

# Critical Approaches to the Storytelling Boom

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**Abstract** The proponents of the contemporary storytelling boom, such as professional business storytellers and self-help coaches, urge individuals, groups, institutions, and corporations alike to find and tell their story. Social media as the predominant narrative environment for contemporary storytellers promotes the instrumentalization and commodification of stories of personal experience. Literary fiction as the primary locus for narrative experimentation finds itself conditioned and challenged by the story logic of social media, but it also possesses unique affordances for a critical engagement with the current celebration of narrative. How should a narrative theorist position oneself vis-à-vis these developments that are currently changing the public notions of what narratives are and what they can do? By drawing from narrative hermeneutics and cognitive and rhetorical narratology, this article outlines a “story-critical” approach to the current storytelling boom and provides examples of how to bring narrative-theoretical findings to bear on public and professional nonacademic storytalk. The article focuses particularly on a critical analysis of storytelling consultancy, provides an overview of antinarrativist approaches and recent criticism of the storytelling boom in narrative studies, analyzes the story logic of social media, discusses the critical potential of contemporary “metanarrative” forms of fiction, and proposes narrative hermeneutics as one pos-

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sible paradigm for the critical examination of storytelling cultures. It concludes by envisioning future forms of public critical engagement for narrative theorists. Popular notions of narrative tend to celebrate the cognitive and moral benefits of storytelling while downplaying the limits of narrative understanding and popular story formulas; this article thus identifies the dissemination of tools for a critical narrative analysis among various audiences as an important task for narrative scholars.

**Keywords** storytelling boom, story-critical narrative theory, social media storytelling, narrative hermeneutics, metanarrative fiction, storytelling consultancy

“Narratives are everywhere” was once the triumphant slogan of narrative scholars, but now we are starting to realize that this pervasiveness might in fact be a problem. In contemporary social media-induced narrative environments, stories of personal change and disruptive experience often end up dominating over scientific knowledge or discussion of structural social issues. As scholar of social politics Sujatha Fernandes (2017) has argued, the contemporary storytelling boom is, in essence, inextricable from the neoliberal doctrine that highlights the upward mobility of an individual, while downplaying supra-individual societal structures and processes. Narrative has, indeed, a unique capacity to capture and convey human experience—what it feels like to be this particular person living through these particular events (e.g., Bruner 1991; Herman 2009). This affordance of narrative is now widely mobilized across spheres of life: storytelling consultancy thrives; economists talk about “narrative economics” (Shiller 2019), and practices ranging from personal branding (see Salmon 2010) to socio-political activism (see Polletta 2006; Fernandes 2017) increasingly draw from a narrative repertoire. What has not received much scholarly attention are the possible downsides of these engaging narratives that everyone should allegedly be crafting in today’s story economy. While Western literary and philosophical traditions have their own strong *story-critical* currents, contemporary practices of storytelling have been, for the most part, uncritically celebrated. We have organized this special issue according to the premise that this wholehearted embrace of storytelling is something that ought to be challenged by narratologists as well as philosophically, sociologically, and psychologically oriented narrative scholars.

Many contemporary researchers in literary studies, psychology, and philosophy like to claim that engaging with narratives enhances our mind-reading ability, or cognitive empathy, and that such skills play a crucial role in social interaction and moral development (see, e.g., Keen 2007; Kidd and Castano 2013; Nussbaum 2010). It is no wonder, then, that narrative is touted as the miracle cure for a wide variety of individual and social ills. Many narrative studies approaches lend generous support to

the instrumentalization of narrative form, and storytelling consultants and manuals eagerly repeat more or less streamlined versions of recent studies on narrative and empathy (see, e.g., Peterson 2017). Yet narrative may just as easily be put to uses that are dubious, if not dangerous. The widespread, uncritical use of narratives of personal experience in journalism and social media may have large-scale consequences that are neither intended nor anticipated. Experientiality may come at the cost of informativeness or of understanding complex phenomena, while the narrative form as such tends to complicate the distinction between factual and fictional rhetoric (see Björninen 2019) in contemporary storytelling environments. Self-fashioning through cultural narratives adopted from self-help literature is not without its risks either. While narratives are ideally suited to conveying human experiences, they may simplify and misrepresent—or simply fail to depict—complex social interactions or material processes that have a timescale that goes beyond an individual lifetime, such as climate change (see, e.g., Raipola 2019; Caracciolo 2021). Consequently, pertinent tasks for contemporary narrative scholars are to highlight not only the affordances but also the epistemic, cognitive, and ethical limitations of narrative forms and, in particular, to articulate the specific elements of narrative that function as such limitations (Mäkelä 2018; Mäkelä et al. 2021; Meretoja 2018; Meretoja and Davis 2018).

This special issue of *Poetics Today*, entitled “Critical Approaches to the Storytelling Boom,” seeks to redefine the role of narrative theorists and analysts in the contemporary storytelling boom. If research on the benefits of storytelling has caught on in the public imagination and various professional practices, we should be in a position to disseminate *critical practices* for the analysis of the forms and contexts of storytelling, as well. In this special issue, narrative scholars across disciplines analyze and critique different aspects of the storytelling boom and discuss contemporary narrative instrumentalization by various actors ranging from antifeminists and storytelling consultants to reading groups. In this introduction, we seek to briefly recontextualize the features of the storytelling boom within contemporary narrative scholarship as well as within some earlier forms of “story-criticism” in Western philosophical thought and literary tradition. We will also propose new theoretical and pragmatic narrative studies approaches to the storytelling boom that provide a critical edge and resist easy amalgamation with the general storytalk and the commodification of storytelling. Our primary goal here is to look for and suggest societally sustainable and methodologically productive forms of scholarly engagement with the storytelling boom.

The special issue does not rely on one, fixed definition of narrative, but

rather attempts a pragmatic approach to contemporary notions of “stories” and “narratives” dominating the public sphere. The starting-point for this exploration is the instrumentalization of narrative in various spheres of life, and in relation to this social phenomenon, the notions of narrative as a cognitive sense-making tool, a culturally mediated hermeneutic practice of shaping experience, and a rhetorical strategy to capture the attention of audiences amid the information overload are highlighted instead of a more traditional, structural understanding of “narrative” as a mere causal-temporal ordering of events. A particularly exciting tension emerges between social media and literary understandings of narrative. Social media storytelling may consist of a simple “share” or foreground the uneventfulness of one’s everyday life in ways that would not be tellable in any other storytelling context. Literary fiction, in turn, attempts to redefi- ne and regain its role as artistic storytelling amid the explosion of instrumental narratives, both conforming to and challenging the success of “true stories” and social media authenticity.

