'. In this way we see how stories can be used to position ourselves in particular ways, as well as to position others.

Narrative and culture

Despite our predilection towards narrative, storying our lives is not necessarily easy; Bruner describes it as a 'cognitive achievement' and suggests, 'Recounting one's life is an 'interpretive feat' (Bruner 2004: 692). This feat is not just about being verbally dexterous or articulate; this can be challenging of course and can make autobiography semantically problematic/unstable, but because we can only use culturally produced resources to tell our stories, we must use words and other modes which are already saturated with meanings from our culture. We may struggle to articulate lived experiences in new ways, to say something new; or we may too easily use the words of others which can feel wrong, clichéd, clumsy and 'ill-fitting'.

As Bakhtin (1981: 293) explains, 'The word in language is always someone else's'. To tell a story that makes sense to others (and ourselves), it must be contextually appropriate; we craft the narrative from cultural resources so as to fit what others understand. Bruner describes how narratives reflect what is a 'possible' life within a culture, explaining like this: 'Indeed, one important way of characterizing a culture is by the narrative models it makes available for describing the course of a life' (2004: 694). Thus only the stories that are supported by any given contextual discursive repertoire can be articulated (Bruner 2004). It is through cultural materials that we voice our stories and if these are not shared, then the story cannot be made manifest. As an illustration, Bruner provides the example of a series of stories from one family, who even when they might disagree with each other's evaluation of events in the stories, all draw upon similar ideological discursive structures to make their evaluations. Thus we see how they share the same basic parameters, the same Discourses, even where their interpretation of the same events may vary. The family shares an underlying view of the world, of what is possible and how events can be

evaluated and by analyzing the narratives, one can discern the prism through which the family views the world. This is not to say that culture is static; Street and Thompson (1993) and later Maybin (2006) use 'culture as verb', highlighting the way culture comes into being, is negotiated, ideologically sensitive and malleable. Over time, through the negotiation of meanings within stories, it is possible for cultural groups to shift cultural understandings and definitions.

TERMINOLOGY: NARRATIVES/STORIES

I have used the terms narrative and story almost interchangeably and it is useful to take a moment to discuss these terms. Cobley (2001: 6 - 7) provides a 'simple' explanation of the distinction between narrative and story, where story consists of the events to be depicted, while narrative is the 'showing or telling' of the story, how the story is told and what details are included. This definition assumes that stories pre-exist their narration; that narrative is the vehicle through which existing stories are conveyed, and that we can separate one from the other. However if we see stories as emerging through narrative, even where stories originate from lived or observed experience, or are drawn from pre-existing narratives (such as in the re-telling of a story), then the story is an integral part of the narrative. Every story is created anew through each re-telling, nuanced within every new context or given expression in a new mode or form.

Ochs and Capps (2001: 18) provide a wide definition, subsuming stories within narrative and arguing that narrative is a 'cognitively and discursively complex genre that routinely contains some or all of the following discourse components:

description, chronology, evaluation and explanation'. Page (2012: 9 - 10) refers to 'narrativity' and provides a summary of three ways of recognising it:

> it is generated by the recognition of reported events within a temporal framework. Second, the inferred connections between temporally ordered events are attributed with distinctive degrees of narrativity where causal events are attributed with distinctive degrees of narrativity where causal connections are understood as more narrative-like than temporality. Finally, narrativity is associated with sequences that signal a teleological focus, an overarching framework of complication and resolution, or a clearly defined point of closure attributed with interpretive significance.

In her study of stories in social media, Page (2012: 12) suggests that such stories often deviate from 'narrative dimensions associated with canonical forms of personal narrative', saying they are more 'emergent, collaborative and context-rich'. These features of Facebook narratives mean that analysis necessarily takes into account the ways in which individuals participate in the creation of stories collaboratively and over time.

STORY BASICS: THE FACEBOOK TEMPLATE

In this section I consider the fabric and structure of Facebook and the way in which the affordances of the space structure text and thus affect meaning-making. I have not included a comprehensive description of Facebook or of social network sites as these can be found elsewhere (boyd and Ellison, 2008; Davies 2012) but here I focus on those elements that impact on the fabric and structure of narrative within Facebook.

