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Digital Life-Story Narratives as Data for Policy Makers and Practitioners: Thinking Through Methodologies for Large-Scale Multimedia Qualitative Datasets

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Digital life stories have been solicited, archived, and Web-cast by organizations and individuals as a way of amplifying marginalized voices in the public domain. Despite the now large collections of digital stories that are available, researchers and policy makers have rarely discussed these stories as qualitative data and powerful evidence for decision making. We analyze the political, ethical and methodological tensions that have limited the use of digital life-story archives to date. In conclusion, we begin to set out future directions for analyzing and applying on-line archives of digital life stories research, drawing on debates within existing research that uses large-scale qualitative datasets.

This article springs from a problem: How might we go about analyzing and using the large-scale databases of multimedia life narratives that have begun to proliferate online as part of the Web 2.0 to shape the world these stories talk about? Over the past two decades, publicly available repositories of digital life stories have proliferated to an extraordinary degree (Goodson, 2006; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Vivienne, 2011). A wide array of "ordinary peoples'" voices and images are now readily available online (e.g., Dovey, 2000; Goodson, 2006; Thumim, 2009). Broad-

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casters, community organizations, advocacy groups, libraries, and museums have increasingly solicited, archived, and Web-cast digital stories (e.g., Burgess, Klaebe, & McWilliam, 2010; Rossiter & Garcia, 2010; Thumin, 2009) while individuals, unsolicited, are putting their multimedia life narratives on publicly available sites like YouTube.

Although personal digital life stories now abound, relatively little attention has been given to the parallel acts of *listening*—across various and many contexts—that need to occur if we are to hear, value, and respond to people's self-documented lives and experiences. The question we pose in this article is: What are the afterlives of these stories, sometimes casually but often painstakingly told? For what purposes are these stories used now, and to what other purposes might they be put? Our own interest in the way digital life narratives might be listened to emerges from our engagement with critical disability studies and the call from the disability movement over the past forty years for the voices of people with disability to be heard in all decision making about policy and provision in this area (see for example Booth & Booth, 1996; Ellem, Wilson, Chuib, & Knox, 2008; Garden, 2010). The outcome of these calls has usually been more direct involvement of service users in shaping policy and provision. Yet, we want to suggest here that digital life-storytelling has the potential to provide another route for such voices to be heard in policy, service provision, and professional education. We do not underestimate the challenges of this task with its profound recontextualisation of life narratives. Indeed part of our intention with this article is to map the political, ethical, disciplinary, and methodological tensions that arise when using large-scale collections of digital life narratives for recontextualised purposes such as policy making.

In talking about digital life narratives we want to include, but not exclusively discuss, texts generally described with the term "digital storytelling." Anna Poletti, in her careful account of the generic conventions of what Kelly McWilliam terms "specific" digital storytelling, describes these stories as "audio-visual vignettes of approximately two to five minutes in length which present a first-person voice-over in conjunction with visual material sourced from the personal archive of its author, edited together on consumer-grade computers and software" (Poletti, 2011, p. 74). An earlier account of the themes and tone of these stories characterized them as "short, personal multimedia tales told from the heart" (Meadows, cited in Rossiter & Garcia, 2010, p. 37). Under the auspices of key institutions like the Centre for Digital Storytellling in Berkley and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne, such "specific digital storytelling" has become a common form of digital life narrative. However, following Nick Couldry (2008) we would like to draw on a wider conception of digital life narrative here; one that allows us to consider a wide range of life stories that may include images, audio files, written text or video testimony (e.g., Dovey, 2000; Matthews, 2007). While an argument might be made that on-line practices as diverse as Facebook status updates, in-game avatars, or micro-blogging might be imagined as forms of life-storytelling, our focus here is on those narratives that can function as stand alone texts and can be archived and thus placed side by side.

What Are Digital Stories For?

First we offer an overview of the way in which the outcomes of digital storytelling projects are imagined both by some of the organizations that facilitate their production and by academic writers who discuss such multimodal storytelling. Our purpose in exploring the rationale for digital storytelling projects and writing about them is to consider the affordances offered by these rationales. What ways of talking about and using digital stories are encouraged by such rationales and which alternative uses and ways of thinking about them are made difficult to imagine?

