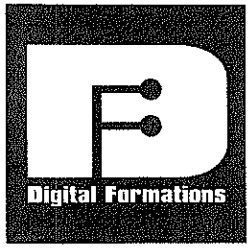

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DIGITAL STORYTELLING, MEDIATIZED STORIES

Self-representations in New Media

Knut Lundby, Editor

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TWO

Tales of mediation: Narrative and digital media as cultural tools

OLA ERSTAD AND JAMES V. WERTSCH

The power of expression is a basic element of human development. The way we express ourselves, through whatever medium available, is one of the key elements in how human beings have evolved since our ancestors started their quest for survival. Humans are now able not only to reinterpret the perception of their world but also to find out more about the tools they used and the impact these tools have (Wertsch, 1998; Säljö, 2005). Starting from paintings made on cave walls, humans represented 'their world', and in order to do that they had to 'invent' tools for painting and systems of meaning making for how things should be represented and the symbolic nature of such representations.

Building on the ideas of the French cultural psychologist Ignace Meyerson, Jerome Bruner discusses what he calls 'the externalization tenet' (1996, p. 22). This refers to the notion that the main function of collective cultural activity is to produce 'works'—or *oeuvres* in French. This can be larger systems like the arts and sciences of a culture, or smaller 'works' like a presentation of a project by a group of students in front of the rest of the class. Bruner shows how important such collective 'works' are for producing and sustaining group solidarity and how they can help *make* a community. At the same time they are

important in promoting a sense of the division of labour that goes into making a product (Bruner, 1996, p. 23).

This sets out our main arguments in this chapter, framed within what is termed as 'sociocultural studies of mind' (Wertsch, del Rio & Alvarez, 1995). We will not discuss digital storytelling or 'mediatized stories' per se but rather present an approach towards the concept of mediation and the use of cultural tools. Narratives are seen as cultural tools that we all relate to and use in our meaning-making activities (Bruner, 1996; Wertsch, 1998). As such, they change over time due to cultural and technological developments. Our approach is motivated by the genetic analysis made by Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934), with the assumption that it is possible to understand many aspects of mental functioning only if one understands their origin and the transitions they have undergone at different levels. The main question in this chapter is then how new digital media might transform the role narratives play in our lives.

This is basically about 'telling lives', that is, how people use different mediational means in their everyday life to express personal narratives and share these with others. There are several examples of how digital media might play a role in such practices. 'Telling Lives' refers to the BBC initiative on digital storytelling where people taking part in different workshops can post their digital stories (www.bbc.co.uk/tellinglives). 'Telling lives' is also the name of a project of the EU initiative eTwinning, where a school in Norway and a school in Finland have collaborated to create digital stories among the students about certain personal aspects of their own lives. The same title can also be found as part of museum blogs (tellinglivesblog.com) where people at certain events can present their stories through the 'Telling Stories' story-capture booth and upload them to the Internet. 'Telling Lives' for us represents the expressive element of storytelling defined by the new information and communication technologies, where people tell stories about their personal lives and share these with others.

We will combine conceptual discussions with examples and reflections on the importance of mediation and narratives as cultural tools in our society. We start with some key aspects of a socio-cultural approach to the mind before we go on to the concept of mediation.

Culture, communication and cognition

What we call a socio-cultural approach is related to the ideas of many authors from a variety of disciplines. Figures such as Dewey (1938) and Kress (1985)

are relevant, for example. Even though these authors highlight the impact of the social on the personal we will differ in the way we relate our discussion to a specific approach on learning and human development originally outlined by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Today a socio-cultural approach includes several different perspectives and 'schools of thought'. Our ambition here is not to present the different dimensions of this approach but rather to highlight certain key elements that we believe are important in our studies of 'mediatized stories'.

The main objective of such a socio-cultural approach to the mind is to explicate the relationships between human mental functioning, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical situations in which this functioning occurs, on the other (Wertsch et al., 1995, p. 3). So the central task is to understand how individual functioning is shaped by and related to the socio-cultural setting within which it exists.

