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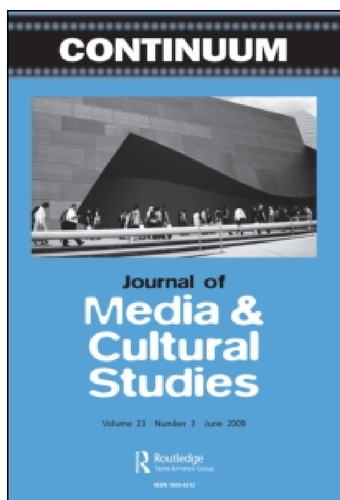

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Coaxing an intimate public: Life narrative in digital storytelling

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This article considers the practice of digital storytelling in light of contemporary theories of autobiography and affect. Using the concept of coaxed life narrative developed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, I analyse the role of digital storytelling in diversifying the voices in the public sphere. Drawing on Berlant's theory of the intimate public, I argue that given its formal restrictions and thematic preoccupations, digital storytelling produces texts focused on affective connection with the audience, contributing to the prevalence of intimacy and affect in the construction of contemporary citizenship. I conclude by considering the capacity of digital storytelling to articulate the relationships between personal experiences of structural social and political inequalities, given its narrative emphasis on closure, affect and universality.

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This article contributes to the current scholarship on the practice of digital storytelling by examining how Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's (2001) concept of coaxed life narrative can contribute to an analysis of the role of digital storytelling in diversifying the voices in the public sphere and subsequent impact on dynamics of media power and democracy. After situating digital storytelling as an example of coaxed life narrative, I use Lauren Berlant's theory of the intimate public to examine digital storytelling as a particular mode of autobiographical storytelling, focused on affective connection with the audience, which contributes to the rising prevalence of intimacy and affect as fundamental to the experience and construction of contemporary citizenship (1997, 1998, 2008). The article concludes by considering the efficacy of digital storytelling to articulate the relationships between personal experiences of structural social and political inequalities, given its narrative emphasis on closure, affect and universality. Following Berlant, the complex dynamics and risks of deploying affect and empathy as tools for politics will be considered in regards to the claims made for digital storytelling's power to 'amplify the ordinary voice' (Burgess 2006, 207) in such a way that those voices are afforded value in cultural and political arenas.

I am using the phrase 'digital storytelling' to refer to a particular practice – often also referred to as a movement – for the production of life narrative through intensive workshops. This practice produces digital stories: audio-visual vignettes of approximately two to five minutes in length which present a first-person voiceover in conjunction with visual material sourced from the personal archive of its author, edited together on consumer-grade computers and software. Digital storytelling was developed in the 1990s in San Francisco by the Center for Digital Storytelling (www.storycenter.org), which

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began teaching the practice in workshops to community groups (Lambert 2006). In 2002, Joe Lambert, a founder of the Center, published a book titled *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community* which has been taken up by many organizations as a guide for running workshops, and which also articulates the philosophy of the practice.

The majority of scholarly work undertaken on digital storytelling has been concerned with its capacity to bring the voices of ordinary and marginalized groups into the public sphere (Couldry 2008) or public culture more broadly (Burgess 2006). The work of John Hartley has also extensively considered the role of digital storytelling as a tool for fostering digital literacy both as an end in itself (Hartley et al. 2008) and as a means of contributing to the move away from the dominance of professional media and its attendant expert paradigm brought about by recent technological and cultural shifts (Hartley 2009). These issues are of interest to me also; however, I propose an alternative way of framing some of these questions which can illuminate the potential and limits of digital storytelling practice, by considering digital storytelling as a means of occasioning life narrative and proposing that it is a means through which a range of institutions participate in the construction of an intimate public. Placing questions surrounding life narrative and its uses at the centre of a consideration of digital storytelling is in keeping with a fundamental element of digital storytelling as defined by Joe Lambert and the Center for Digital Storytelling. As Nick Couldry has observed, the importance of reinvigorating practices of storytelling about our experiences as a means of addressing ‘the disarticulation between individual narratives and social or political narratives’ is fundamental to digital storytelling as a movement aimed at effecting change in social and political spheres through the inclusion of marginalized voices (2008, 388). Nancy Thumim has also shown the importance of self-representation for the institutional uptake of digital storytelling in the United Kingdom (2009). Of the many claims for digital storytelling made by its practitioners, and some theorists, the centrality of life story to digital storytelling’s power and potential is consistent (see Burgess 2006; Lambert 2006; Meadows 2003; Lundby 2008), and while some theorists have noted the limitations this may present for digital storytelling’s capacity to produce change in media production and reception (Hartley 2009; Couldry 2008), to date there has been little discussion or analysis of digital storytelling as a form of life narrative (the exceptions being Neilsen 2005; Thumim 2009).