The stated intentions of organizing digital storytelling projects and narrative inquiry generally are strongly oriented toward emancipation and social justice (e.g., Riessman, 1993; Meadows, 2003). A key thematic in various liberation and rights movements in the past fifty years has been the need to give opportunities for disenfranchised and disempowered people to speak publicly about their perspectives and experiences (e.g., Meadows, 2003). This is one of the main avenues through which digital life-story narratives have been seen as a way of empowering socially marginalized people. Digital stories are also seen as an opportunity to narrate and preserve hidden histories, (Rossiter & Garcia, 2010; Thumin, 2009) and to correct incomplete or inaccurate public understandings (Burgess et al., 2010).

The very act of speaking a story that has not previously been heard is invested with great psychological and political power by many advocates of digital storytelling (e.g., Burgess, 2006; Rossiter & Garcia, 2010)—seen as "enriching the lives of individuals who participate" in the words of the ACMI digital storytelling Web site. Alongside the therapeutic benefits of telling your story—especially a story that has been denied or refused by those with more power—is a social capital understanding of the value of digital storytelling projects (e.g., Hull & Nelson, 2005; Radley & Taylor, 2003; Wang, 1999). Some writers and facilitators—although not all (McWilliam, 2008)—stress digital storytelling as a route to enhancing skills, especially digital literacy and media training (e.g., Hartley, McWilliam, Burgess, & Banks, 2008; Hull & Nelson, 2005; McWilliam, 2008; Pfahl & Wiessner, 2007). Digital storytelling projects are not just seen as benefiting individuals, but as consolidating community and enhancing connections between generations (Burgess et al., 2010; Klaebe, Foth, Burgess, & Bilandzic, 2007).

While a great deal is invested in the notion of social and political transformation through the *telling* and *publishing* of stories, much less attention has been paid to the specifics of how such stories circulate, are understood by individual viewers and listeners, and, most interestingly for our purposes, how they might be used as "evidence" to enhance policy making and related service provision for marginalized groups. A number of writers have flagged the potential value of digital storytelling for research and policy. Joe Lambert (2009), for example, articulates this view: "We think of the facilitators as social issue-focused artists/activists creating work to help agitate and advocate for change in policy" (p. 85). More broadly, Rossiter and Garcia (2010) argue that "participant-produced digital stories constitute a rich and relatively unexplored source of qualitative data" (p. 49). Yet, there have been very few

detailed explorations of what might happen to these stories after they have been constructed. We are intrigued by some of the questions opened up by this absence. Who watches these narratives? Do they shape the political views or understandings of those who see them? Are they used by the community groups or advocacy organizations, and if so how? How can these rich stories of experience be used to create more targeted and responsive policies and services for marginalized people in the future?

Listening to Stories: Strategies and Challenges

In highlighting the absence of critical academic writing around digital storytelling we are drawing inspiration from the arguments of O'Donnell, Lloyd, and Dreher (2009) who have suggested that ''much of the analysis of mediated communication is modeled on a politics of expression, that is, of speaking up and out, finding a voice, making oneself heard, and so on'' (p. 423). They argue for a move to attend instead to *listening* as a critical part of the way politics of communication. Their work highlights the difficulties of listening, especially for those of us who are beneficiaries of the often-unnoted privilege of speaking safely and comfortably about our experiences of the world (Dreher, 2009). This emphasis provides a helpful corrective, we would argue, to a focus on the production of narratives and the type of narratives produced by digital storytelling projects.

If our interest in this article is exploring the way in which digital life stories might be listened to by policy makers, O'Donnell, Lloyd, and Dreher's work underscores the challenges of listening across difference, of hearing stories that do not necessarily resonate with one's own experiences, and may in fact offer a very jarring critique to one's own understandings of the world. This analysis is particularly pertinent in the light of work on online life-story telling that has stressed the tendency of readers to follow familiar stories, told from a similar position to their own. Lena Karlsson (2007), for example, in her research on consumption of the writing of female bloggers, noted that many readers of blogs sought out the daily life accounts of people similar to themselves not only in interests and hobbies, but also in gender, age, ethnicity and place of origin. Emma Maguire's (2012) recent analysis of the hoax embodied within the blog ''A Gay Girl in Damascus'' suggests that the popularity of the blog with western readers might be traced to the very familiar orientalist discourses to be found there. The revelation that the blog was in fact authored by a middle aged straight man based in Edinburgh highlights the appeal of the culturally familiar even to those who might seem to be opening themselves up to the experiences of difference in their reading of online life stories.