### **Inside Looking Out or Outside Looking In? Narrative Studies and the Storytelling Boom**

At best, a narrative-theoretical intervention in the business- and self-help- led storytelling boom would support the development of new, socially, culturally, and ecologically sustainable narrative practices in different spheres of life. The more sophisticated the commercially and politically motivated use of narrative becomes, the greater is the need for tools of critical narrative analysis among various societal and professional groups and the general audience. Yet the task is not simple, as both public discourses and collective imaginaries are saturated by storytalk coming from various actors attempting to make a profit and gain visibility with storytelling. The task of narrative scholars is made even more difficult by the fact that the storytelling boom has selectively adopted concepts and empirical findings from narrative studies, thus integrating scholarly discourse into the neoliberal aims and rhetoric of the “story business.”

The contemporary profit-driven storyteller’s stock response to critique is to refer to our allegedly universal need for narratives. The public discourse around storytelling is permeated by a “campfire rhetoric” that associates even the most commodified use of narratives with the elementary role that storytelling has played in human culture and evolution through the ages, thus echoing the twenty-first-century cognitive-evolutionary approaches to narrative (e.g., Boyd 2009). This is emblematically expressed in the marketing guru Jonah Sachs’s (2012: 44) acclaimed *Winning the Story Wars: Why*

*Those Who Tell—and Live—the Best Stories Will Rule the Future:* “Great stories are universal because at their core, humans have more in common with each other than the pseudo-science of demographic slicing has led us to believe. Great brands and campaigns are sensitive to the preferences of different types of audiences, but the core stories and the values they represent can be appreciated by anyone. Universality is the opposite of insincerity.” Short as it is, this quotation contains several keywords and associations of the storytelling boom: universality, values, sincerity.

While celebrating the universal value and stock of narratives, today’s most popular storytelling manuals feature lists of necessary and avoidable narrative elements for storytellers. In his recent best-selling manual *Storyworthy: Engage, Teach, Persuade, and Change Your Life Through the Power of Storytelling*, for example, Matthew Dicks (2018: 26) proclaims a recognizable “change”—even a personal epiphany—to be necessary for successful storytelling: “You must start out as one version of yourself and end as something new.” In fact, for Dicks, *storytelling* denotes primarily (if not exclusively) *personal storytelling*: “There is power in personal storytelling that folktales and fables will never possess” (25). Sachs calls for an “update” and “enactment” of myths as the most efficient marketing tool in today’s “story wars.” For decades, one of the darling theories of story consultancy has been Joseph Campbell’s (1949) *Hero’s Journey* or the *monomyth*, which argues for the universal story model of an archetypal hero triumphing over supernatural powers and emerging as an exemplary individual who is able to benefit his entire community. Sachs follows suit: “In my experience, the more of [Campbell’s] insights you use [in training marketers], the more likely your audiences are to say, ‘Aha! This my story!’” (147). None of the storytelling manuals and trainings that we have seen using Campbell’s theory acknowledges, much less engages with, the long line of criticism against Campbell’s ahistorical, universalizing Jungian presumptions, stretching from poststructuralist problematization of a collective unconscious to recent feminist interventions in the public sphere such as *The Heroine Journeys* project.<sup>1</sup> As Brian Attebery (2014: 119), among others, asserts, Campbell bends his evidence to fit the monomyth, while his theory “rests on shaky folkloristic and ethnographic grounds.”

Either derived from the universal stock of stories or rooted in one’s personal experience, the “compelling story” of the contemporary storytelling boom can thus be conceptualized as a successful amalgamation of the particular and the universal. The experiential truth conveyed by storytelling is commodified, and rather than treated as an intersubjective act, it is con-

1. See *The Heroine Journeys* project, [heroinejourneys.com](http://heroinejourneys.com).

sidered an asset in the attention economy. In the words of storyteller Matthew Dicks (2018: 26): “We tell stories to express our hardest, best, most authentic truths. . . . They [people] want the real deal. They want the kind of stories that just might make them fall in love with the storyteller.”

Professional storytellers clearly favor cognitive, psychological, and anthropological or folkloristic theories of narrative. For example, the amateur definitions of narrative by the storytelling consultants often look like smart adaptations of cognitive-narratological prototype definitions (Mäkelä et al. 2021: 142; Mäkelä 2021: 50). Dicks’s foregrounding of *personal experience* is a case in point, as it resonates with the emphasis of cognitive narratologists on narrative as *mediated experientiality* (Fludernik 1996; Herman 2009). Or consider the definition by Sachs (2012: 20–21): “Stories are how we humans arrange and recount our experiences of the world so that others will want to listen to and learn from them. They allow us to create order out of the chaotic, otherwise meaningless experience of our senses by editing out irrelevant details, defining a cause for each effect and providing meaning in the string of things we have seen, felt or even just imagined.” By emphasizing the ordering of lived experience, immersive storyworld details, and a recognizable “breach” (Bruner 1991) or “storyworld disruption” (Herman 2009), these storytelling consultants superficially align themselves with hermeneutic approaches which emphasize narrative as the human mode of experiencing time (Ricoeur 1983) and with the cognitive approaches that see it as a tool for “coming to terms with time, process, and change” (Herman, Jahn, and Ryan 2005: iv).

Moreover, the storytelling business has been eager to adopt the recently widely popularized studies on the links connecting narrative, reading, and empathy. Both cognitive-narratological approaches to readerly immersion (e.g., Ryan 2001) and experimental psychological studies of how reading literary narratives enhances empathy (see, e.g., Kidd and Castano 2013) have been translated and commercialized into training material for individuals and organizations. An illuminating example can be found within the web materials of “storyteller” and “coach” Katja Alanne who heads a storytelling training for organizations by the in-service training program at the University of Helsinki, Finland. What follows are fragments of a story allegedly told by a business manager encountering change resistance in her customer services team. This team was supposed to launch a new chat service until workers resisted. The sustained conflict culminated in an encounter between an employee and the manager:

So, one day Mirja came and talked to me and told me straightforwardly that “Listen Liisa, you’re not going to make this change happen by lecturing about

its benefits. You need to think about ways of helping us with this. This is not a piece of cake, and every one of us will need personal support from you.”

I went speechless and then hugged her suddenly. She went totally speechless too. . . .

And just guess if the chat thing took off after that. It sure did.