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The uses and ubiquity of life narrative

In the introduction to their edited collection, *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1996) combine foundational thinking regarding the everyday from the field of cultural studies with a specific interest in life narrative to examine the diverse array of instances in which having and presenting an intelligible life story is central to the functioning of everyday life. They trace the variety of daily encounters in which individuals are called upon to produce accounts of themselves and indicate the range of discourses and practices which inform the production and reception of these life stories. Smith and Watson’s thesis is that life story, where one gives an account of oneself and also where one listens to the life stories of others, is the stuff of the everyday, taking place in encounters with medical and social service bureaucracies, performed in talk shows, political campaigns, self-help groups, and personal ads (2). While Smith and Watson are concerned explicitly with the rise of life narrative in constructions of American identity, much of their characterization of the uses of life story holds for other media-rich democratic societies such as Australia, the United Kingdom and Western Europe. Their analysis of the role of life narrative in the construction of national

identity as an imagined community, for example, can be adapted for the Australian context where the discourse regarding the 'promise' of a free life in a meritocracy dominates the national identity, but is underscored by the struggle for inclusion and recognition of genocide by the original inhabitants of the land (4–6).

Smith and Watson's introduction is concerned with articulating and unpacking the central role that being able to produce an intelligible life narrative plays in everyday life. While Smith and Watson acknowledge that 'we are not autobiographical subjects at every moment of the day, but we are called on to become autobiographical subjects in a variety of situations, a range of temporalities' (17), their work, along with that of scholars such as Paul John Eakin (1999), makes a significant claim for recognition of the role of life story in everyday life at the level of the social, the political and the individual's identity. In addition, Liz Stanley (2000) has examined the specific institutional and surveillance ramifications for life narrative that come with audit culture in areas such as social services.

The argument that life story is a recurring component of everyday life situates the practice of digital storytelling as one of many instances where individuals are called upon to produce an account of themselves which to be successful – that is to be intelligible to the intended audience – needs to achieve 'the right alignment of many kinds of evidence' into 'known scripts' (Smith and Watson 1996, 12). As my discussion of coaxing will demonstrate, recognition of the impact that the philosophy of digital storytelling has on the kinds of texts produced, the contexts in which they are received and the kinds of meanings they can generate within the public sphere is important if we are to examine the potential of digital storytelling to contribute positively to the democratization of media (Hartley 2009), and democracy more generally (Couldry 2008, 387–8). Such an analysis argues for the need to recognize the range of overlapping discourses and textual practices which facilitate and delimit how and where one produces a narrative account of their life.