Kress (2010) refers to the cultural resources that can be used for meaning making and his work on multimodality provides a thorough and sophisticated discussion of how meanings are culturally situated within texts – both in words and multiple modes – multimodally. Facebook allows users to update multimodally, using written words,

acronyms, emoticons, images, web links and a number of textually expressed para-linguistic features unique to the space such as 'liking' and 'poking'. Thus any analysis of Facebook stories needs to take into account a repertoire of cultural meaning making resources, including language. Despite the range of modes that co-exist within, or that even 'produce' (Leander and Sheehy 2004) the space of Facebook, the affordances of the site also constrain the way stories can be communicated.

Facebook updates appear within an online template; self-evidently, this template structures updates or 'statuses' in a particular way so that self-representation is to a great extent controlled by Facebook – including the fact that online interactants are (sometimes controversially) all referred to as 'Friends'. Outside Facebook this term may be used somewhat differently, referring to established relationships of a particular nature; whilst the meaning in Facebook may overlap with the way the term is used beyond its perimeters, it does simply refer to the people who have been 'accepted' by a user and thus allowed to appear on a list of friends and to share certain bits of information in Facebook. Notwithstanding that optionally, other familial relationships can be signaled, (e.g. partnerships, marriages, maternity and paternity), the site frames the way relationships are perceived by others in a somewhat deceptively homogeneous way.

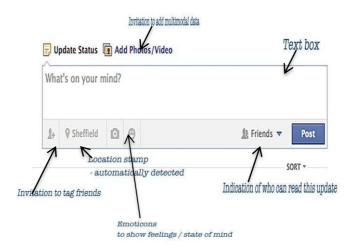Online entries, or updates, are all date and time stamped at the point of upload. As in blogs, they appear in chronological order, with the most recent item appearing at the top of the screen. Posts immediately show how long ago they appeared e.g. 'a few seconds ago'; 'two minutes ago'. After a while this detail changes to give specific times and dates. Device brand names used to upload text can be automatically

detected and stated by Facebook – e.g 'mobile' or iPhone™ / Android ™

Blackberry™ etc, for example one update from one of my Friends was annotated as:–

'a few minutes ago in Sheffield via Blackberry™'. Such a template emphasizes the

importance of time and place within the narrative and suggests a diary, a logging of

events, maybe for posterity. It also reflects the importance of branding for the

sustainability of Facebook; this branding also locates the story materially in a world

where smartphones are selected with care and whose marketing is tied up with

identity presentation. As one 17 year old told me, ' you have your phone out nearly

all the time. It has to look good and you can't be ashamed of it. You have to upgrade

when you can and people can tell what <brand> you've got by your updates'. In this

way we see how the trademarks form part of the stories, part of the grander narrative

of individuals' lives as consumers of products, where my participant in this case cared

about her mobile 'matching <my >outfit' as well as 'not looking lame when it says

what you've got on Facebook'. This awareness of brand, but also her meta-awareness

of the function of branding in her life seemed all to contribute to the notion that there

was some kind of management going on in terms of presentation of self within

Facebook as well as beyond. These identity markers of branding and style suggest

that identity work in Facebook narratives is performed not just in the textual elements

but in the material reality of the person creating the texts as she holds her smart

device. The work of Ochs and Capps who refer to the 'performance' of stories

resonates here; it is not just the substance of the stories but the way they are delivered

in terms of mode and medium, maybe the style, contribute to overall meanings.

Facebook users can opt to upload images alongside status updates and choose to name

Friends they are with; these 'tags' hyperlink to Friends' profiles so that readers can

cross-reference to these people's profiles too. A digital signal alerts tagged (named) friends, sending a textual notification, usually with an accompanying sound on a mobile phone. In this way the tags serve to multimodally outline the network of Friends; to immediately involve Friends who have been mentioned and to facilitate, even nudge, their participation in the latest conversation/story/event. Tags help define social perimeters/parameters in this way; they delineate as well as make connections and operate as a kind of socio-digital-syntax, joining online texts as well as people. Thus Facebook affordances draw in collaborators and actively encourage co-authorship across time and space – since Friends may respond immediately or later. Friends are of primary structural significance in Facebook; in making stories about oneself and others, the naming of Friends digitally and syntactically binds them to that story. The network of Friendship is the key socio-digital-syntactic structure and so this becomes a prominent aspect of the semantics in Facebook. Here we can begin to see that while Facebook provides a template and emphasizes certain aspects of communication, the communication itself works both within and beyond the virtual network, so that stories are not pinned down to time and space.