The renewed interest in such issues, and the reinterpretation of the texts of Vygotsky in the 1970s, especially in American discussions, can be seen as a strong movement away from methodological individualism. In our discussion it is therefore important to argue against an understanding that stories are unique to the individual and rather move towards the social origins of individual mental functioning and collective dimensions of storytelling, learning and meaning making. These arguments against a strong individual reductionist tendency are important for our approach towards mediation.

In summing up the main characteristics of what he calls 'a cultural psychology', Michael Cole (1996, p. 104) mentions the following points:

- It emphasises mediated action in a context.
- It insists on the importance of the 'genetic method' understood broadly to include historical, ontogenetic, and microgenetic levels of analysis.
- It seeks to ground its analysis in everyday life events.
- It assumes that the mind emerges in the joint mediated activity of people. Mind, then, is in an important sense, 'co-constructed' and distributed.
- It assumes that individuals are active agents in their own development but do not act in settings entirely of their own choosing.
- It rejects cause-effect, stimulus-response, explanatory science in favour of a science that emphasises the emergent nature of the mind in activity and that acknowledges a central role for interpretation in its explanatory framework.
- It draws upon methodologies from the humanities as well as from the social and biological sciences.

What these points show us is the complexity embedded in studying human psychological and communicative activities. Such a socio-cultural approach emphasises that human action is mediated through the semiotic means available in the culture (Mertz & Parmentier, 1985). In this perspective, cultural tools are situated, historically, culturally and institutionally. The focus is on human action and not on behaviour as 'mechanistic materialism' (Taylor, 1985).

Human action is closely linked to communication processes and the use of cultural tools, both material and abstract, for example, language, for meaning making by individuals and groups. It is not communication seen in a linear fashion as something transmitted from a sender through a channel to a receiver. As we shall see below it is more in line with a semiotic tradition of meaning making by using signs, situated within cultural settings and building on historical developments.

In Vygotsky's writings there is a recognition of a complex relationship between history as change and history as universal human progress (Wertsch et al., 1995). This is seen in his account of the particular aspect of history that was of most interest to him, that is, 'the symbolic-communicative spheres of activity in which humans collectively produce new means for regulating their behavior' (Scribner, 1985, p. 123).

As Wertsch (1998) has argued, the natural unit of analysis in this approach will be 'mediated action', or 'agent-acting-with-mediational-means', in order to highlight the focus on the agent–instrument relationship. In his book *Mind as Action* Wertsch outlines certain properties of mediated action (1998, p. 25):

1. mediated action is characterised by an irreducible tension between agent and mediational means,
2. mediational means are material,
3. mediated action typically has multiple simultaneous goals,
4. mediated action is situated on one or more developmental paths,
5. mediational means constrain as well as enable action,
6. new mediational means transform mediated action,
7. the relationship of agents towards mediational means can be characterised in terms of mastery,
8. the relationship of agents towards mediational means can be characterised in terms of appropriation,
9. mediational means are often produced for reasons other than to facilitate mediated action,
10. mediational means are associated with power and authority.

Mediated action as an analytic approach to the study of mind is therefore

seen both on the microgenetic level of agents and instruments, and on broader issues of socio-cultural history and issues of cultural struggle as in power relationships. Even though our main interest in this chapter is on the tension between agent and mediational means, other aspects of mediated action as part of mediatized stories will be discussed.

When studying digital storytelling we have to take these broader perspectives on culture, communication and cognition into consideration as a way of connecting inter- and intra-personal processes. The important point here is that storytelling is not something 'invented' by the individual, but renegotiated in a cultural process in which we all participate. People may believe that they have a totally unique story, one that nobody has ever had before. This can be seen as an autobiographical obsession in our western culture through a long tradition of written texts but also in cultural expressions in general, through art, science and so forth (Taylor, 1989). From our point of view this is not an individual endeavour but rather built into general cultural and historic processes where we reuse and further develop stories through mediational means, thereby ensuring layers of 'multivoicedness' of being (Bakhtin, 1981).