The storytelling trainer continues:

Didn't the story sweep you off your feet? Feeling anxious about Liisa's challenge and being relieved at the end by how all turned out so well. You were swept away and immersed by this story. According to research a story activates not only the linguistic but also the kinetic faculties of your brain. The latter occurred when you read about Liisa hugging Mirja. (Alanne 2019)

Enactivist second-wave cognitive narratologists will recognize the arguments as their own, as their recent research has emphasized the readerly enactment of the embodied actions represented in narratives (e.g., Kuzmičová 2014). Yet the ways in which these arguments are being watered down and bluntly instrumentalized may not exactly fit academics' idea of a successful dissemination of research results among the nonacademic audiences. Enactivist narratology does not assume a simple causality between narrative enactment and empathy or any other fixed rhetorical function or ethical effect. The theoretically and methodologically problematic equation between theory of mind and moral agency which does have supporters in narrative studies (for criticism, see, e.g., Gallagher and Hutto 2008; Zahavi 2014; Meretoja 2018: 3–5) results in the context of storytelling consultancy in a deliberately backward reasoning where immersion in a compelling story (such as the one quoted above) in a workshop is believed to make us more ethical and hence more efficient team workers in the future.

A reliance on discourses of the cognitive and evolutionary “naturalness” of storytelling thus efficiently and cleverly highlights the shared cognitive-emotional ground created by compelling narratives while downplaying the instrumentalization of storytelling in specific contexts. Such “campfire rhetoric” pitches storytelling as a “natural” part of our brain architecture dating back to ancient tribal settings and therefore somehow stripped off of manipulative uses. This naturalizing is particularly apparent in narrative environments that are saturated with conflicts of interest and of ideology, such as political debate and activism. While cognitive narrative studies as such cannot be blamed for promoting any particular ideology, its vocabulary lends itself easily to idealizing and naturalizing discourse in which politicians or advertisers sell ideas in the package of an emotionally appealing story that focuses on individual experience. The cognitive narrative prototype, the recounting of disruptive individual experience with

immersive storyworld detail, thrives in the contemporary story economy as “compelling stories” highlighting the upward mobility of the neoliberal subject. Maria Mäkelä has identified as one such recurring masterplot (cf. Abbott 2008) what she coins the “conversion story of the wellness entrepreneur,” the story formula where “getting off the hamster wheel” and the experience of burnout lead to new, transformative business ideas (Mäkelä 2018; Mäkelä 2020).

From the point of view of narrative theory, this curious yet strategically beneficial relationship between the naturalness of storytelling and its conspicuously manipulative uses can be conceptualized as an intentional collapsing of the cognitive and the rhetorical: storytelling is marketed with the cognitive vocabulary of essentiality, universality, embodiment, naturalness, and empathy, and yet it is precisely these features that are considered efficient rhetorical tools, or even weapons in the “story wars.” Such neoliberal, streamlined interpretation of the cognitive rhetoric is effective in effacing socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds of storytellers and audiences.

### **Antinarrativist Approaches and Recent Criticism of the Storytelling Boom in Narrative Studies**

This is not to say that narrative scholarship has not provided *any* resistance. In narrative theory and philosophy of narrative, story-critical views emerged at the same time as the so-called narrative turn. Among the first to argue that narratives impose a false, coherent order on events and experiences were philosophers of history who, from the 1960s onward, drew attention to how historians retrospectively narrativize the past. Such scholars emphasized that narrative is not inherent to historical events but rather something that historians project onto them. Louis Mink wrote in 1970: “Stories are not lived but told” (557). Similarly, Hayden White (1981: 4) argued that human reality is fundamentally nonnarrative and it is problematic to narrativize it: “Real events should simply be; . . . they should not pose as the *tellers* of a narrative.”<sup>2</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s, the claim that narratives are not only essential to the ways in which human beings make sense of their being in the world but also inherently beneficial, particularly in terms of moral integrity, became increasingly popular. Alasdair MacIntyre (1984: 219), for example, argued that moral accountability requires “the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life,” that a good life has the form of a narrative “quest,” and that

2. This section’s account of the antinarrativist approaches draws on Meretoja 2014, 2018.



“the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest.”

Since then, such positions have been fiercely attacked by several thinkers (e.g., Strawson 2004; Sartwell 2000; Currie 2010). The strong antinarrativist view is most famously articulated by the philosopher Galen Strawson (2004), who focuses on refuting two “narrativist” theses.<sup>3</sup> First, what he calls the “psychological Narrativity thesis” is “a descriptive, empirical thesis about the nature of ordinary human experience,” one that argues that “human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort” (428). Second, what he calls the “ethical Narrativity thesis” is a normative claim which asserts that “experiencing or conceiving one’s life as a narrative is a good thing . . . essential to a well-lived life” (428). Strawson draws attention to different ways in which individuals experience their existence in time. While “Diachronics”<sup>4</sup> consider the self “as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future,” “Episodics” have little or no sense of having a self that “persists over a long stretch of time” (430). He argues that “the fundamentals of temporal temperament are genetically determined” and neither “time-style” is “an essentially inferior form of human life” (431). However, Strawson then goes on to insist that the Episodic disposition is ultimately morally superior to the Diachronic one: “The best lives almost never involve this kind of self-telling” characteristic of the Diachronic disposition (437). For him, narrative self-reflection is inherently harmful: “My guess is that it almost always does more harm than good—that the Narrative tendency to look for story or narrative coherence in one’s life is, in general, a gross hindrance to self-understanding: to a just, general, practically real sense . . . of one’s *nature*. . . . The more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you risk moving away from accurate self-understanding, from the *truth of your being*” (447; emphasis added).

Strawson’s antinarrativist position relies on the notion that narratives falsify our self-understanding by projecting a false idea of a unified self. According to his “realistic materialism,” the self ultimately exists only during an “uninterrupted or hiatus-free period of consciousness” (Strawson 1999a: 7, 21) so that a duration of “up to three seconds” is “the normal duration of human selves” (Strawson 1999b: 111). He calls this the “Pearl view,” because “it suggests that many mental selves exist, one at a time

3. For criticism of Strawson’s position, see, e.g., Battersby 2006; Eakin 2006; Schechtman 2007; Ritivoi 2009; Meretoja 2014, 2018.