 Images are easy to upload even from mobile devices and the software prompts authors to consider uploading images within the text box where they write updates. This fact, alongside the ease in which Smartphones can now take pictures, means that the still image is a prominent textual feature of Facebook. The template thus encourages users to seek opportunities to use images as part of a multimodal message; texts become rich with images as well as words. See Figure One below:

Figure One: Facebook textbox with prompts

Images that are uploaded alongside a status appear in the original author's photo album called 'timeline photos' as well as in tagged friends' albums. Thus, one image can be displayed in multiple ways and appear in a range of online contexts; a single image can be a component in a range of stories. Cultural resources are therefore replicated in multiple stories and take with them meanings that are traceable via hyperlinks. An image may appear within a story of one person's night out, but may also appear as part of a set of images shared with someone else on a story in their timeline too. These stories can be linked to each other or read independently. Particular stories, embedded in multimodal texts, can become particularly rich with a range of accumulated meanings as they are shared across spaces in different ways – but all drawing on similar cultural understandings or Discourses (e.g. see Davies 2013 for ways in which Discourses of gendered behavior are disseminated and reinforced).

Finally, a 'Like' button' (with a 'thumbs up' icon) is adjacent to the comment button, so those who perhaps have little time to upload text can simply affirm, or give a positive acknowledgement about the status update. In sum, through its prompts, Facebook gives Friends, images, place, time and affirmation from Friends, high value. As Danath and boyd (2004) observe, social network sites are at least partly about 'public displays of connection' and even where stories are not ostensibly about the display of Friends, signaling of Friendship occurs throughout the narrative frame that is the Facebook template.

FACEBOOK STORIES

Page (2012: 69) identifies that the majority of Facebook status updates are self-reporting stories; they fall into Ochs and Capps' (2001) categorization of stories with 'low tellability' being mundane, often lacking obvious relevance, and rhetorical finesse. They tend to fit with what Georgakopoulou (2007) describes as 'small stories' and can include projections for the future, 'breaking news' stories and 'shared stories' which recall or retell stories. As Page (2012) also points out, small stories tend to typify Facebook updates and tend to foster social connections.

A single phrase can constitute more than one short story, such as, this one posted by one of my Facebook Friends: 'Today I washed the cats paws and baked a cake. Who am I???' Whilst this update is just a few words long, it comprises a story with temporally organized events, and implicitly, character delineation; the story is stylistically interesting, concluding with what feels like a disconnected question, but which foregrounds the first person narrator in an interesting way. 'Who am I?' Intertextually, its structure, with its interrogative affix, references a riddle and creates

a poetic sensibility. The freshness of this free-standing update exemplifies the 'creativity' of language that Carter (2004) demonstrates is embedded in everyday 'common talk', yet here, unlike the face to face conversations Carter analysed, in Facebook this story is time-stamped, and in this instance, read in the absence of the author and 'liked' 12 times. The story is quite abstract, absurdist even and plays with the notion of identity, where the writer purposefully constructs herself as intriguing, hard to pin down. It fits with a genre of game playing too and as part of a wider set of updates in this Friend's site, forms part of a wider delineation of her character, her evolving biography for others to read over time if they wish.

A Facebook update can constitute one, or multiple stories, while a single story may also be told (or enacted) collaboratively across a series of updates, perhaps across days or weeks as an individual or several people add to Facebook text through comments, hyperlinks, images, and even through the addition of tags to images. Such updates allow individuals to narrate aspects of their lives for others to read, for themselves to reflect back upon, and for collaborators to amend or contribute to over time (see Davies 2012; 2013; Page 2012). Each person's Facebook Wall or site could be viewed as a series of episodic stories told collaboratively across time, accumulating to a jointly told biography. While the voice of one Facebook Friend may lead a story with each of her updates, the comments of others (and herself) contribute perspectives and evaluations that add to each story. Stories that participants share on Facebook form part of the broader narrative that they make for themselves and others; participants' life narratives comprise the accumulation of many stories some of which may be presented through Facebook, some of which may cut across a

range of sites – perhaps going from Flickr to Facebook and Twitter and into a blog, for example (see Davies, 2008; 2014).