Semiotic mediation, cultural tools and transformation

In a general sense the term 'mediation' can be associated with the objectification of symbolic meaning in time and space as part of socio-historic development. However, one needs to specify this concept according to particular objects, social groups, historical periods, and so forth (Rasmussen, 2000). Since Hegel, the term has incorporated more specified meanings through the insertion of *Vermittlung* (the German term for mediation), and which is built into different perspectives on the role of media in our society. Raymond Williams (1976, p. 205) distinguishes three aspects of mediation: (a) finding a central point between two opposites, as in political negotiations; (b) describing the interaction between two opposed concepts or forces with the totality to which they are assumed to belong; and (c) describing such interaction as in itself substantial, with forms of its own, so that it is not the neutral process of the interaction of separate forms, but an active process in which the form of the mediation alters the things mediated, or by its nature indicates their nature. (See also Rasmussen, 2000.) The last aspect provides a point of departure in our exploration of mediation linked to mediatized stories.

In Vygotsky's writings the construct of mediation, especially semiotic me-

diation, played a central role, becoming increasingly important during the last years of his life and career (Wertsch, 1985, p. 50; Wertsch et al., 1995, p. 20). A year before his death he wrote that 'the central fact about our psychology is the fact of mediation' (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 166). He provided an outline of how mental functioning is situated in a cultural space. Vygotsky extended Engels's notion of instrumental mediation by applying it to 'psychological tools' as well as to the 'technical tools' of production (Wertsch, 1985, p. 77). He invoked the analogy between psychological tools, or what he termed 'signs', and technical tools, or simply 'tools', at several places in his writing. Language, which was Vygotsky's main interest, can then be seen as a cultural tool and speech as a form of mediated action.

Vygotsky was, however, not alone in pointing out the role of different cultural tools and mediation in human functioning. Similar ideas can be seen among contemporaries of his such as Bakhtin, Leontev, Lotman and also going back to Engels and Dewey. The common point is how new forms of mediation always transform human action. Central issues for all these thinkers are on the role of text in cultural settings, about action in the sense of interpersonal activities and human development. During the last twenty-five years there has been a renewed interest especially in the theoretical thinking of Vygotsky but also drawing on Leontev about activity theory and Bakhtin on the role of 'utterance' and 'voice'. Our approach builds on all three thinkers, even though we will mainly refer to Vygotsky since our main arguments are close to his theoretical propositions.

Vygotsky touched on two forms of mediation. The first is 'explicit mediation', which relates to the overt, intentional introduction of a 'stimulus means' into the flow of action. It relates to the materiality of mediational means. The second is 'implicit mediation', which provided the foundation of Vygotsky's account of egocentric and inner speech. This perspective focuses on how some signs are transparent and largely inaccessible to conscious reflection.

There are two important properties of psychological tools that need to be taken into consideration (Wertsch, 1985, pp. 79–80). The first is that by being included in the process of behaviour, a psychological tool alters the entire flow and structure of mental functions. There are different sets of tools and different forms of thinking that go with them. Vygotsky viewed the introduction of a psychological tool (for example, language) into a mental function (such as memory) as causing a qualitative transformation of that function. In his approach psychological tools are not viewed as auxiliary means that simply facilitate an existing mental function while leaving it qualitatively unaltered. Rather the emphasis is on their capacity to transform mental functioning. Vygotsky did not view development as a steady stream of quantitative increments but in terms of fundamental qualitative transformations associated with changes in the psychological tools.

The second major property of mediation in his account is that by their nature psychological tools are social, not organic or individual. The mediational means, or cultural tools, are inherently situated culturally, institutionally and historically. There are two aspects in which Vygotsky considered psychological tools to be social. First, he considered psychological tools such as language, various systems for counting, mnemonic techniques, algebraic symbol systems, and so forth to be social in the sense that they are the products of socio-cultural evolution. Individuals have access to psychological tools by virtue of being part of a socio-cultural milieu. The cultural knowledge of our society is in a developmental sense built into our tools. The second aspect concerns the more 'localized' social phenomena of face-to-face communication and social interaction. Instead of examining forces that operate on a general socio-cultural level, the focus here was on the dynamics that characterise individual communicative events. Vygotsky said of language, the most important psychological tool in his approach, that 'the primary function of speech, both for the adult and for the child, is the function of communication, social contact, influencing surrounding individuals' (Wertsch, 1985, p. 81).