4. Presumably Strawson uses capitalization to emphasize that he takes these to be stable (genetically determined) “time-styles.”

and one after another, like pearls on a string,” in the life of a human being (1999a: 20). Underlying such strong antinarrativist positions is the tacit assumption that the world is given to us in raw, unmediated experiences, which narratives falsify and distort by imposing order on them, and that these raw, disconnected units of experience are more real than experiences that are narratively interpreted or remembered (Meretoja 2018: 57). However, this assumption rests upon the problematic empiricist-positivistic notion of “pure experience,” immediately given here and now, a kind of “myth of the given” (Sellars 1963: 127–96; see also Freeman 2015: 239). Most thinkers who emphasize the ethical questionability of narrative see the relationship between experience and narrative as one of *imposition*—of imposing order, meaning, and structure on something that inherently lacks it. They tend to see life as a temporal process, flow, or flux, and they regard this imposition as problematic on both ontological and ethical grounds (Meretoja 2018: 56–57). There is a need for story-critical approaches that do not rely on such totalizing views of narrative as inherently ontologically or ethically questionable but which, rather, analyze different uses of narrative in social contexts. Such contributions can be found in narrative hermeneutics and sociologically oriented narrative studies.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the most influential recent critical indictments of the storytelling boom within narrative studies have targeted the use of political storytelling or “curated” narratives in the context of human rights activism. Anthropologist Amy Shuman writes in her *Other People’s Stories* (2005) on the self-congratulatory attitude with which other people’s personal narratives are being adopted to promote “good causes” and on the ethical problems in promoting stories of personal experience as representative of a collective or a cause. In Shuman’s (2005: 5) memorable words: “The appropriation of stories can create voyeurs rather than witnesses and can foreclose meaning rather than open lines of inquiry and understanding. Appropriation can use one person’s tragedy to serve as another’s inspiration and preserve, rather than subvert, oppressive situations.”

A related critique of emancipatory storytelling can be found in sociologist Francesca Polletta’s *It Was Like A Fever* (2006). Challenging the storytelling consultants’ urge to look for the *hero’s journey* stories that rearticulate myths and invite clear moral positioning, Polletta argues for the political effectiveness of complex and even morally ambivalent narratives. Fernandes’s *Curated Stories* (2017) continues in a similar vein by critically analyzing the organized production and circulation of touching real-life stories

5. See, e.g., Meretoja 2018; Meretoja and Davis 2018; Schiff et al. 2017. We discuss narrative hermeneutics later on.

and the consequent attempt at “giving voice” to the oppressed by political and charitable campaign organizations. Fernandes traces the emergence of the storytelling boom (or what she calls “storytelling turn”) to the rise of personal storytelling in the civil rights movements in the 1960s and feminism in the 1970s. She makes a strong claim that these emancipatory movements and their storytelling practices were already usurped by the neoliberal policies of the ensuing decades as the telling of one’s story was made a spectacle and thus divorced from political concerns, particularly from matters of class (Fernandes 2017: 17). Fernandes also discusses other evident precursors of the storytelling boom such as the “therapeutic turn” with its self-help discourses (21–23). According to Fernandes, the new millennium finally saw the configuration of storytelling on the model of the market:

Nonprofit storytelling and advocacy storytelling are increasingly defined by a business model that emphasizes stories as an investment that can increase competition positioning, help to build the organization’s portfolio, and activate target audiences. . . . Narrating one’s story is also a process of neoliberal subject-making, as actors learn how to be entrepreneurial, self-reliant actors who seek upward mobility rather than building class consciousness. (18)

Yet another forerunner in the criticism of the storytelling boom is Christian Salmon, whose *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind* (2010; the French original is *Storytelling: La machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits*, 2007) appears to be the academic “story-critical” monograph most widely read and circulated outside of academia. Salmon’s (2010: 7–10) synthetic approach to the storytelling boom conceived as a proliferation in the “instrumental use of narrative”—recognizes the concurrence of the “narrativist turn” in social sciences and the “Internet explosion” in the mid-1990s (6). Of particular relevance is Salmon’s genealogy of the storytelling boom within US politics, management training, and advertising. Moreover, following narrative theorist Peter Brooks’s concern that “the very promiscuity of the idea of narrative may have rendered the concept useless” (Brooks 2001; cited in Salmon 2010: 7), Salmon scrutinizes the expansion of the use of “story” as a buzzword in various spheres of life from international politics to corporate strategies. Ultimately, Salmon (2010: 10) is concerned by how instrumentalized storytelling transforms the sharing and accumulation of collective experience into a unidirectional act of control:

The great narratives that punctuate human history—from Homer to Tolstoy and from Sophocles to Shakespeare—told of universal myths and transmitted the lessons learned by past generations. They passed on lessons in wisdom that

were the fruit of cumulative experience. Storytelling goes in the opposite direction: it tacks artificial narratives on to reality, blocks exchanges, and saturates symbolic space with its series and stories. It does not talk about past experience. It shapes behaviors and channels flows of emotion. Far from being the “course of recognition” that Paul Ricoeur detected in narrative activity, storytelling establishes narrative systems that lead individuals to identify with models and to conform to protocols.

While we share some of Salmon’s concerns, his idealization of the “campfire” of myths and the Western cultural (male) canon as conveyors of universal truths, as well as his demonization of the contemporary storytelling business—which, indeed, feeds on the idea of the neoliberal individual as a disciple of the storytelling industry—is unnecessarily black-and-white. Our notion of “wisdom” is and must be changing, and one of the driving forces not yet discussed by Salmon’s 2007 book is social media platforms that paradoxically both multiply and delimit the possibilities for collective (narrative) truth formation. Moreover, the contemporary literary sphere is far from being immune to the doctrines of the storytelling boom. Therefore it should not be idealized as a locus of “non-instrumental” narratives but instead critically examined as affected by the storytelling boom yet possessing unique affordances for its contestation. In what follows, we take up both the story logic of social media and the story-critical affordances of fiction as central elements of our theoretical project of reevaluating the storytelling boom. We then move on to suggest narrative hermeneutics as one possible paradigm for the critical examination of our storytelling cultures, and conclude by envisioning future forms of public critical engagement for narrative theorists.

### **Social Media as the Decisive Inducer of the Storytelling Boom**

Social media make the best out of the didactic potential of narratives and foreground the moral of the story, already recognized as a recurring element of everyday oral storytelling by twentieth-century sociolinguists (e.g., Pratt 1977: 136). New platforms, together with professional story-talk exemplified by storytelling consultants above, affect thus the way we understand “narrative” and what it can do. While social media have made us all storytellers and “consum[ers] of others” (Fernandes 2017: 2), both the rhetoric and the ethics of narrative (e.g., the terms of tellability; see Georgakopoulou, Iversen, and Stage 2020) are being radically transformed by its storytelling affordances such as liking, sharing, and algorithms that support strong and collective, “networked” affect (e.g., Hillis, Paasonen, and Petit 2015; Papacharissi 2015; Page 2018). As the storytellers of our time

suggest, the ultimate power of instrumental storytelling does not reside in simple cognitive immersion and embodiment but in the moral positioning and claims to universal truth that such vicarious experientiality permits. This is a conclusion that can be easily drawn by simply looking at the persistent masterplots on our social media feeds: politicians draw moral lessons from their touching encounters with troubled citizens; citizens draw moral lessons from their random encounters with public institutions; marketers use “true” survival stories of illness and burnout to sell products that have nothing to do with recovery; charity organizations look for—or increasingly curate, as Fernandes claims—inspirational stories of deserving individuals. With its increased emphasis on human interest, journalism fishes for the same kind of affective consensus generated by social media shares that “true stories” by individuals arouse.