Some Facebook stories evolve where participants simultaneously interact both face-to-face and online at the same time. Such interactions are also made more complex when additional interactants occupy different geographical spaces but join in the conversation. This can be seen as collaborative text making with participants in both distributed and onsite locations, as shown in Figure Two:
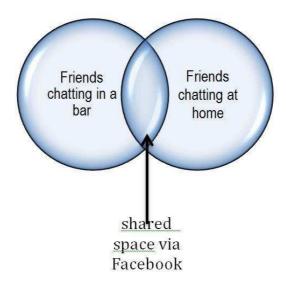

Figure 2: Synchronic Facebook interaction

The diagram illustrates how each set of friends occupies different spaces whilst simultaneously sharing a space. They can filter information from one remote space into the shared space and this can form a story which can be read by interactants and others. Other Friends can contribute from numerous other distributed locations, perhaps sharing information from where they are or adding commentaries and details to the shared interaction. This kind of dynamic means that stories can be situated in a space that are difficult to geographically locate but which can develop meanings from

shared socio-cultural understandings that seem to create new 'online' centres. In this way we see how the notion of 'online' has resonance for many users and how stories can seem to be situated virtually. Nevertheless, because many updates begin with a geographically located story (such as an image shown of friends in a bar), the evolving story develops around that particular location irrespective of the location of other interactants. In this way we see how the story meanings work differently for differently located audiences and interactants.

Page (2012: 146) provides a useful diagram (Figure 3) to illustrate the possibilities. The diagram represents the distinction between endophoric (on site) and exophoric (off site) interaction as well as the dimension of time, which shows the varying points of contact that are possible in online story-making:
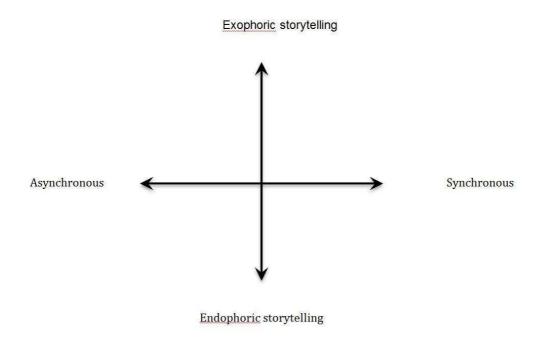

Figure 3: Facebook storytelling across time and space based on Page (2012).

Interaction within a space is endophoric, while interaction with people outside of a specific place is exophoric. In her example Page refers to oral histories, but the diagram can be adapted to suit Facebook. This kind of interaction has layers of participation, with those present able to communicate via two media and modes – using digital technology alongside physical voice and gesture, etc. Others are able to participate just through digital technology. For example young women in a nightclub are able to take a photo of themselves, jointly compose a comment to accompany it and upload it to Facebook, tagged with all their names. They can comment on the image and show each other their comments. Such activities (e.g. see Davies, 2014, forthcoming) see Friends narrating their lives as they live it, and collaborating on how to create a story of current activities. The text-making activity is an important narrative line that is made on a moment-by-moment basis, like an extra semantic layer within the present context. Friends who are not physically present may see the images, the comments and participate in the interaction around the images. Thus while the narrative is shared, authors are distributed across space; the ability of multiple participants to comment and contribute to meanings allows Friends to create stories of their lives and participate in ongoing events in different ways. As Gee (1996) argues, these are Affinity Spaces, where different people are able to access content in different ways and all types of contribution are valued.

CURRENT CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESEARCH

Facebook is a relatively new phenomenon; it was launched initially in the US in 2004 firstly just to Harvard students, but later to anyone aged 13 or over with an email address. Facebook is not accessible globally however, since in some places such as China, it is not accessible. Because it is a relatively neophyte field of research,