Another point about mediation is that it involves constraints as well as empowerment (Wertsch et al., 1995, pp. 24–25). Any form of mediation involves some form of limitation. It frees us from some earlier limitations while at the same time introducing new ones of its own. Our emphasis, of course, is often on the new possibilities that new mediational means represent for empowerment and new actions. However, we need to keep a focus on the limitations at the same time, on how tools shape our action in an inherently limiting way.

The important point here, and again, a point that is often missed in sociological and psychological studies, is that when a new tool, a new medium, is introduced into the flow of action, it does not simply facilitate or make an existing form of action more efficient. The emphasis is on how it transforms the form of action, on the qualitative transformative, as opposed to facilitative, role of cultural tools.

So when we move from memorising long stretches of poetry to just saying it is good enough to read them out of a textbook with feeling or find them on the Internet, using such external symbolic storage, there is more than just a change in the efficiency in a mode of action and the mental processes that go with it. Such a change imposes search strategies, new storage strategies, new memory access routes, new options in both the control of and analysis of one's own thinking, all of which represents a qualitative transformation in mediated

action. We now turn to one such issue, the role of narratives and mediatized stories in our culture.

Narratives as 'equipment for living'

Narratives in our culture can be described as powerful cultural tools. They give us a structured way of accessing knowledge in a culture and a way of expressing intentions and how we relate to others. These properties reflect broader claims about artefacts outlined by Hutchins:

> What we learn and what we know, and what our culture knows for us in the form of the structure of artefacts and social organisations are these hunks of mediating structure. Thinking consists of bringing these structures into co-ordination with each other such that they can shape (and be shaped by) each other. The thinker in this world is a very special medium that can provide co-ordination among many structured media, some internal, some external, some embodied in artefacts, some in ideas, and some in social relationships. (1986, p. 57)

There are several traditions of examining the role of narratives in our culture (e.g., Mitchell, 1981). Our interest is related to how narratives function as cultural tools and influence human functioning. Both Wertsch (1998) and Bruner (1990, 1996) analyse narrative and historical texts as cultural tools. Bruner highlights the role of narratives in human functioning as part of his fundamental critique of the 'computational view', which is concerned with information processing. The 'computational view' is fundamental to our whole education system and the dominating perspective on learning on which it is based. In its place, or at least as complement, Bruner argues for what he calls 'culturalism'.

> For the evolution of the hominid mind is linked to the development of a way of life where 'reality' is represented by a symbolism shared by members of a cultural community in which a technical-social way of life is both organized and construed in terms of that symbolism. This symbolic mode is not only shared by a community, but conserved, elaborated, and passed on to succeeding generations who, by virtue of this transmission, continue to maintain the culture's identity and way of life. . . . On this view, knowing and communicating are in their nature highly interdependent, indeed virtually inseparable. (1996, p. 3)

In his elaborations on this, Bruner defines narrative as a central mode of human thought and as a vehicle of meaning making. Storytelling and narrative are viewed as the way people in general create a version of the world in which

they can envisage a place for themselves, a personal world. (1996, p. 39). Bruner distinguishes between logical-scientific thinking, which is more specialised for treating physical 'things', and narrative thinking, for treating people and their plights.

With reference to Kenneth Burke (1966) we might view narratives as 'equipment for living'. The way narratives are structured as plots with characters makes a transition from the fictional to the real world. Literature, for example, can be seen as equipment for interpreting and categorising human action. Burke (1966) claims that literature (discourse) equips individuals with attitudes for dealing with recurring situations. This can also be related to other mediated texts, as stated by Cole and Keyssar;

> For the richness of our lives depends not only on how much equipment we carry with us, but how we use that equipment and in what context it is relevant. The chisel in the hands of a sculptor is different than the chisel in the hands of a bricklayer, but it is not clear that one uses the tool better than the other. The first step, and one that continues to meet with resistance, is to recognize and work with films such as 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Nashville', as well as printed books, as equipments for living. This is not to reduce meaning to usefulness, but to enlarge our concept of 'meaning' and 'usefulness'. (1985, p. 69)

Narratives, seen as a cultural tool, are part of our living, bridging past, present and future (Wertsch, 1998). They are tools in cultural settings that pre-exist any group or individual use. These tools, especially in the case of narrative forms, are not a product of independent invention, and they influence us in different ways and become part of the repertoire of means we use in our everyday lives, our 'telling lives'. When we talk about human action, narratives are used as a basis for 'seeing' events, a way of understanding characters in our environment. In this way they become very important equipment for the formation of the collective and individual identity. This can be seen in studies on such phenomena as national narratives and collective memory (Wertsch, 1998).

