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# Mediatization or mediation? Alternative understandings of the emergent space of digital storytelling

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## Abstract

This article reviews the social potential of digital storytelling, and in particular its potential to contribute to the strengthening of democracy. Through answering this question, it seeks to test out the relative strengths and weaknesses of two competing concepts for grasping the wider consequences of media for the social world: the concept of mediatization and the concept of mediation. It is argued that mediatization (developed, for example, by Stig Hjarvard and Winfried Schulz) is stronger at addressing aspects of media textuality, suggesting that a unitary media-based logic is at work. In spite of its apparent vagueness, mediation (developed in particular by Roger Silverstone) provides more flexibility for thinking about the open-ended and dialectical social transformations which, as with the printed book, may come in time to be articulated with the new form of digital storytelling.

## Key words

articulation • democracy • digital storytelling • mediation • mediatization • media logic

## INTRODUCTION

**People who have never done so before** are telling personal stories through digital forms, storing and exchanging those stories in sites and networks that would not exist without the world wide web and which, because of the remediation capacity of digital media, have multiple possibilities for transmission, retransmission and transformation available to them. This is the process generally called 'digital storytelling', as distinct from earlier modern forms of storytelling through photography, radio and television.<sup>1</sup> This shift of storytelling form, in itself, is interesting but not epoch-making. While digital storytelling has attracted attention recently for many reasons (cultural, economic, brand-led), which are not the concern of this article, one important reason is that digital storytelling represents a novel distribution of a scarce resource – the ability to represent the world around us – using a shared infrastructure. Digital storytelling occupies a distinct stage in the history of mass communication or perhaps in the supersession of mass communication; as such, it has implications for the sustaining or expansion of democracy, but only under complex conditions yet to be identified fully. This article seeks to clarify what those conditions are, or if that is still premature, at least to clarify what questions need to be answered, if the social consequences and democratic potential of digital storytelling are to be understood and not merely hyped.

Understanding digital storytelling as a broad social phenomenon involves moving beyond such storytelling's status merely as texts or processes of production or distribution. Ever since Lazarsfeld and Merton (1969[1948]) identified the first and most important question of 'media effects' as the 'effect' of the existence of media institutions as such, media scholars have developed answers to this classic question within a variety of methodological paradigms. This article will focus on just two: the concept of 'mediation' (Couldry, 2000; Martin-Barbero, 1993; Silverstone, 1999) and the concept of 'mediatization' (Hjarvard, 2004; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Schulz, 2004). Due to its complexity as a narrative and social process, digital storytelling 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', this article will mean the whole range of personal stories now being told in potentially public form using digital media resources.

The terms 'mediation' and 'mediatization' will be defined later in this article. However, in choosing such broad concepts for comparison, it is selecting from the variety of wide-range and mid-range concepts that we might use to characterize digital storytelling. Its purpose in choosing two wide-range concepts (mediation and mediatization) is to clarify a broader choice of emphasis in the huge variety of processes collected under the term

'digital storytelling' between linear or non-linear dynamics. The argument at its broadest is that, because they look for an essentially linear transformation from 'pre-media' (before the intervention of specific media) to 'mediatized' social states, theories of mediatization may be less useful for grasping the dynamics of digital storytelling than other approaches, which are identified with the uses of the term 'mediation' mentioned earlier.<sup>2</sup> The latter approaches emphasize 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, but the precision with which we understand the complex social consequences of media. We should not expect a single 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 the contexts of lived practice and situated struggle that themselves are open to multiple interpretations, or indeed to being ignored. While its attentiveness to the non-linear will be the main reason for choosing 'mediation' as a concept for grasping 'digital storytelling', this article will not be claiming that mediation is always a more useful term than 'mediatization'. They are different concepts with different valences. At most, it will be claiming that, in spite of its apparent vagueness, 'mediation' has a multivalence which usefully supplements accounts of the 'mediatization' of the social.

This is a theoretical article that aims to contribute to wider debates within older media theory and new media theory, not through an abstract model, but through clarifying the quite particular issues which a social process such as digital storytelling raises. The shape of this article is as follows. Taking for granted an account of the rise and current forms of digital storytelling, covered in the introduction to this special section, it will begin by clarifying the differences between the terms 'mediatization' and 'mediation' before discussing in the following sections how each would analyse the social consequences of digital storytelling. Then it will seek to reinforce an 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.

## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

This argument proceeds by contrasting two wide-range concepts for grasping the social transformations actually and potentially linked to digital storytelling. One should 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'.<sup>3</sup> However, this does not affect the conceptual contrast being made in this article.

## Mediatization

Let us start from the term 'mediatization', whose profile in media theory has grown considerably in recent years. Mediatization, as developed by Friedrich Krotz, Winfried Schulz, Stig Hjarvard and others (Hjarvard 2004; Krotz, 2001; Schulz, 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 'mediate') particular processes, objects and fields: a distinctive and consistent transformation that, it is suggested, can be understood properly only 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 that 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:

As a concept mediatization denotes the processes through which core elements of a cultural or social activity (e.g. 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: 3)

However, the theory of mediatization insists that wider consequences follow from this regular dependence of zones of social or cultural activity on media exposure 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: 3; emphasis in original)

In his helpful discussion of 'mediatization' theory, including German-speaking scholars, Winfried Schulz (2004) breaks the term 'mediatization' down into four 'processes' (extension, substitution, amalgamation and

accommodation), but in so doing, confirms indirectly the linear nature of the logic that underlies theories of mediatization. For example, how else can we understand the notion of 'substitution' (Schulz, 2004), which implies that one state of affairs has become another because of the intervention of a new element (media)?

As will be explained later, the reservations expressed in this article 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 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 (1993) field theory, if they are to make detailed sense; if so, it will not be possible to analyse their causal workings under one single 'logic' of 'mediatization', since Bourdieu's account of social space is always multipolar. (This article will come later to some other limitations of the term 'mediatization'.)

However, one 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 representation. One example might be in the area of state or religious ritual: when we see weddings or other ceremonies taking on features that make them ready for remediation (via a 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. It has been argued that in the most extreme case, media 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 (2006), that under Britain's New Labour government, Cabinet meetings have been changed profoundly 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.

However, 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 the influence of media in the political domain?

Or are they linked to political forces, to shifts in the power that national governments have in relation to external markets and other factors (see 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 (2006) recent work 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 supersedes 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, in more complex cases it may obscure the variety of media-related pressures at work in society: for example, practical necessities that 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 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 reshaping 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. In other words, media 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 (see Couldry, 2003b), but suggesting that the complex dynamics of the interrelations between media and other fields are not best captured by 'mediatization', in so far as it suggests a single logic of transformation (of course, there is no problem if we use 'mediatization' merely as a catch-all term to cover any and all changes in social and cultural life consequent upon media institutions operations'. However, this line of argument would take this article some way from the specific issues raised by digital storytelling).

The other way of arguing for the limits of the term 'mediatization' is to explore the virtues of the complementary approach to media's social consequences which, following other writers, is gathered here under the term 'mediation'. Do media (and specifically digital storytelling, to which we will

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’?

## Mediation

In introducing the term ‘mediation’, first a little needs to be said about the term ‘media’. The term ‘media’, in English at least, is so taken-for-granted that there seems to be nothing more to say about it. However, it is a basic point of media research that the term ‘media’, and notoriously the phrase ‘the media’, result from a reification. Indeed, 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’.<sup>4</sup> As a term, ‘mediation’ has a long history and multiple uses: for a very long time it has 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). However, the concern here is 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 that media make by being there in our social world. This addresses Lazarsfeld and Merton’s (1969[1948]) first question of ‘media effects’, but it only gestures in the right direction without helping us to differentiate any of mediation’s components; indeed, it gets us no further definitionally than the catch-all use of the term ‘mediatization’ rejected a moment ago. A more useful approach is via John Thompson’s (1995) term ‘mediation’: as it happens, he avoids the term ‘mediation’ because of its broader usage in sociology. Thompson notes that:

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 ‘*mediatization of culture*’, had a clear institutional basis: namely, the development of media organizations, which first appeared in the second half of the fifteenth century and have expanded their activities ever since. (1995: 46; emphasis added)

This is helpful because it turns the general question of media institutions' consequences into a series of specific questions about the role of media 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 authors 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 multidirectionality of how media may be transforming society. This is where this article turns to Roger Silverstone's definition of 'mediation', the approach for which it wants to reserve its main use of that term:

Mediation, in the sense in which I am using the term, describes the *fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process* in which institutionalized media of communication (the press, broadcast radio and television, and increasingly the world wide web), are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life. (Silverstone, 2002: 762; emphasis added)