We would like to draw out two implications from this work on listening. Firstly, this writing suggests the importance of carefully tracing how digital life stories circulate, who listens to them and how, and with what outcome. As Jean Burgess (2006) has suggested, there is a pressing need to ''understand and practically engage with the full diversity of existing and emerging media contexts in which [digital stories] are, or are not, being heard'' (p. 212). Our concern here is with the ways

in which digital stories might impact the political, social and economic institutions that undergird peoples' lives. Consequently we want to trace the ways that such stories are currently being used and how they might be used to shape the practices of workers in the health and human services field and the policies by which their actions are framed. Secondly, for those who have an agenda beyond research and towards advocacy and social change—including writers within critical disability studies—this work suggests that modes of listening by those in positions of power may need to be cultivated and scaffolded, rather than simply assumed. We cannot assume that the proliferation of ordinary peoples' voices online via the accessible and interactive Web 2.0 will necessarily lead to a democratization and diversification of media consumption, or that stories will always meet the kinds of audiences whose views on the world might change through that encounter. Work, it seems, is required to make these stories listenable across differences. Part of this work is thinking through methodologies that might enable the message of these digital stories to find ears that are able to hear them.

Our first move in this direction was to identify exemplars that we could emulate by identifying literature that explored the effectivity of digital stories, particularly in policy making and professional education contexts. In particular we hoped to identify a methodology that we might use to analyze large-scale databases of multimedia life narratives, making such stories ''listenable'' to policy makers used to large-scale quantitative data. To our surprise, our search for other work that maps out ways of analyzing large-scale databases of life narratives did not produce a model for us to follow. Consequently, for much of the remainder of the article we reflect on the curious tendency for researchers to ''stop short'' of analyzing large collections of digital story data. We argue that exploring this hesitation highlights the complexity of and inherent tensions involved in recontextualising digital stories as data for research and policy decision making.

Obstacles to Synthesizing Large-scale Databases of Digital Life Narratives for Applied Research

The lack of large-scale digital narrative analysis and related application to date could be accounted for in a number of ways: the relative nascence of digital storytelling and resulting collections of materials, for instance, or the time consuming nature of research on media audiences. Our own experience of an existing large-scale digital disability life stories project (1000voices.edu.au) indicates, however, that the process of synthesizing and applying digital life-story data to new contexts—that is, ''recontextualising'' and potentially ''remediating'' the life stories—raises numerous political, ethical, and methodological challenges that might have also limited the application of digital life-story collections to date. We discuss some of these difficulties here, through a focus on some themes in the existing literature that we suggest both highlight political and ethical challenges in this use of digital stories and present obstacles to further exploration of such uses.

A Political Commitment to the (Relatively) Unmediated Individual Voice

In confronting this absence, this section explores the politics and ethics of re-contextualising people's "voices" in the form of digital stories. Following Iedema (1997) we use the term "recontextualisation" to refer to the inherently political and interpretive shifting of meanings between genres and contexts of social activity such as personal storytelling, research, and policy making. In these terms, recontextualisation includes "remediation," that is, movement of stories between media of representation. For example, stories might appear as digital narratives in public spaces on-line and then be moved into research analysis software artifacts, research reports, and so on. We will suggest that this process of re-using people's digital stories as data presents real, if often undiscussed, political concerns. This is particularly relevant when working with storytellers such as people with disabilities who have fought to have their voices heard in decision making contexts.

The first and primary recontextualisation that occurs in digital storytelling is the abstraction of the storyteller's "voice" from their physical body and ordinary contexts of daily living. While this alienation and recontextualisation of the storyteller's voice into a new media such as the digital story is typical of all mediated autobiography, it is invested with new political and ethical intensity when the abstracted representation of voice—i.e., the digital story—is used in lieu of face-to-face consultation and engagement in processes such as policy making.