Maria Mäkelä and her research team have studied the social media storytelling mechanisms that generate such didacticism with the concept of the “viral exemplum.”

We define the viral exemplum as the chain reaction, typically fueled by social media shares, from narrative experientiality to representativeness and normativity. Spurred in the first place by experientiality, this chain works in such a way that even when challenged by subsequent evidence, the initial interpretation and affective reactions may persist and lead to normative conclusions and political action. (Mäkelä et al. 2021: 154)

We argue that this chain reaction from experientiality to representativeness and normativity is the single most significant “danger” of narrative brought about by the twenty-first-century narrative platforms. It transforms the parameters of tellership, narrative audiences, and the “occasion” for telling (see, e.g., Phelan 2017); social media scholars call this transformation “context collapse” (Marwick and boyd 2010) when they attempt to describe how unprecedented, uncontrollable, and undetectable the tellers, audiences, and occasions of viral storytelling can be. The “compellingness” of a social media story is dependent upon an emergent narrative authority (Dawson and Mäkelä 2020), created by the affective networks of the like-minded who validate even anonymous or falsified experiences through sharing. No individual can thus be considered responsible for the ultimate rhetoric and ethics of such “shared stories” (Page 2018). Yet the requirements of authenticity and particularity often mean that the lives and identities of the individuals whose story is being told are instrumentalized, with scarce consideration of “narrative entitlement” (see Shuman 2005). Universal lessons are being drawn from random experiences and story-world particulars, affective resonance and bodily immersion are taken for

representativeness, and the rhetoric of viral storytelling guarantees the status of this doxa as the “truth” (Mäkelä 2021).

Losers in this game of narrative attention economy are tellers who cannot instrumentalize personal stories (such as health care or social service professionals), tellers whose story does not provide easy affective resonance (“undeserving” individuals), or tellers whose concern exceeds the parameters of human experientiality (such as climate scientists trying to warn us of dangers that do not yet manifest themselves in our daily lives). Sharing content that audiences might consider ambivalent is a social risk, and therefore easily recognizable masterplots with stock roles and clear moral positioning thrive. Yet even more crucially, the search for a maximally compelling story for social media platforms can backfire even in the hands of the storyteller who succeeds in creating a viral story—and this is a point that is difficult to communicate to actors such as politicians or activists whose main target is to gain maximum attention (see Mäkelä 2018). If one succeeds in creating a touching and inspiring story for a good cause, what can go wrong? When a prototypical narrative of disruptive personal experience, affording embodied immersion, storyworld construction by inference, and moral positioning on an individual level collides with the social media affordances that turn experientiality into representativeness and moral norms, the results can be unanticipated and even unwanted. Moreover, the interactive effects of these colliding affordances may further collide with the advocated idea. For example, when a leftist politician creates a viral social media story of her transformative encounter with a “deserving” individual, the affective chain reaction of viral storytelling, reinforcing the positioning of the sharers of the story as benefactors, ultimately counteracts the political ideal of non-individuating social welfare the politician attempts to promote.

This is not to say that viral storytelling would not come to any good in, for example, politics. A case in point, and an example of both beneficial and misguided uses of personal storytelling online, would be the *#MeToo* movement which succeeded in precisely matching the forms of the “story,” the platform, and the political structure under attack: patriarchy. The fact that the majority of the stories shared with the hashtag were stripped to the bare minimum, from any storyworld or experiential particulars, made the collective narrative effort the very picture of patriarchy as a *structure*. As far as the campaign succeeded in directing the attention away from particular experiences, by simply prompting the victims to share the hashtag *#MeToo*, it was able to make the invisible power structure visible. Patriarchy affords individuals with certain patterns of behavior while inhibiting others (from other individuals). The minimal

narrative elements were enough to convey the essence of the problem: the “me” signaling the disruptive personal experience and the “too” activating the pervasive structure of oppression. In contrast, some of the more elaborate narratives of sexual harassment by celebrities were much more likely to backfire, or to hand a loaded gun to the agents of the backlash, as they were more easily refuted by appealing to unlikeliness of details or biased representation of intentions and interpretations (see Dawson and Mäkelä 2020: 32). In fact, while contemporary storytelling consultants are currently making considerable profit among political parties and organizations, research rather consistently shows that political stances are rarely altered by stories of personal experience; consumers of emotional investment narratives are more likely to embrace even more fervently opinions they already possess, particularly when it comes to structural political issues (Polletta and Redman 2020).

### The Role of Fiction in the Storytelling Boom

In today’s storytelling boom, fiction writers do not hold a place of honor as conveyors of meaning but are forced to compete with other “influencers” within a single “attention economy.” A totalizing conception of the author as a brand that should secure its consistency across media and genres dominates the literary sphere. In addition to brandization, the current media environment is dominated by discourses on the moral and cognitive benefits of literature. Today, narrative fiction is instrumentalized and even medicalized in the service of the well-being and self-help industry. It is particularly common to claim that literature makes us more empathetic (Kidd and Castano 2013), which, in popularizing media reports, is turned into simplistic advice of how to capitalize on this benefit, for example on the job market: “For Better Social Skills, Scientists Recommend a Little Chekhov” (Belluck 2013). For the purposes of critical engagement with the storytelling boom, however, it is worth looking at how fiction itself critically engages with narrative. Narrative fiction has a long tradition of such engagement, and, in fact, one of its affordances is that, due to its self-reflexivity, it is well equipped to provide critical insights on the problematic aspects of storytelling.

