What are the limits between grand narratives, small stories, and micro self-narratives in the digital age?

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The Digital or Information Age has given rise to the proliferation of and increased value in micro-narratives and small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2008), created and published from a first-person point of view, often on social media platforms. Small stories, coined by Georgakopoulou (2015), refer to everyday, informal, and fragmented narratives, which are proliferating in video format on a variety of social media platforms. Digital dissemination has removed the quality control that gatekeepers formerly held (Shirky, 2008) and changed the ethos of storytelling where self-narratives, opinions, and memories of the masses are more heavily valued by society. Self-narratives, posted as videos on YouTube and TikTok, can become repetitively banal representation of everyday life (e.g., cleaning one's house; going to the gym;) in a wider story economy (see Mäkelä, 2022). A reader/viewer/listener may often be left wondering so what after viewing a constant stream of self-narratives? Or they may question whether a self-narrative is true or a work of fiction? On the other hand, micro-narratives are also extremely valuable, and are an important part of sociocultural documentation, preservation, and social progress. Many large-scale positive changes have arisen due to collective actions inspired by self micro-narratives shared on social media, such as the #Metoo movement as noted by Mäkelä (2022). There are also countless public history projects that have given voice to marginalised persons who were previously ignored by dominant hegemonic narrative foci. For example, Ellis and Coleborne (2022) discuss how new digital communication tools offer opportunities to present public histories about maddness / psychiatry to global audiences in a new landscape of knowledge exchange that requires finding meaningful partnerships and contributions as co-produce. However, there are also limits to wider understanding from a micro-narrative only perspective. This paper argues that a chrononarratological approach (Birke et al., 2022) can be used to examine how ethos has been passed down to the masses, who are sharing a continuous stream of self-micro-narratives to an extent that wider authorial ethos (i.e., gatekeepers / authors) has now been largely devalued. The question is: How can new grand narratives (Lyotard, 1979) be developed by authorial gatekeepers by using a bottom-up approach of curating non-fiction self-narratives, or small stories, which arguably now serve as cultural data (many potential corpora) ready to be analysed to make further meaning of our current world? The current postmodern conditions require new consideration for how the proliferation of self-narratives on digital media, and how the increasing presence of artificial intelligence (AI) generated narratives, has broken down authorial ethos but also prompted an urgent need for the resurgence of authorial gatekeepers to make meaning out of the many self-narratives being self-published online.

The limits of self-narratives and their affordance to contribute to new grand narratives will be explored from a theoretical perspective. The limits of self-narratives as micro-narratives (i.e., self-contained completed stories) versus small stories (i.e., incomplete fragmented anecdotes) will also be discussed and how self-narratives can be analysed as a collective cultural dataset (i.e., corpus) for creating wider grand narratives about contemporary digital cultures. Case study examples will be used to contextualise this theoretical discussion.

The case studies will be drawn from YouTube or TikTok videos on the topic of sharing everyday life self-narratives of mental illness (e.g., bipolar disorder; schizophrenia; depression; AnxietyTok; etc.) (Cuthbertson, 2022; Gallagher, 2021). This non-fiction mental-illness case study focus will be used to help delineate between micro-narratives, small stories, and their potential to contribute to new grand narratives about contemporary life and stigmas on mental illness will be investigated. As Kilciksiz (2023) notes, this audiovisual media can contribute to further understandings of both the past and present of patients living with psychiatric illnesses and contribute to the wider understanding of using patient narratives the in medical humanities or medical historiography. The case study examples will be examined through the lens of chrononarratology which allows narratologists to explore time and place of situated narratives and can help determine the limits of how contemporary micro-narratives or small stories can be used to contextualise the historical context of mental illness in contemporary society.

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