The inherent ethical and political value of using personal digital stories as data is also evident when personal stories are juxtaposed with dominant stereotypes or meta-narratives. When working class people, young people, people with mental illnesses, or people from ethnic or religious minorities, for instance, are represented in the mainstream media they are often framed within narratives of "social problems" (Rose, 2000) or as representative of a "type" and these frames are commonly reproduced in policy (see Sunderland, Catalano, & Kendall, 2009). First person narratives seem to offer more diverse representations of marginalized individuals beyond agenda setting framing narratives. As Daniel Meadows (2003) powerfully argued in an influential article on digital storytelling:

> no longer must the public tolerate being "done" by media ... no longer must we put up with professional documentarists recording us for hours and then throwing away most of what we tell them, keeping only those bits that tell our stories their own way and, more than likely, at our expense. If we will only learn the skills of Digital Storytelling then we can, quite literally, "take the power back." (p. 192)

In digital storytelling, as Gubrium (2009) points out "the aim is to have participants construct their own digital story and to avoid having the experts, the trainers, construct stories for them" (p. 187).

There is an important critique here of the empowered gaze and voice of professionals. This critique echoes the analysis emerging from a range of liberation movements of the way institutions and the professions associated with them, have

sought to frame, explain, and normalize bodies and identities (e.g., Davis, 1995; Mitchell & Snyder, 2001). Autobiographical narratives and performances by people with disabilities, for example, have sought to escape, parody, or critique the medical gaze at the disabled body (Sandhal, 2003). Narratives of the self are about speaking back and speaking differently to these authorized and professional voices.

Thus we would argue there is a powerful political investment in the notion of the comparatively unmediated voice, particularly of marginalized people, in a range of digital storytelling projects. Norman Denzin makes this same point, arguing:

> the biography and the autobiography are among Reagan's legacy to American society. In these writing forms the liberal and left American academic scholarly community reasserts a commitment to the value of individual lives and their accurate representation in the life-story document. (Denzin cited in Goodson, 2006, p. 14)

The critique of notions of expertise in the political heritage of these projects is a powerful blockage to modes of analysis that, firstly, draw on the expertise of academic analysts, and secondly, seek to primarily address an audience of researchers, policy makers, or other professionals.

Many academic accounts of digital storytelling have been based on "insider" research around projects that the writer has been involved in as a facilitator or educator (e.g., Burgess, 2007; Brushwood Rose, 2009; Gubrium, 2009; Hull & Katz, 2006; Kajder, 2004; Rossiter & Garcia, 2010). This is not to undermine the value of this kind of research. However, we would argue there is an alignment between the philosophy of academic researchers engaged in writing about digital storytelling, and the philosophy of those who seek to encourage others to tell their stories in this form. That is, the integrity of the personal narrative is highly valued by researchers, and analytical methodologies reflecting that valuing—such as the use of detailed case studies—are generally deployed.

We are not implying a naïve assumption on the part of those conducting or writing about digital life narrative projects that such narratives are spontaneous or unmediated. Much of this writing bears out a sophisticated understanding of the circumstances of emergence of life-narratives by those involved in these projects and the shaping role of trainings, expectations, and effective facilitations. Indeed, arguments are made for the critical role of expert facilitation in the effective conduct of these projects (e.g., McWilliam, 2008). Those writing about digital storytelling, particularly those discussing life narratives that describe pain, marginalization and trauma, stress that such retellings by their nature involve elisions, rearticulations, and reframings—sometimes even factual inaccuracies (Bennett, 2003; Felman, 1992; Gigliotti, 2002). Nonetheless, there is a profound political commitment in these projects to the notion of the individual voice, set up in opposition to the voices of "experts." This commitment is perhaps best described in the words of Klaebe and colleagues (2007) as "an ethic of participation." This commitment is challenged by research strategies that will inevitably involve reframing. At these moments of reinterpretation, researchers, in essence, function as interpretive gatekeepers,

deciding which elements of digital stories are worthy of recontextualisation into policy contexts.