analyses of Facebook narratives are also emergent. Nevertheless, responding to the legion numbers of people taking-up opportunities to use online social networks across the globe, the field has attracted research interest from a wide range of disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, linguistics, education and medicine. Within language and literacy research, Facebook has been studied from many angles. For example, Losh (2008) uses a linguistic analysis to explore 5 ways in which a group of users expressed politeness on Facebook; Placensia and Lower (2013) look at complimenting behavior; Maíz-Arévalo (2013) explores interactants' uses of the 'like' button, while Eisenlauer (2014) refers to Facebook as a 'third author' which provides a template for the ways in which people are able to narrate their lives. Page's study of stories in social media specifically addresses this topic and provides a wealth of examples in a range of sites, including Facebook. Her work sets out the field very clearly from a sociolingiuistic perspective and provides useful analytical frameworks. In Higher Education, work has explored how Facebook might be harnessed to support learning (Stirling 2014), while in schools the widespread blocking of the site would render parallel projects superfluous. Thus much of the work about Facebook has explored ways in which people use it to perform particular identities, to make particular types of relationship, but less has been done to explore specific narratives, or ways in which narratives emerge. Such narrative analysis may be embedded in studies looking at specific issues, as opposed to analysing the stories themselves per se, thus my own work explores how people represent themselves through Facebook, how they performed gender in Facebook and how Facebook allows people to manage complex relationships by filtering different kinds of access to profiles in different spaces at different times (Davies 2012; 2013; 2014).

RESEARCH METHODS IMPLICATIONS

Many written narratives, novels, for example, are self-contained, intended to be read without the writer present; authors, film directors, playwrights and so on, expect their texts to be independent, autonomous, self-standing, to be read beyond the context in which they were written and consumed in places unknown to them as the text producers. Thus we have global distribution of books and films which can be broadly interpreted – sometimes with alternate cultural lenses – without the need for continual recourse to ask questions of authors. This is not exclusively the case, especially where the culture of a film requires background knowledge in order to fully understand the plot. In oral presentations of stories it is often the case that knowledge of the teller and his/her life is crucial in order to understand – as Langellier and Peterson (2004) demonstrate. For example in telling family stories, insider knowledge as a family member may be crucial for frames of reference to be understood. Facebook stories often tend to be similarly deeply rooted in contexts and, often because Facebook is used 'on the move', with Friends interacting using mobile devices, can be cryptic. As in speech, explanations tend to be minimal and this is also partly because the audience is usually assumed to know something about the teller – they are, after all, Facebook Friends. Bernstein (1971) referred to elaborated and restricted codes; the former being associated with stories where context is carefully set out and the narrator makes it possible for people who are not part of the story's context can understand. Restricted codes refer to ways of telling, explaining and narrating that are less explanatory and more associated with intimate circles. Whilst restricted codes have long since been assumed to imply lack of linguistic dexterity, being cryptic and witty can conversely require skillful manipulation of communication modes. Indeed it should be noted that Bernstein did not see either code as intrinsically better or worse

than the other, and argued that, 'Clearly one code is not better than another; each possesses its own aesthetic, its own possibilities. Society, however, may place different values on the orders of experience elicited, maintained and progressively strengthened through the different coding systems' (Bernstein 1971: 135). (This tendency for Facebook stories to be strongly contextualised and cryptic, is perhaps the reason why it is often seen as a waste of time, unbeneficial and inane, with pictures of people's breakfasts being cited as common instances of impoverished communication).

Since Facebook updates are so often semantically dependent upon specific socio-cultural settings, Facebook researchers are likely to need to seek clarification with those who have authored and read the texts they want to cite in their work. Thus in my own Facebook research for example, I have recruited all participants face-to-face. Some of them, I asked permission to 'friend' on Facebook, and talked with them about events of which their Facebook updates were a part. With others, I talked to them about their Facebook pages and asked them to show me aspects of their Facebook they were happy to share and explain. Explanations of the Facebook texts were crucial, not just because I needed to be told simple contexts, but also it helped me uncover the extent to which online contexts are somewhat slippery; boundaries are fuzzy and interaction is frequently embedded in a variety of contexts at once and this is not always apparent from simple screen-reading (Davies 2014). Thus I have taken a 'connected approach' (Leander and McKim 2003), looking at the online texts but referring also to explanations offered by those involved in their authorship.

ETHICAL RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

As with any research setting, it is important to become comfortable with a research site and to abide by the usual protocols of behaviour within that setting. The same applies to online research, that it is best to exist as a 'quiet member' or 'lurker', at least in the beginning and not to participate until and unless you have started to understand the rules and etiquette of the space. Even if a researcher has already been a member of Facebook for a while, the ways of behaving amongst her/his friends may be different to those of the research participants. This is especially important in a site like Facebook where, owing to the variable ways in which Facebook Friends may have organised their permission settings, a person's behaviour may be witnessed by many, even if they are unaware of it. Thus, because some Facebookers may not have closed down all their interactions to 'Friends only', a researcher may come across updates that they had not expected. This may not be of a concern to some people, but for others, will feel like an invasion of privacy and it is the responsibility of the researcher to behave responsibly about the data they come across. It is crucial that researchers obtain the trust of participants since photographs of their relatives and friends may often also be visible to researchers without friends and relatives' knowledge. Clearly researchers should follow protocols as set out in their institutions' ethical codes of practice and acquire permission to use anything at all from Friends' pages. All these factors need to be discussed both before, during and after the process of research. Sensitive issues, such as arguments that may occur, revelations about lives and so on, should of course be respectfully treated and additional permissions acquired should such episodes be used as data.