Story-critical views have a long literary history. Classics such as *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary* famously ridicule the way in which literary narratives create false expectations of a life that follows a narrative arch full of meaning, adventure, and fulfillment. Modernists, however, were the first ones to explicitly engage in a fully fleshed-out criticism of narrative form, pointing out that life and human experience do not follow the form

of narrative. Virginia Woolf (1925: 188–89), for example, argued that fiction aspiring to “likeness to life” has “no plot, no comedy, no tragedy,” for “life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged.” Jean-Paul Sartre ([1938] 1965) raised the issue of the relationship between life and narrative in his novel *Nausea*. Its protagonist, Roquentin, famously suggests that there is something fundamentally dishonest and problematic about our tendency to narrativize our experiences: “This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it. But you have to choose: to live or to recount” (61). In the postwar period, the French *nouveaux romanciers* adamantly rejected narrative and developed arguments that anticipate the antinarrativist views that theorists formulated over the following decades. In 1950, Nathalie Sarraute ([1956] 1990: 61) questioned storytelling as a convention that gives characters a false “appearance of cohesiveness” and masks reality, which is in a state of constant transformation; in 1957, Alain Robbe-Grillet ([1963] 1989: 28–29, 33) declared that narrative is an “obsolete notion” because it “represents order” and creates “the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe.”<sup>6</sup>

Postmodernist fiction is permeated with a playful and often ironic relationship with the story economy that constitutes late modern society. Even more pertinent from the perspective of critical engagement with the storytelling boom, however, is twenty-first-century fiction, which has been characterized by various labels ranging from post-postmodernism to meta-modernism (Vermeulen and Akker 2010). Over the past few decades, much fiction has specifically problematized narrative as a form of representation, questioning various uses of narrative from ontological, epistemological, and ethical perspectives. Hanna Meretoja (2014, 2018, 2022) has suggested conceptualizing such fiction as *metanarrative fiction*, which is not only characterized by reflection on processes of narration, as suggested by previous discussions of metanarration (see Fludernik 1996, 2003; Neumann and Nünning 2012; Macrae 2019) but also by critical reflection on the significance and roles of cultural narratives in our lives. Much of metanarrative fiction has a strong story-critical dimension: it critically explores the risks and limits of problematic narrative practices. By making visible cultural narrative models that limit our narrative imagination without our awareness, story-critical fiction can expand our “sense of the possible” (Mere-

6. On the problematization of storytelling in literary fiction and particularly in the *nouveau roman*, and on the relationship between the narrative turn in fiction and theoretical discourse, see Meretoja 2014.



toja 2018)—that is, our capacity to imagine beyond what appears to be self-evident in the present and how things could be otherwise. The cognitive, affective, social, psychological, and ethical relevance of these fictions inheres in how they disturb the experiential recourse to culturally dominant narrative models of sense-making.

Story-critical reflection is particularly prominent in much of contemporary *metanarrative autofiction* (Meretoja 2022), from J. M. Coetzee’s brutal exploration of narrative as a form of self-deception in *Summertime* (2009) to Annie Ernaux’s turn away, in *The Years* (*Les années*, 2008), from individual-centered autobiography to a collective “impersonal autobiography” that charts the change of times through the itinerary of the author’s own life. The latter relates the unfolding of an individual life to historical events and change of fashions and mentalities, showing how even highly subjective bodily experiences, such as those linked to illness or sexuality, are mediated by cultural narrative models of sense-making. To take another example, Karl Ove Knausgaard’s autobiographical series *My Struggle* (*Min kamp*, 2009–11) critically engages with conflicting narrative models of masculinity, in the context of contemporary Nordic welfare society, but at the same time Knausgaard creates a brand of his ethos of “brutal honesty.” The way he capitalizes on his struggle with dominant cultural narratives exemplifies the way writers are enmeshed in the current story economy even when criticizing it (Meretoja 2022).

Zadie Smith argues that the answer to the question “why write” cannot be “to satisfy a pre-existing demand”; instead, “at the heart of creativity lies a refusal” (Gonzalez 2014). Part of this is the refusal to simply follow preexisting narrative models. Critical engagement with such models is pervasive, for example, in her recent collection of short stories, *The Grand Union* (2019). “Two Men Arrive in a Village” begins with reflection on a certain story type, an archetypal story of two men arriving in a village: “our example is representative; in fact, it has the perfection of parable” (135). While narratives are typically characterized by particulars—something happens to a particular person in a particular situation—this short story focuses on how the recounted story is a variation of a transculturally circulating narrative model with stock roles: “It goes without saying that one of the men is tall, rather handsome—in a vulgar way—a little dim and vicious, while the other man is shorter, weasel-faced, and sly” (136). The two men assault girls who may be “preparing food or grinding meat or texting on their phones” (135–36).

The archetypal story progresses through certain types of scenes: a tense welcome, eating together, the first violence that descends into bloody chaos, “the time of stealing” (“The two men will always steal things,

though for some reason they do not like to use this word” [137]), “pointless courage of our women” (“though it could not keep two men from arriving in the village and doing their worst—it never has and never will”), until the moment arrives when “bloody chaos found no more obstruction to its usual plans” (138). The highly self-reflexive narrator draws attention to the rhetorical effects of the narrative devices employed: “And yet the effect was the same: the dread stillness and the anticipation” (137).

After the violent incident, there is a series of retellings: “The next day the story of what happened is retold, in partial, broken versions that change depending very much on who is asking” (138). The chief’s wife compares the two men to a mythical whirlwind (*ga haramata*) in which their names and faces are lost, and the narrator ironically remarks: “This is of course a metaphor. But she lives by it” (138). The chief’s wife finds a girl who “told her story in full” (138), but when the girl comes to a point that does not fit the archetypal story, a point where the “short, sly man” wanted to reveal his name and present himself as a vulnerable human being, the chief’s wife stops the hearing. In a parable, men do not have names; they are not particular individuals, they are archetypes. In this metanarrative short story, Zadie Smith draws our attention to the archetypal narratives that circulate in popular culture and affect how we understand ourselves and others, such as those that repeat scenes of nameless sexual violence, or conflicts between “us” and “them,” the latter anonymous intruders who come to the community and degrade “our girls.” The point is not to repeat an archetype or reinforce its universality, but rather to critically engage with such archetypes in order to draw our attention to how such narrative models are repeated and through repetition naturalized.

### Narrative Hermeneutics

We propose that one solution to the need for narrative scholarship that critically engages with the current storytelling boom is narrative hermeneutics, which approaches narratives as culturally mediated interpretative practices.<sup>7</sup> Against the backdrop of the polarized debate between narrativists and antinarrativists, the narrative hermeneutics developed by Hanna Meretoja provides a theoretical-analytical framework that acknowl-

7. Narrative hermeneutics draws on the Ricoeurian tradition of narrative theory and has been formulated in its current form by Hanna Meretoja (2014, 2018), Jens Brockmeier (2015), Mark Freeman (2015), etc. See also Brockmeier and Meretoja 2014; Korthals Altes 2014; Korthals Altes and Meretoja 2018; Brockmeier 2016. Here, we focus on Meretoja’s version of narrative hermeneutics, as it is the version that explicitly engages with the current storytelling boom and focuses on the potential and risks of different narrative practices.

edges equally “*both* the ethical potential *and* the risks of storytelling” and addresses “the ethical complexity of the roles that narratives play in our lives” (Meretoja 2018: 2). This approach offers an analytic model which questions universalizing claims according to which narrative form in itself is either beneficial or harmful. It argues that “there is nothing in stories to guarantee that their possible ethical potential will be actualized. Narrative form makes a narrative neither inherently harmful nor beneficial; instead, its ethical value is *contextual*, that is, dependent on how the narrative is interpreted and put to use in a particular social, historical, and cultural world” (Meretoja 2018: 170). Meretoja proposes “a hermeneutic narrative ethics, which acknowledges that narrative practices can be oppressive, empowering, or both, and provides resources for analyzing the different dimensions of the ethical potential and dangers of storytelling” (2).