A Many-to-Many Model of Dissemination

Alongside an emphasis on the individual voice in digital storytelling is a strong commitment to a particular mode of dissemination of these stories. Early exemplars of electronic first person narratives, such as the BBC's *Video Nation* project, used a broadcast model—from one source to many recipients (Thompson, 1995)—for disseminating their stories. The notion of many-to-many dissemination is a more appropriate way of understanding the dissemination model of recent collections of first person narratives, even those collected and archived by institutions like councils, libraries, or museums. Rossiter and Garcia, for instance, proclaim: "we believe that the long-term impact of digital storytelling is inextricably tied to individuals' access to thousands—indeed, millions—of viewers/listeners through the Internet" (2010, p. 47). This mode of dissemination is an obvious corollary of the emphasis on individual voices relatively unmediated by gatekeepers. Embedded in Rossiter and Garcia's statement is an argument for a model of social change through large-scale shifts in public opinion, enabled by person-to-person contact via the Internet. It is not our purpose here to throw doubt on this as a model of social change. Nonetheless, it is clear that this emphasis on contact with the stories of previously unknown others via the Internet as the most important mode of dissemination for digital stories places the emphasis on digital publication as the final destination for such experiential narratives. Conversely, other means by which digital stories might inform social change have been less carefully explored.

This many-to-many model of dissemination is distinctly different from other deployments of life narratives. For example, in the collection of testimonies for parliamentary enquiries, human rights cases or commissions focused on truth and reconciliation. These collections of life narratives may in part be about speaking out to change the ways a nation imagines or remembers itself but they are also, in part, the many speaking to the few: commissioners or parliamentarians who will make judgments, write reports, or change laws (Cuthbert, Quartley & Taft, 2012; Gigliotti, 2002; Kelly 2008). Our analysis seeks to use digital stories in ways that invoke something closer to this model—the many speaking to the few. Work on testimonial uses of life narratives may be a useful model for further research on digital storytelling (e.g., Gugelberger & Kearney, 1991; Nance, 2006).

A Privileging of Reflexivity

Digital storytelling has been widely and enthusiastically discussed in the literature on education, at levels from primary school to adult and professional education. What is remarkable about such discussions is the consistency in recommended ways of using digital storytelling in the classroom. Speaking and writing about the

self is seen as helpful towards a range of ends: to enhance literacy (Kajder, 2004) and digital literacies in particular, to engage and motivate students (Sadik, 2008) and to develop research skills (Robin, 2006). While some writers, particularly those in medical education, may mention the instructional possibilities of teacher authored case studies or teaching materials (e.g., D'Alessandro, Lewis, & D'Allesandro, 2004; Pullman, Bethune, & Duke, 2005; Robin, 2006), most writers stress digital storytelling by students about their own experiences.

Why is digital storytelling so very useful in the classroom, according to these accounts? Rina Benmayor (2008) lays out what she argues makes digital storytelling a ''signature pedagogy'' in the humanities. Such projects provoke:

> active learning process that engages the cultural assets, experiences and funds of knowledge that students bring to the classroom. It is also a self-reflexive and recursive process that helps students to make important intellectual (theorizing) and personally transformative moves. (p. 189)

Here Benmayor, like many other writers on the virtues of digital storytelling in the classroom, stresses the importance of promoting reflexivity. Indeed, extending her argument, we might suggest that reflexivity is a signature pedagogy across the humanities and the social sciences, with a great many writers discussing autobiographical storytelling (e.g., Conle, 2000; Pfahl & Wiessner, 2007) and digital storytelling's educational effectivity in precisely these terms (e.g., Jenkins & Lonsdale, 2007; Rossiter & Garcia, 2010). In professional education, the ideal of the reflective practitioner has become an unquestioned ambition of many education programs, such that research frequently raises the question of what curriculum interventions might enable reflexivity to be achieved, rather than interrogating the value of reflexivity itself (e.g., Barrett, 2006; Jenkins & Lonsdale, 2007; Sandars & Murray, 2009).

Ivor Goodson (2005) points out the centrality of personal autobiographical narrative, not only within classrooms, but also in contemporary practices of educational research (pp. 224–5). Goodson identifies ''narratives, stories, journals, action research and phenomenology'' as key research tools in educational research—and we might add digital stories to this list. Reflexivity and personal storytelling are very frequently visible in the textual strategies through which educational research, including work on digital storytelling, is written for publication (e.g., Alexandra, 2008; Bemayor, 2008; Rossiter & Garcia, 2010).