Ethical advantages in using Facebook as a research space includes the reciprocity of access to private spaces. Thus while a researcher can see all the data on their

participants' sites, so too can they see the data on the researcher's site. This can support a more balanced relationship. Participants can easily contact the researcher and vice versa, can ask for clarification and chat 'backstage' in private messages if required.

While Facebook data will often reflect unremarkable everyday aspects of people's lives and mainly portray the quotidian aspects of living, mundane stories of relevance to only a few, the data is also likely to be rich. The data will show how people make relationships through a range of communication modes and will reflect idiosyncratic behaviour patterns and established ways of doing things that bind individuals in groups. They will behave and communicate in ways that mark out their groups in all kinds of creative ways (Carter 2004). The analysis is likely to be both linguistic, and multimodal, but also to have an 'ethnographic texture' (Green and Bloom 1996), where researchers seek to understand the contexts in which texts are produced and read.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THIS WORK

Page (2012, xv) gives two reasons for studying the stories that people tell about themselves in social media formats. She succinctly argues the first as, ' Stories remain one of the most pervasive genres people use to make sense of themselves and the surrounding world'. Secondly, she refers to the 'unprecedented measure' of stories that are daily documented online in the 21st century. These arguments are also the basis upon which I have justified my own work; however further than this, as an educational researcher, I argue that while so many of us and our students are actively involved in creating stories online, as a society and as individuals, we have not yet

fully come to terms with the wider socio-cultural implications of these acts. As mentioned above, Bruner has described how the stories of our lives are created in conjunction with meanings that are 'enmeshed in a net of others' (Bruner 1990: 113). Digital technologies allow us to distribute local meanings amongst friends across wider networks. This allows us to draw in wider communities to local meanings, extending intimacies in ways that we may not always remember or imagine. The additional social and creative possibilities and dimensions that Facebook has opened out allow Friends to enrich their lives and to be creative in new and exciting ways (Davies 2012; 2013; 2014; Page 2012). The ubiquity of Facebook suggests that millions of Friends find its affordances seductive; the allure of creating narratives about our lives has long been established, but this is a new medium with unprecedented power. It can be used synchronically, asynchronically and across spaces. As such our meanings, grown through local understandings, may appear in networks where the semantics may be misconstrued, mis-used or be seen as inappropriate in new contexts. It is exciting and invigorating to be able to distribute stories to many others, yet we do not always understand the range of meanings that will be brought to our texts from elsewhere. This is an area where education is appropriate; currently Facebook used at home for leisure activities tends not to be taken seriously in academic circles. Yet the texts are powerful and need to be acknowledged as worthy of educators' attention – beyond dismissal or the banning of social networking sites from school premises.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There remains a good deal of research to be pursued in the whole area of social network sites through multimodal analysis. The educational implications for literacy

and language research in such spaces are yet to be fully understood. We are not yet clear on the nature of the impact of digital technologies on our communication with ourselves and with others, but it is clear that there are a great many. We need to research more in order to understand the social and educational implications in order that we can inform policy and practice in schools and beyond. There exists work looking at time and space, (im)materiality as well as re-examinations of what we mean by literacy. Until this point social network sites are generally deemed as unsuitable for use in schools and so learning in this sphere happens off-site and often unsupervised. In Higher Education the use of Facebook tends to be directed towards harnessing it as a means for formal learning. Whatever its future in formal education, Facebook or its successor, is likely to remain a space where stories are mediated and as such a site worthy of investigation into meaning–making practices.

RELATED TOPICS

New Literacy Studies; affordances and constraints; m/Literacy; (im)materializing literacies.

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[i] This capitalisation honours the distinction between d/Discouses following Gee (1996), where Discourses refers to wider cultural narratives and where discourses refers to spoken words.