When discussing narratives as cultural tools, it is important to distinguish between two basic narrative levels. On the one hand, we have *'specific narratives'*, which deal with concrete places, characters, events. This is the usual sense of 'narrative'. They can be fictional or real, but they involve specific characters, places and events. On the other hand, we have *'schematic narrative templates'* which are more transparent, having the capacity to shape thinking and speaking in ways that are hard to identify or reflect upon. A schematic narrative template is schematic in the sense that it is generalised, abstract, without specifics on actors, times and places. It is narrative because it has an emplotted form, one that is especially transparent in the sense that like a clear window it

is something through which one views the world without realising it is there. It appears as if you are looking onto reality directly. Part of its power to shape thinking and speaking comes from the fact that it is hard to see and appreciate the fact that we are using it as cultural tool. And a schematic narrative template is a template in that there is one story line that helps us make sense of many specific episodes, the same story over and over with different characters, making the basis for collective memory, collective narratives and national narratives. Schematic narrative templates tend to be extremely conservative and resistant to change, both because of their transparency and because they are tied to our identity.

As part and parcel of particular socio-cultural settings, schematic narrative templates in various contexts differ from one another. They are not universal. What it means to be Norwegian, American, French and so forth is shaped in part by the use of certain schematic narrative templates. How we conceive ourselves as either Norwegian or American depends to a large extent on certain narratives that shape national identity. As a Norwegian this is connected to narratives for example about 'winter and skiing', 'the importance of being in nature', 'upholding peace and democracy'. As an American it may be tied more to issues like 'equal possibilities', 'cultural melting pot' and 'superpower'. Such issues can be seen at play in Samuel Huntington's book *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (2004), where he argues for an agenda of conserving and preserving established notions of American national identity. In his view these notions are threatened by immigration in the United States today. Our point here is that mediatized stories can involve both specific narratives and schematic narrative templates, with the power of the latter often harder to detect and more resistant to change.

Our interest is in the transformative role of cultural tools and how for example the introduction of digital technologies can change the fundamental form of certain actions such as narratives about a national past. This can, for example, be seen in moving from a culture based on techniques of memorisation, to a culture developing new ways of storage and use of texts, and towards new symbolic systems and increasing availability of information as seen in the use of the Internet that might have a major impact on such processes.

An interesting question that arises in this connection is how such narratives are more likely to be contested today in the light of new information and communication technologies. What is ongoing and what is resistant to change versus what may be new and transformative? National identity for example might be more open to being influenced by other schematic narrative templates than before, as young people use a broader set of narratives in their identity work. New technological platforms for communication can also be

used to debate the construction of narratives to a greater degree than before the emergence of the newest forms of Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

One example can be taken from the former Soviet republic of Georgia, where online forums play an important role in dealing with issues of collective identity.[1] Chat rooms in Georgia are in many respects similar to chat rooms in other countries. They are occupied by young people, and rarely visited by adults. The topics covered are typically a function of interests, age and gender. However, online forums that have developed in Georgia (www.forum.ge), a country that has gone through major social transitions after having been part of the Soviet Union, often take the form of sites of serious discussion on cultural and political issues. In these forums there are participants of all ages, and different topics are covered. What is particularly interesting is how these forums are used to discuss transitions in national identity and highlight differences between different groups of the population and areas of the country.

In this context it is possible to see examples of Georgians who have been expelled from the breakaway region of Abkhazia talking about their past and future, recalling their childhood and sharing their views, and also finding old classmates and neighbours. Such forums can serve as a shared space where different narratives about national identity and past events become apparent, for example about whether it was Russians, Abkhazians or Georgians who started the armed conflict in Abkhazia in the early 1990s that resulted in ethnic Georgians being expelled. One example is the following posting in the forum that shows the strong narrative divisions made between us (Georgians who had formerly lived in Abkhazia) and them (Georgians from other regions of the country).