Thus, within the field of education, reflexivity is a key pedagogy and a central research tool. Again, we are not interested in critiquing this approach. What we do want to point out is how this emphasis on reflecting on one's own experiences makes teachers and researchers less likely to explore the way listening to *other* peoples' stories might be used in education. Where listening to others' stories is discussed as part of the educational consequences of digital storytelling, this listening is usually involves sharing the stories generated within a classroom with other members of the class (e.g., Hull & Nelson, 2005). While the sharing of stories within the classroom may be very valuable, medical students listening to other medical students' stories,

we would suggest, for example, are likely to hear something very different from medical students required to listen to stories from their patients.

We would argue that the great value placed on learning through reflection on one's own experiences makes the idea of using others' autobiographical stories as a source of information and possible transformation seem a less than obvious pedagogical tool. Our purpose here is to shift attention to the conditions under which other peoples' stories—especially large-scale collections of such stories—might be listened to and learned from. Reflexivity continues to be important in the ethical recontextualisation of digital life narratives, as we will discuss below. However, to develop a methodology for making such stories intelligible and ''listenable'' we need to move on from a pedagogy and practice that focuses on reflection on one's own life narrative, towards one that considers reflection as part of the process of listening to others' stories.

Decontextualisation or Recontexualisation?

Rich and Chalfen (1999), discussing their video-based research on young peoples' experiences of asthma and asthma treatments, note

> in projects that have used visual media created by young people, research efforts have been greatly outnumbered by programs that stressed community involvement, often focusing on issues of self-realization, self-help, and the building of self-esteem.... we have personal experience of projects where directors and staff simply have not known what to do with the visual results of such efforts, either how to interpret them or how to take action on what has been expressed. (p. 53)

We have suggested above some of the reasons for this methodological absence in the literature on digital storytelling. In the years since Rich and Chalfen's work anthropology, media studies and the newly emerging specialism of visual sociology have generated approaches for making sense of visual materials (e.g., Pink, 2007; Prosser, 1998). Similar work has been done in the field of health and human services, such as ''photo-voice,'' which draws on images and narratives, generated through participatory and collaborative methods, as a way of informing policy (e.g., Harrison, 2002; Radley & Taylor, 2003; Wang, 1999). Similarly, narrative has increasingly been used as a tool for the study of experiences of health (e.g., Busby, 2000; Riecken et al., 2006; Shultz & Lempert, 2004).

However works in sociology, education, and health studies that use life experience narratives as a key source, we would suggest, share with the literature on digital storytelling patterns in their approach to analysis and the way they report the results of their work. Much of this research, in health studies and elsewhere, emphasizes small scale, ''rich'' ethnographic research with its emphasis on explication of the meanings that people make of their experiences. As Harrison (2002) remarks, recent health research which draws on visual methods has ''an epistemological commitment to the ways participants themselves interpret, give meaning to and

make sense of, their experiences'' (p. 865). We would argue that researchers who value life stories have a strong desire not to lose a sense of the modes and tone of the authorial voice and its context when analyzing life narratives.

Where does this leave us in our quest to respect this emphasis on the context of multimodal narratives while, at the same time, increasing the scale of analysis? Some writers have argued that the gulf between life-story analysis and large-scale social science research may be unbridgeable. Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008) in their account of the use of life stories stress the importance of ''whole persons'' in what they describe as ''personal narrative analysis.'' They depict such research as fundamentally incompatible with social science research. They see themselves as ''soliciting stories that individuals tell about their lives and in their own terms, rather than simply categorizing them in analytic terms that research questions impose on them'' (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 10). Life history research, they suggest, ''contrasts with much of the research in the social sciences—especially common in the disciplines of sociology, political science, and economics—that focuses on the statistical analysis of aggregate data about entire populations or large samples'' (2008, p. 10).

This focus on ''whole persons'' is very evident in the way in which those working with life stories report their data, even when their research encompasses a large sample of narratives. For instance, one of the very few articles on digital storytelling based on a survey of a large number (200+) of digital stories nonetheless returns to a case study approach for its fine-grained account of the relationship between modes of communication (Hull & Nelson, 2005). Similarly, large-scale social research projects that have sought to locate life narratives in terms of broader political and social history often present their findings in the form of case studies. The publication emerging from the Learning Lives project, which drew on over 500 life experience interviews, is based around eight lengthy case studies rather than an attempt to analyze life narratives thematically (Goodson et al., 2010). This case study approach also is taken in Goodley and colleagues' life history text (2004), which focuses more specifically on narratives by people with a disability. The lure of the ''whole person'' in life-story based research is very strong, even when researchers do not seek to set up such research in polar opposition to large scale, quantitative, or social science based research.