Silverstone explains the nature of this dialectic in a later essay, when he comments that mediation requires us to understand how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them, as well as the relationships that individuals and institutions have to that environment and to each other (Silverstone, 2005; see also Madianou, 2005). This helpfully brings out how any process of mediation (or perhaps 'mediatization') 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. In other words, 'mediation' is a non-linear 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 the non-linearity of mediation. 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 is suggested that it may be more productive to see mediation as capturing a variety of dynamics within media flows. By 'media flows I mean flows of production, circulation, interpretation or reception, and recirculation, as interpretations flow back into production or outwards into general social and cultural life. We need not assume any 'dialectic' between particular types of

flow, still less need we assume any stable circuit of causality; we must allow not only for non-linearity but for discontinuity and asymmetry. More specifically, this adjustment allows us to emphasize 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, 2003a). However, with this qualification to Silverstone's notion of dialectic, 'mediation' remains an important term for grasping how media shape the social world which, as we shall see, usefully supplements the theory of mediatization.

Martin-Barbero's (1993) concept of 'mediation' broadens this still further by considering, over the longer-term, how the embedding of media technologies has consequences within the broad development of national cultures (Scannell and Cardiff's (1991) classic research on the social history of the BBC addresses similar territory, but without emphasizing the term 'mediation'). This historical dimension will be drawn upon later, but what will not be considered further here is Martin-Barbero's interest in how particular narrative contents – particular addresses to the nation – have cultural consequences: it would be beyond the scope of this article.

The next section will 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.

## DIGITAL STORYTELLING AS MEDIATIZATION

Any account of the long-term consequences of digital storytelling 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 circulated widely through a single 'digital' site. This argument can be simplified 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 weblogs (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 channelling narrative consistently in one particular direction?

Some important features of online narrative forms immediately spring to mind, which are important by contrast with oral storytelling. These features stem in various ways from the oversaturation of the online information environment:

- 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;
- 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 soundtracks;
- a 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; and
- a pressure to take account of the possibility that any narrative when posted online may have unintended and undesired audiences.

It is suggested that we are 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. However, that there will be some patterns is unquestionable; whatever patterns become standard will be consequential insofar 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.

This last case also brings out the complexity of the transformations underway. If digital storytellers assume that their public narratives will be an archive that can be used against them in years to come, they may adjust the stories they tell online. Indeed, the evidence of David Brake's (2007) recent work on MySpace users is that young people are already making similar adjustments to content: not merely style but 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 that they want to tell, and that the digital format imposes certain constraints on those particular stories, producing an adjustment we can register as an effect of 'mediatization'. Instead, they are

holding back personal material that in theory might 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 (*Financial Times*, 2007) have drawn precisely this conclusion. On the contrary, we might argue that by holding back personal narratives from such sites, young people are protecting an older private/public boundary rather than tolerating a shift in that boundary because of significant social pressure to have an online presence.

We start to see here how the transformations underway 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 suggested earlier, 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, by studying:

- 1 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);
- 2 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); and
- 3 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, and as explained previously, this article will remain at the theoretical level. 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 difficult, but it cannot be ignored because of the possibility that digital storytelling is part of a

wider democratization, a reshaping of the hierarchies of voice and agency that characterize mediated democracies. While the resulting issues encompass issues of media form (and therefore mediatization), they go much wider and therefore can only be captured, it will be argued, by the dialectical term 'mediation'.

We can learn a lot here from the work of the American sociologist Robert Wuthnow (1989) on the social and ideological consequences of the book. In *Communities of Discourse*, Wuthnow 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 that it made possible as essential to these long-term changes. However, what makes Wuthnow's account so interesting is that his argument does not stop there – if it did, it would be 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). The factors that Wuthnow isolates include: first, the development of settings for communication other than the book (such as the church, school, 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 institutionalized 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 hierarchization which developed through the above changes. For example, think of the literary public sphere 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 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) under particular historical circumstances become embedded more widely in individual routines and the organization 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. (1990: 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 also will involve a similar spatial transformation, with resulting spatial asymmetries.

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

- 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 is not?
- What types of resources and agents are drawn upon typically in creating and 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?)
- 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?
- 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 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, rather, they need to 'become embedded in concrete communities of discourse' (1989: 552). There is a striking intersection here with Etienne Wenger's (1998) concept of 'communities of practice'. Wenger uses the term 'community' as 'a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as *worth pursuing* and our participation is recognizable as *competence*' (1998: 5, emphasis added). For Wenger, 'communities of practice are the prime context in which we can work out common sense through mutual engagement' (1998: 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 – building community through the construction of value and giving recognition (see Honneth, 2007) – on which the next section will focus, since they are crucial to digital storytelling's claims to re-energize 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**

In his theory of polyarchy – a cautious account of the preconditions of a democracy that does not yet exist – Robert Dahl prescribes that 'citizens should possess the political resources they would require to participate in political life pretty much as equals' (Dahl, 1989: 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: 324). It is in relation to the latter that digital 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). 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: 113), but crucially, as Fraser argues, this also involves a redistribution of resources.