> To those of you posting on this topic: you all are from Tbilisi, and none of you is Sukhumian, and you know NOTHING about what happened there! I lived there! Already in Soviet times, every Abkhazian hated Georgians. 'When will we get rid of you?!,' they said. If you (a Georgian) entered a shop and found an Abkhaz vendor working in it, then you would be in trouble. They would make you stand at the end of the queue and wait until all the Abkhaz who were in the shop at the time had bought everything they wanted. Up to that point the vendor would not pay any attention to you, just because you were a Georgian. There were cases when they would even close the shop right in front of you as you tried to enter. YES! They HATED Georgians!

Such mediational means reflect certain narrative constraints. This writer saw a non-negotiable gulf between his own and others' accounts. There are several similar instances of how narratives 'grasp together' events and characters in qualitatively different ways. Such frozen narratives can be seen in many conflicts such as those between Armenians and Azeris, Israelis and Palestinians

and Koreans and Japanese.

As cultural tools, narratives can be used to represent both the past and the present. And when we look at how people around the world use digital media to tell stories we see how this creates both support for schematic narrative templates and for counter-narratives. Some of the usual mechanisms of regulating and negotiating between narrative accounts are no longer readily available. Everybody can post their interpretation and reformulations of events without having to encounter and negotiate with others in ways that earlier had shaped such encounters. Everybody believes that he or she has a story to tell, and digital technologies create new possibilities for this, which brings us to the next section.

New performance spaces

The emergence of new media and technologies in our society has brought new conditions for mediated action and narratives as cultural tools. In recent years we might describe this as a transition from mass media towards more 'personal media'. All media are of course personal in the sense that they are mediational means for meaning making. However, the new possibilities of user generated content production represented by web 2.0 make the personal voice more apparent. Information and communication technologies can be used for producing and consuming narratives in a whole new way by people around the world, as seen on Internet sites like 'MySpace' and 'YouTube'. By using terms like my(space), you(tube) or face(book) we see combinations of the personal expression and the mediational means used in an integrated way.

There are indeed critical points to be made about the autobiographical obsession in the participation culture (Jenkins, 2006) of these new sites. The large number of videos and texts is formidable, and this raises concerns about who will be heard or read. Many postings on these sites are not viewed by others at all. However, our interest is not so much on these new social networking sites, but rather on some other mediated actions made possible by new digital media and the Internet.

With reference to Goffman (1959), we can talk about new 'performance spaces', especially for young people. They use these online sites to express personal opinions, views and comments either through videos taped at home, written text or other means that are uploaded to shared spaces on the Internet. This implies a space where we are part of the cultural flow of using different narratives and where we talk about ourselves. Performance is part of the expressive nature of human functioning mentioned at the beginning of this

chapter, and it takes place in different spaces of society, using a range of different tools, as, for example, seen in new virtual environments (Laurel, 1993; Turkle, 1995, 2007).

Mediatized stories are in this sense seen as global phenomena of shared narratives where our conception of mediation assumes a central perspective in understanding what these narratives represent. This can be linked to what Juri Lotman termed the semiosphere, as a continuing world of communication as a system like the ecological system or biosphere (Lotman, 1990).

One example is the blogging culture that started to develop at the end of the 1990s and which has now moved into new versions on different 'social networking sites'. However, we can still see examples of how these new performance spaces such as blogs play an important role as mediational means and narratives as cultural tools. In an online article by Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi (2004)[2], based on her research, she describes how blogs in Tehran represent an important performance space for certain groups in their redefinition of the self and consolidation of new identities. She discusses how, in Western democratic societies, cyberspace is often viewed as an 'alter' space of information, research and leisure that functions in a parallel or complementary fashion to existing public spaces and institutions. In countries where public spaces are controlled by traditional or restrictive cultural forces, however, the Internet can take on varied significance. In Iran, where the public sphere is closely monitored and regulated by traditional and state forces, the Internet has become a means to resist the restrictions imposed on these spaces. As she explains, for people living in these countries, especially marginalised groups such as youth and women, the Internet can be a space more 'real' than everyday life. From this perspective, an analysis of Internet use is an important tool by which to study socio-cultural forms hidden in everyday life but revealed in the virtual world.