Anxieties about the dangers of wrenching life-experience accounts out of the hands of their narrators by reusing them in new contexts have also emerged in debates over secondary analysis of qualitative data. Niamh Moore (2007) discusses the critical response by many researchers to the requirement by the British funding body, the Economic and Social Research Council, to deposit data from research in the social sciences in the QUALIDATA database, to facilitate analysis of such material by other researchers at some later point. Moore documents concerns that the reuse of qualitative research will remove narratives from the process by which such ''data'' is produced (Moore, 2007). She, however, offers a more optimistic account of this reuse of qualitative material, which we want to echo. Moore argues that rather than secondary analysis being viewed as decontextualisation of research

findings, rather, such secondary analysis should be viewed as a recontextualisation of these sources, undertaken in a rigorous and reflexive way that acknowledges the different position, concerns, and research questions of the new researcher. She suggests that the longstanding use of the archive of life narratives in the Mass Observation Archive is a model to which sociologists may want to attend (e.g., Bhatti, 2006; Busby, 2000; Savage, 2007; Smart, 2009). One useful example is Mike Savage's (2007) comparison of the way in which hundreds of diarists in 1948 and a similar number in 1991 discussed questions of class and their own class position. What is particularly important about Savage's account is the way his discussion is alert to the narratives and discourses, metaphors, and languages people use to talk about class. This analysis focuses not just on what people say, but what they fail to say, or struggle to say (see also Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Sunderland et al., 2009). This analytical element is particularly crucial in the light of Burgess's (2006) arguments that the tropes and even the clichés that are used in digital storytelling narratives are a key part of the communication strategy of storytellers (see also Poletti, 2011).

Archives of historical life narratives—like Mass Observation's collection of life experience accounts from the 1930 to the 1950s, and then from the 1980s onward—offer an interesting parallel to research on large-scale archives of digital narratives. One key strategy for maintaining the validity and richness of individual accounts when recontextualising these narratives has been an ongoing relationship with participants. Methods such as photo-voice, for example, are rigorously participatory, with an ongoing connection between participants and the multimodal narratives and policy research they shape (Wang, 1999). This kind of ongoing relationship facilitates at the very least checking of the emerging analysis of narratives by participants (e.g., Hampton, 2004). Such ongoing relationships are not necessarily able to be maintained when participants' narratives are placed on large online databases.

In fact, this temporal disconnection between the storyteller and his or her listeners can be one of the assets of databases of life narratives. Such stories can provide some form of self-representation for people who are not interested in or not always able to participate more directly as self-advocates or health consumer representatives. For example, people whose health conditions are progressive or changeable may be able to contribute their story to the shaping of health policy at some times, but not at others (Davies, 2011). Digital storytelling may be one way to make their voices available even when they are not themselves free to participate in consultation processes. People who participate in policy consultation in areas like disability are often small in number and limited to the most vocal and motivated self-advocates and advocates. Collections of digital stories, while still restricted to those who are able and inclined to access digital media for self-representation, provide a broader palette of everyday experience from which policy makers and others can draw both wisdom and "data." The often repeated comment by self-advocates that community representatives are required to tell their stories over and over again, with little sign of change or transformation in the policies and practices they seek to influence (Hallahan, 2009) is in part addressed by the ability of stories to be deposited, reused,

and replayed. Some level of decontextualisation, then, is not simply and always a bad thing.

Moving Towards New Methodologies

The barriers to analysis of large-scale collections of multimodal narratives are clearly methodological as well as ethical and political, and this article can only flag some possible ways of unraveling these knotty methodological problems. While there is little in the literature on digital storytelling to show the way, research with large datasets of life-story narratives offers another starting point, signaling, at least, the elements that need to be incorporated in this analysis. Phoenix, Smith, and Sparkes' (2010) survey of approaches to narrative analysis in gerontology, for example, offers a helpful distinction between approaches to narrative analysis which focus on what is said (including content analysis and structural analysis) and those which focus on how such narratives are told (including performative analysis and rhetorical analysis) (pp. 4–5). Citing Lieblich and colleagues, Marshall and Long (2010) add another dimension to analyses of narratives: From holistic to categorical approaches, the latter breaking down narratives into smaller, categorical units. Phoenix and her colleagues (2010) flag up the difficulty of combining these various orders of analysis and, intriguingly and perhaps predictably in the light of the survey of the literature on digital storytelling offered above, foreground auto ethnography as a key strategy to preserve and integrate all of these elements in the original narratives.