While traditional narratology approaches narrative as a form of textual discourse (providing a representation of a series of events), cognitive narratology in terms of universal cognitive models, and rhetorical narratology as a mode of communication, narrative hermeneutics conceptualizes narratives as *culturally mediated practices of sense-making* that—as explicit narratives—present experiences as part of a meaningful, connected account or—as implicit narratives—provide models of sense-making; they have a dialogical and a performative dimension and are relevant for our understanding of *human possibilities*. “Instead of being mere representations, narratives have a performative character that is intertwined with practices of power. As interpretations of the world, narrative practices have real-world effects. This is precisely what their (per)formative and productive character means: they take part in constructing, shaping, and transforming human reality” (Meretoja 2018: 47). Many sociologically oriented approaches to narrative similarly acknowledge the performative dimension of narrative and pay attention to how narratives take shape in social interaction and at the same time participate in molding the narrative environments in which social actors can take up different subject positions (see, e.g., Riessman 2008; Georgakopoulou 2015). Meretoja’s (2018) narrative hermeneutics draws particular attention to how we are constituted in a constant dialogical engagement with cultural narrative models of sense-making and to the existential relevance of narratives practices—that is, to how they shape our sense of what is possible or impossible for us as actors in certain social situations and cultural contexts. Arguably, the social pressure, in the current story economy, to reduce one’s experiences, lives, and identities to easily shareable and sellable narratives has a huge impact on how social actors perceive their selves and their possibilities.

Hermeneutic narrative ethics provides a heuristic model for evaluating

the ethical potential and dangers of different kinds of narratives. Meretoja's (2018, 2021) model provides six evaluative continua on which narratives can be placed in context-sensitive ethical evaluation of social and cultural narrative practices. These continua explore whether narratives: (1) expand or diminish our sense of the possible; (2) cultivate or distort personal and cultural self-understanding; (3) promote or impair our ability to understand the experiences of others in their singularity; (4) participate in building inclusive or exclusive narrative in-betweens; (5) develop or impede our perspective-awareness; and (6) function as a form of ethical inquiry or dogmatism. This model is applicable in the ethical evaluation of any cultural narratives, including "implicit narratives" that function as cultural models of sense-making but are not necessarily anywhere available in explicit, textual form (Meretoja 2021). These continua not only draw attention to aspects of narratives but can also be seen as interpretative strategies that can be helpful in the critical analysis of the narrative practices that dominate the current story economy.

### **Toward Engaged and Story-Critical Narrative Theory**

Above we have contextualized narrative studies within and vis-à-vis the contemporary storytelling boom, trying to provide some critical perspectives that might help us grasp this complex phenomenon and approach it with concepts and theories that move us beyond the general and easy storytalk abounding in public parlance and, to some degree, in academic settings. Narrative scholars should more eagerly pursue the role of a public intellectual, helping one's community to become aware of cultural narratives that surround them and shape the public space and imagination. Moreover, narrative scholars should take up the task of introducing analytical and critical aspects into the general storytalk, in order to provide different audiences with critical tools with which to encounter the torrent of touching, inspiring, and transformative narratives directed at us as citizens, voters, consumers, and constructors of identities. The promotion of storytelling on different fronts uses the language of authenticity, diversity, and interpretative freedom, concealing the fact that instrumentalized and easily shareable narratives often thwart such good intentions and misdirect our attention. The greatest challenges of our time—climate change, fluctuations in the global economy that perpetuate and contribute to global inequality and injustice, changes in the population structure, or pandemics—are supraindividual developments that defy narrativization (see, e.g., Raipola 2019; Björninen and Polvinen 2022). Scholars of narrative are the ones who should make visible the limits of narrative.

In 2018 we launched our consortium project “Instrumental Narratives: The Limits of Storytelling and New Story-Critical Narrative Theory,”<sup>8</sup> with the explicit aim of promoting a critical approach to the storytelling boom, not only within narrative studies but in contemporary societies at large. We have invited our narrative colleagues across disciplines to address exciting or irritating cases of instrumental storytelling in our *Instrumental Narratives* blog aimed at both academic and nonacademic audiences. Currently the blog features entries, for example, on Donald Trump’s rhetoric (by Marie-Laure Ryan and James Phelan), the instrumental uses of fiction (Brian McHale, Peter Lamarque), epidemics (by Hanna Meretoja and Avril Tynan), mental health (by Lasse Gammelgaard), fictional Amazon reviews (Lyle Skains), and medieval exempla (Robert Appelbaum). Many of us have noticed that scholarly commentary is made challenging in contemporary media platforms that—following the story logic of social media—favor clear-cut moral and antagonistic positioning (see, e.g., Lasse Gammelgaard’s blog entry<sup>9</sup>).

Our “Instrumental Narratives” consortium was anticipated by two research projects that involved public engagement. In “Dangers of Narrative” (led by Maria Mäkelä, 2017–20), narratologists crowd-sourced examples of dubious, unnecessary, or amusing storification in different spheres of life. The project, with its hashtag #mindthenarrative, proved a genuine success among the Finnish social media audience, attracting approximately one thousand reports and ten thousand Facebook followers, and resulting in two national podcasts and collaboration with professional groups ranging from journalists and advertisers to artists and health care professionals. The key to the success were the popularizing critical analyses of the reported stories posted on Facebook by the research team members; these postings allowed the social media audience to partake in the quasi-affective evaluation of the “dangers” of storytelling while at the same time familiarizing the reader with the terminology and approaches of narrative studies in an easily digestible and shareable form. The price to pay for all the social media visibility and popularity was, however, the project’s constant exposition to the very same laws of the storytelling boom that the research team was criticizing: the most liked and shared narrative analyses were those that the audience interpreted as conforming to a preferred ideology, while critical analyses of, for example, storytelling by the literary left was considered a biased “narrative” generated by the research project.