She goes on to explain how, since the revolution in Iran in 1979, 'multiple personalities' have become second nature to their society. To maintain their security in social spaces, individuals must obey assorted codes that are particular to each space (private, public, official, etc.) or vis-à-vis their counterparts (women/men, youth/elders, children/parents, students/instructors, ordinary individuals/morality enforcers). The dissimulation and social invisibility in terms of appearances and behaviours are constantly shifting according to variables such as place, time and spectators, and they are defined according to the status, gender and age of social actors. For many women and youths, for example, particular urban districts and hours of the day demand concomitant performances.

The arrival of the Unicode system in the digital world has made the entry of young middle-class Iranians in cyberspace much easier. Specifically the

introduction of the Persian font and the possibility of typing in Persian have made possible an indigenous approach to the Internet. Weblogs have since become an alternative space to discuss matters censored in ordinary public spaces, but in this alternative medium this is done more through text than talk. Weblogs, through their 'comments' section, allow an open and wide discussion between different social actors on an unprecedented scale. In this sense, weblogs have become realms and spaces where all kinds of discussion and interaction between readers and writers can take place. The continual availability of and access to past written records and archives give youth greater self-awareness and self-development. More than any other generation, they have the ability to review and consider their past and their relations with others. In addition, weblog archives provide others with the ability to judge and comment on their track records. The existence of such archives forces bloggers to think more about what they write and accept responsibility for it.

Weblogs, as Amir-Ebrahimi explains, have become a key site for Iranians to participate in the new virtual world and at the same time rediscover their own selves and desires while constructing new relations and communities often not possible in real spaces. Weblogs also reveal important trends, desires and transformations in the subjectivities of Iran's next generation as well as an ongoing struggle between youth and traditional and state authorities over the limits placed on public discourse.

For youth, this empowerment begins with a redefinition of the self and consolidation of new identities. Many of them believe that their 'real/true' identities have been 'lost/repressed/ hidden' in the real/physical public spaces of Iran. Amir-Ebrahimi argues that the act of weblog writing in the universal, yet also semi-private space of the Internet, can help youth discover, reconstruct and crystallise their 'true' selves in virtual public spaces. In the absence of the body, these new 'bodyless-selves' enter a new world and form new communities which are restricted and controlled in their real physical spaces. At the same time, Amir-Ebrahimi refers to studies which found that some of these new identities can encounter new sources of limitation, self-censorship and disempowerment in the virtual, as well as real, spaces.

The lack of freedom in real public spaces has rendered virtual spaces an important site for new encounters, the formation of communities, finding friends (especially of the opposite sex) and, finally, the possibility of redefining the self according to one's own narrative. Thus, virtual space in Iran is a space for shaping repressed identities in all their simple and complicated forms. Through the continuous practice of writing, individuals can assert layers of their personality that they were hitherto unable to assert in real life.

Through text and personal history, individuals can gradually create a narrative of the self in virtual space that may be entirely new. Through this narrative, individuals undergo a process of identity-formation which the virtual world makes increasingly possible. In transient interactions such as chat rooms, these identities can be temporary and unstable. In weblogs, however, identities are gradually formed, crystallised and transformed into secondary identities for webloggers. To maintain this consistency and coherence of character, the blogger is obliged to abide by a more vigorous discipline of thought and articulation than is often required in real spaces. The individual acquires a new 'constructed' virtual identity that can be measured and judged by others.

Similar expressions can be seen when Sherry Turkle (1995) quotes a conversation with a woman who has made a date with a man she has been chatting with for several months. The woman is anxious because she feels a schism between her virtual and real identities:

> I didn't exactly lie to him about anything specific, but I feel very different online. I am a lot more outgoing, less inhibited. I would say I feel more like myself. But that's a contradiction. I feel more like who I wish I was. I'm just hoping that face to face I can find a way to spend some time being the online me. (1995, p. 179)

In spite of the increased feelings of freedom in cyberspace, Amir-Ebrahimi discusses how both female and male webloggers practice self-censorship. Yet, their censorship of the 'self' is different in cyberspace in the sense that the individual decides the limits. In this regard, the subjectivity of the 'self' among bloggers is one of the most important characteristics of this medium.