However, other scholars working within narrative analysis have developed different strategies to encompass the range of objects of study and analytical process emerging from large data sets of narratives. For example, Hall's (2011) detailed account of the methods used to analyze multiple narrative interviews from over forty women successfully surviving childhood maltreatment suggests some possible directions. The research Hall describes was undertaken by an interdisciplinary team of researchers who used an eclectic range of analytical methods, variously holistic and categorical, to explore different dimensions to the collection of narratives. While using open ended questions to solicit life-story narrative data, Hall and her colleagues used a summary of narratives, dubbed "summary narrative assessment," as a tool for ongoing analysis, while original details of transcripts were returned to repeatedly through the process of analysis. This summary enabled researchers to draw out continuities across dissimilarly structured accounts. However, the summary did not merely describe "themes" but also included notations on "emplotments" (Frank, 1995) within each account. Such attention to narrative structures offers a useful supplement to the finer grained focus on frequently occurring terms or ideas within content analysis (e.g., Sunderland, Kendall, & Catalano, 2009).

Evidently, in the case of large-scale collections of multi-modal narratives, there is still greater complexity within the text. Analysis of these stories, in attending to the way in which stories are told, must consider elements like sound, address

to camera, point of view, framing, editing, mise-en-scéne or setting, and the use of visual imagery. While such dimensions to multimedia narratives anchor them firmly in a particular context from which abstraction and generalization seems even more difficult, attention to patterns within these audio-visual elements across large numbers of stories can highlight important continuities. Matthews' (2007) analysis of more than 60 broadcast first-person narratives from the pioneering British digital storytelling program *Video Nation* (1994–2000), for instance, identified the near-ubiquitous direct address to camera and the intimate setting of bedrooms and bathrooms in a cluster of stories as key parts of a ''confessional'' mode of speaking. The strategies adopted by Hall and her colleagues, including the deployment of a large interdisciplinary research team, the use of narrative summaries and the acknowledgement that neither every element of researched narratives nor every analytical strategy deployed by the team will be present in each publication, could enable such audio-visual features of digital stories to be incorporated into large-scale analysis.

Further resources may be found within the ''evidence based practice'' impulse in health and human sciences, which has produced a number of qualitative synthesis methodologies that emulate the ''systematic review'' process used for quantitative clinical studies (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009). These qualitative synthesis methodologies—including for instance meta-ethnography, critical synthesis, and textual narrative synthesis—systematically analyze and synthesize the outcomes of multiple discrete qualitative studies. There is much potential here both for synthesizing insights *across* the growing number of digital stories projects internationally, and developing new methodologies for analyzing large numbers of stories *within* discrete projects and collections.

Our documentation here of the hesitations in the literature on digital storytelling—a hesitation to move away from the individual voice; from citizen to citizen communication, and from individual reflexivity—suggests the acute awareness of many researchers and practitioners of what is lost in the process of recontextualisation. However, we have suggested that there is also something to be gained from attempting to reframe life stories so some of their ''messages'' may come to be inscribed in the institutions and practices that help to frame and shape these lives. Iedema's (1997) work on recontextualisation offers a useful theoretical underpinning for this more optimistic understanding of the refiguring of life-story narratives that we have proposed. He argues that recontextualisation is the process by which discourses are encapsulated in ''increasingly durable materialities'' as a direct result of their translation and entry into new social systems and contexts (Iedema, 1997). The consequence of recontextualisation then is that these increasingly durable materialities—such as a hospital building, a technology, or a product—are seen to encapsulate the discourses that have shaped their being and becoming: they are discourse materialities. Such recontextualisation of life stories presents many pitfalls that those working on digital storytelling have thoughtfully and carefully moved around. We would argue, however, that the potential value of digital life narratives as a source of data makes it worth confronting and interrogating these dangers rather than attempting to slide past them.

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