8. More on our website [instrumentalnarratives.wordpress.com/](http://instrumentalnarratives.wordpress.com/).

9. [instrumentalnarratives.wordpress.com/2020/06/29/lasse-gammelgaard-mental-illness-costumes/](http://instrumentalnarratives.wordpress.com/2020/06/29/lasse-gammelgaard-mental-illness-costumes/).

One of the greatest lessons of “Dangers of Narrative” lay in the ways in which it allowed its readers to recognize the pervasiveness of the drive for moral positioning as a feature of the storytelling boom that not even the dissemination of research can escape. Currently the crowdsourcing activity provides the “Instrumental Narratives” project with a corpus of instrumental storytelling and the accompanying notes by audience reporting the cases, a corpus that reflects the audience’s affective yet critical engagement with the stories. What still remains to be done is to find the right balance between descriptive and normative analysis of contemporary narrative practices, as we believe that while it is common to separate normativity and descriptiveness in research, a cultural-critical approach aiming at societal engagement needs to be both.

Such an ethos of socially engaged narrative scholarship characterized another interdisciplinary research project anticipating the consortium, “The Ethics of Storytelling and the Experience of History in Contemporary Arts” (led by Hanna Meretoja, 2013–16, Emil Aaltonen Foundation), which analyzed how contemporary literature and visual arts engage with the ethical potential, risks, and limits of different narrative practices in dealing with such issues as social injustices and histories of violence (see Meretoja and Davis 2018). It contributed to public discussion on how to distinguish between narratives that function as forms of appropriation and ones that enhance our understanding of violence and trauma, alerting us to the need for evaluative tools to differentiate between productive and problematic narrative practices and thereby giving impetus to the development of the aforementioned evaluative continua.<sup>10</sup>

The “Instrumental Narratives” consortium continues to promote public debate on storytelling that, instead of rewarding “good causes” and condemning storytelling by heretics, recognizes the ambiguities brought about by the clashes between forms, genres, uses, platforms, and contexts of narratives. A case in point would be the current coronavirus pandemic that is dominated by certain patterns of narrativization. As Hanna Meretoja (2020) has analyzed, the narrative of war has dominated the public discourse on the pandemic. The narrative of battle is used, in problematic ways, to attribute agency to patients, health care professionals, and “us” collectively so as to turn us from passive victims into courageous sol-

10. The project involved, e.g., an exhibition, in the Turku City Library, featuring the documentary photography by the photojournalist and filmmaker Louie Palu, and a public discussion event on the creation, use, control, and censoring of visual narration in the media in the post-9/11 age of terror. The project aimed at addressing the historicity of experience in ways that have been generally lacking in narrative studies and at providing conceptual tools to articulate the ways in which narratives are entangled with practices of power.

diers in a fight against a common enemy. Politicians use it, for example, to convey the gravity of the situation, to justify emergency legislation, and to legitimize sacrificing lives of minimum-wage nurses. Narrativizing the pandemic in terms of war is an example of the workings of *implicit narratives* (Meretoja 2021) that are not necessarily anywhere explicitly fleshed out in textual form but function as models of sense-making that steer us to attach certain meanings to certain phenomena. Articulating such implicit narratives could have a major impact in amplifying cultural self-understanding, providing critical insights on the dangers and limitations of dominant narratives, and opening up alternative ways of making sense of complex social phenomena.

### Outline of the Special Issue

This special issue at hand features a selection of articles that we hope provide both methodological groundwork and inspiration for further engagement with the contemporary instrumental uses of narratives. The special issue is divided into three thematic parts. The first section engages with the social and political context of the storytelling boom from the perspective of political campaigning; the second addresses specifically the instrumentalization of storytelling in social media; and the third suggests story-critical alternatives by drawing on the affordances of contemporary literary fiction.

The first section, “Narrative Politics and Campaigning,” focuses on politics and campaigning in the age of the storytelling boom. Andrea Macrae provides new insights into the UK storytelling boom by discussing emotive storytelling within UK charity fundraising letters. Drawing and building on research in philanthropy communications, she analyzes the typical linguistic constituents and narrative conventions of these stories, combining cognitive linguistics and classical models of narrative arcs. Kristiana Willsey looks at how veterans’ stories are used in political campaigns to make war meaningful. Her article juxtaposes a “vernacular critique of the storytelling boom” with the idea of “management of narrative” linked to the veterans’ need to curate the situations in which storytelling could keep its promises.

In the second section, “Social Media Identities,” five scholars offer their take on social media as the quintessential platform for the instrumentalization of storytelling. Alexandra Georgakopoulou shows how small stories research functions as a paradigm for critically interrogating the current storytelling boom on social media. She analyzes, in particular, the *directive of authenticity* guiding influencers’ self-presentation in Instagram Stories. Directives and other platform affordances shape social media small stories

into recognizable formats with particular values attached to them. Against the backdrop of how research on illness narratives has been based on a largely underdeveloped and essentialized notion of voice, Korina Giaxoglou's article discusses a new type of illness stories emerging in digital contexts, *entrepreneurial narratives* characterized by the connective mobilization of illness for producing economic and social value. She focuses particularly on how sharing stories of illness online is associated with the growing commoditization of the "wound." Matias Nurminen analyzes how radical, online masculinity groups and mainstream populist rhetoric use memetic narratives that function as *allusive cognitive metaphors* which are effective in conveying thought patterns and activating masterplots in the viral storytelling environment. Showing how narrative strategies do not discriminate between aims, he contributes to the discussion on the ethical responsibilities of narrative scholars. Hanna-Riikka Roine and Laura Piippo engage with the concepts of affordance and affect to show how computational agents such as platform logics give shape to experiences and prompt narrativization. Their discussion and analyses promote what they call the *semiotics of the imperceptible*; they suggest a critical approach to contemporary storytelling cultures that accounts for the entanglement of individual agents in collectivities and points the way toward recognizing the ethics of shared responsibility.

The third section, "Story-Critical Affordances of Contemporary Literary Fiction," articulates interpretative resources that narrative fiction provides for critical engagement with the current storytelling boom. Anne Rügemeier considers the role of non-narrative literary practices as an antidote against simplistic understanding and uses of storytelling. She explores the story-critical affordances of literary forms that rely on fragmentation, slowness of action, and intensity instead of plot and embodied experience, thereby problematizing conventional conceptions of what life is and drawing attention to small episodes, sensations, and passing impressions. In the final article, Hanna Meretoja, Päivi Kosonen, and Eevastiina Kinnunen lay out a theoretical-analytic framework of narrative agency and their new model of metanarrative reading groups. They discuss the potential of reading together metanarrative fiction, which critically engages with problematic aspects of narratives, to amplify narrative agency understood in terms of our ability to navigate our narrative environments.



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