Other interesting examples of new performance spaces and mediatized stories stem from developments in online gaming communities and virtual environments (Renninger & Shumar, 2002; Gee, 2003). They are interesting because they show how these cultural tools create new conditions for storytelling and narratives. This can be seen in virtual communities like 'Second Life' (http://secondlife.com/) as an indication of recent developments in spaces online. This is sort of a 'parallel world' to our real and physical environment, where people buy land, build houses, make friends, get jobs, seek entertainment, and other things that people usually do in a physical environment. However, in this virtual space people create 'avatars' as representations of themselves through which they interact with other virtual characters.

The question is then how mediated action in such virtual environments influences people's conduct and interaction. From our perspective it is clear that such environments create new narrative structures and that digital storytelling becomes a central form of mediated communication in such worlds. New narratives might appear that build on familiar narratives, but ones that are transformed into something new due to the new environments and ways

of interacting with 'unknown' people. Such new cultural tools create different conditions for activities and people's conceptions.

Similar tendencies can be seen in multiplayer online games, where narrative structures are already provided, but where participants still create new storylines by collaborating, creating avatars and communicating through audio and written text. This can also be brought into simulations of real issues, like *Global conflicts: Palestine* (http://www.globalconflicts.eu/). In this online game, individuals enter an ongoing conflict in the real world as a journalist, where they meet and interact with different characters and hear their stories. Their task is to create a new digital story in the form of a newspaper article, where they can use available headlines, photos and quotes to build the article. In this way they both relate to different stories and create and express their own story.

These examples show the complex nature of how new technologies create new performance spaces where young people in particular take advantage of these new mediational means to engage themselves in digital storytelling.

Conclusion: Creating spaces for mediated action

The socio-cultural approach to mediation we have outlined is grounded in a few basic assumptions. The most important is the relationship between human mental functioning and the cultural, institutional and historical situations in which this functioning occurs. Our discussion of mediation is understood as 'agent-acting-with-mediational-means'. The important point made here is that the 'cultural tools' that we use for meaning making change over time. The main argument in this chapter concerns the nature of transformations embedded in the development of cultural tools and how they then fundamentally change mediated action. Something new appears as we start to use new tools. Another argument made in this chapter relates to the role of narratives in our culture. We have distinguished between two basic narrative levels. On one level we find 'specific narratives', which is how we usually understand narratives as consisting of a storyline, characters, events and so forth. On another level we can find 'schematic narrative templates', which are very much part of how we use narratives in our culture, but which are harder to identify and which are resistant to change. The latter kinds of narratives have the capacity to shape our thinking. We believe both narrative structures are important in analysing mediatized stories and digital storytelling.

The implications of these arguments are then related to the terminology of 'performance spaces'. We see this as an important way of grasping mediated action as the relationship between agent and tool in cultural and contextual settings. The interesting issue we have highlighted in the latter part of this chapter is the implications of new digital technologies for creating new performance spaces. We have just taken a few examples of much broader cultural processes of transformation due to technological developments. This is not interpreted in a technological deterministic or individual reductionist way but rather seen as a complex interrelationship between agent and tool. New digital technologies give us certain affordances (Gibson, 1979) that we might take advantage of in different ways.

In this way digital storytelling for us represents developments in the way humans relate to each other and their surroundings. They represent new performance spaces and possibilities for mediated action. Our challenge is then to grasp how these new cultural tools change the use of narratives and the act of storytelling in fundamental ways.

Notes

1. The information for this illustration was provided in a study conducted by Levan Karumidze in Tbilisi, Georgia. The interpretation, including any possible misinterpretation, however, is that of the co-authors of this article.
2. Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi is an urban sociologist and geographer who has worked extensively on Tehran, particularly on the southern parts of the city. Since 2001, she has been serving as the executive and scientific coordinator of the Atlas of Tehran Metropolis, a collaborative project between Le monde iranien of the CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research) and the Tehran Geographical Information Center (TGIC). Currently she is conducting research on new public spheres and the impact of cyberspace on the daily lives of women and youth in Tehran. The research project, 'Authority and Public Spaces in Iran', was assisted by an International Collaborative Research Grant from the Social Science Research Council's Program on the Middle East & North Africa. Data from this study were obtained through regular consultation of weblogs, different focus groups and personal interviews with webloggers.

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