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 work on the margins of such institutions (Nancy Thumim's [2006] work examines how power asymmetries are worked out in digital storytelling sponsored by media institutions such as the BBC). In that sense, digital storytelling contributes to a wider democratization of media resources and possibly to the conditions of democracy itself. Digital storytelling vastly

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

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. To introduce that discussion, this article will look briefly at the language of the leading exponent of digital storytelling, Joe Lambert, founder of the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley ([www.storycenter.org](http://www.storycenter.org)).

Lambert's book *Digital Storytelling* (2006) is intended as an inspirational as well as a practical guide. It discusses the background to the practice of digital storytelling in a way that relates interestingly to the history of mass media: he argues that not only is an expansion of digital literacy necessary but a greater faculty for listening to others' stories 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: 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: 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 (Lambert, 2006).

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. However, let us concentrate here on the claims made by Lambert for digital storytelling's links to democracy, particularly the practice of 'storycatching' which, through meetings of 'story circles' in particular communities, catches stories which otherwise would not be exchanged. The aim is, in part, political:

[T]o 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 ... as we envision it, storycatching will become central to planning and decision making, the foundation upon which the best choices can be made. (2006: xx–xxi)

It would be easy in an academic article to pass by this (for some, utopian) vision without comment, but it would be a mistake, since it addresses a problem for many contemporary societies identified in academic analysis: the

problem of the disarticulation between individual narratives and social or political narratives. Alain Touraine has put this in almost apocalyptic form:

[W]e 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: 103)

Others (Bennett, 1998; Turner, 2001) have expressed similar concerns in less dramatic terms. Seen from a sociological point of view, story circles are an easily replicable practical setting for the mutual exchange of stories that at least test out the degree to which we find each other's lives incommensurable with our own and that, since each of us is differently inserted in the various 'registers of collective life' (Touraine, 2001: 103), test out the degree to which the contradictions between the levels of our own lives can be resolved.

Insofar 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 this claim and the sociological conditions through which it might be realized? More specifically, which of 'mediatization' or 'mediation' would prove more useful for grasping the dynamics of such processes? Mediatization is concerned with the systematic consequences of 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 the experiences of group formation, exchange and learning that such storytelling involved. More consequential, it is suggested, 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 wider spatial and social scales than otherwise possible; questions about the institutional embedding of the processes of producing, distributing and receiving digital stories.

In other words, we need – if we are to take Lambert's vision of the potential contribution of digital storytelling to democracy seriously – to follow closely through extended empirical work not just the forms and styles of digital storytelling and what types of people in what locations are involved in digital storytelling, 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 the 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, more importantly, cut off from the broader

range of everyday life, both private and public/political. To put it crudely: a phase that individuals and groups 'go through', which is 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 wider distribution of power in intensely mediated, but also often increasingly unequal, societies.

The realization of that hope depends on many other types of transformation too, not least the addressing of what elsewhere I have called the crisis of 'voice' in neoliberal democracies (Couldry, 2008),<sup>5</sup> which in turn will require major shifts in the political and economic landscape.

## CONCLUSION

This article has argued that digital storytelling is a good topic from which to explore the respective strengths of two influential wide-range concepts for understanding the broader social consequences of media, including new media: mediatization and mediation.

Its general aim has not been to show that one concept is always more useful than the other (both are useful and important), but that we need both in our conceptual toolkit, since they are complementary. However, the greater attentiveness of certain approaches that prioritize the term 'mediation' (particularly that of the late Roger Silverstone) may be better attuned to capturing the complexity of the multiple, often dialectical processes through which the range of practices that we gather under the term 'digital storytelling' will transform society and politics. For that reason alone, it is important to retain within the developing field of new media theory the legacy of the concept of mediation.

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## Notes

- 1 I am not referring exclusively to stories told within workshops run by the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, CA, although I will briefly consider the work of that centre later on.
- 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 (2004) in his discussion of mediatization.
- 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 be greatly missed for a long time.
- 5 Compare Pattie et al. (2004) on the lack of a deliberative culture in Britain.

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