If a given digital storytelling workshop is situated as one of a variety of encounters existing on a continuum from the intimate to the institutional (Smith and Watson 1996, 12) where individuals are asked to produce a life story, this alters the understanding of digital storytelling as a unique opportunity for 'ordinary' people to have their voices, and, more specifically, stories from and about their lives, heard. On the one hand, it encourages us to acknowledge that the very act of narrating life experience is ordinary (in the mundane sense) and opens up the possibility for us to consider how digital storytelling may be experienced as a repetition (albeit a variation) of the autobiographical invitations and injunctions that are a part of contemporary everyday life (Smith and Watson 1996; Foucault 1998, 60). Such an observation does not undermine or invalidate the specific processes of valuing ordinary experiences often associated with digital storytelling (McWilliam 2009; Burgess 2006; Lambert 2006); however, it does relativize the context in which participants are asked to partake in digital literacy projects through the telling of personal stories by establishing that an invitation to 'tell your story' is but one of many experienced by people in everyday life. (The ramifications that this repetitious call for autobiography has for digital storytelling's contribution to the public sphere and public culture will be taken up later in this discussion.) While Smith and Watson suggest that every occasion of speaking autobiographically presents an opportunity for the realignment and re-creation of the meanings attached to a life (1996, 14), I will argue that the specific narrative strategies of the digital storytelling form present significant barriers against digital storytelling being used as a means of redefining or challenging existing meanings attached to life experience, given its emphasis on narrative accessibility (Burgess 2006, 207), closure (Lambert 2006, 57), and coherence of theme (Neilsen 2005, 5).

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Putting digital storytelling in such a context also requires us to consider how individual digital stories are situated intertextually within an individual's practice of speaking autobiographically. To do so would be to reconsider Burgess's suggestion that digital storytelling 'sits uncomfortably with ... the available critical toolkit for textual analysis' by acknowledging that the specific autobiographical act produced in any given digital story exists alongside a raft of other autobiographical acts produced by the 'citizen-producer' (2006, 208–9). As I have argued in relation to autobiographical writing in Australian zines, individual life narratives produced by everyday people can be productively read intertextually with the other environments in which versions of their life are being coaxed or coerced (Poletti 2008, 36–43). Considering how digital storytelling is situated within the array of autobiographical practices of everyday life acknowledges that when 'we move in and out of autobiographical subjectivity, sometimes by our own desire and purposes, sometimes through the exertions and coercion of others' (Smith and Watson 1996, 17), intertextual relationships are formed between autobiographical acts.

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Coaxed life narrative

Following on from their early work in *Getting a Life*, Smith and Watson refine their conceptualization of the uses of life narrative in their 2001 publication *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. In a section titled 'Coaxers, Coaches and Coercers' Smith and Watson theorize the role that audiences, questioners and institutions play in bringing life story into being. The practice of coaxing life narratives is varied and occurs across a range of locations and occasions, and Smith and Watson extend their representative list of the kinds of situations in which life narrative is coaxed to include sites such as: family gatherings where collective memories are confirmed through story; medical forms and the 'standardized forms' of audit culture; CVs and job applications; self-presentation for inclusion in groups and societies such as sororities, church and neighbourhood organizations; legal environments where people swear to tell the truth; emails and letters from loved ones asking how we are going (51–2).

The conceptualization of life narrative as something that is coaxed or coerced in specific environments and contexts allows us to consider the relational function of life story, a feature of autobiography which is central to the digital storytelling movement and the importance it places on the telling and listening to life stories as 'a new form of general civic engagement' (Lambert 2006, xx–xxi). The movement of digital storytelling propagates particular ideas about the power of story to foster and promote community bonds through the exchange of narratives of life experience.[1] The importance and value of the individual's story to digital storytelling, indeed the positing of the pre-existence of a story itself ('Anyone can make a Digital Story because everyone has a story to tell' [Meadows 2003, 190]), informs the site in which the story is narrated (Smith and Watson 2001, 56). Thus, how participants shape and structure their stories in response to the framing discourse of digital storytelling needs to be considered. Kelly McWilliam (2009) has undertaken such an analysis in a recent article that considers how the discursive encounter between participants and the organization conducting the workshop results in variations in the kinds of life story produced. McWilliam notes that in the two case studies she examined (the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), and tallstoreez productionz) the narratives were found to have different emphasis in correlation with how the site of narration was constructed by the organization: in the case of ACMI, the emphasis is on memorial and nostalgic storytelling, while tallstoreez productionz constructs a site of storytelling which has an emphasis on aspirational narratives of youth

empowerment (154–5). An analysis such as this, examining the relationship between the stories and the discursive contexts in which they are produced, runs counter to Burgess's claim that digital storytelling facilitates autobiographical stories with 'minimal direct intervention by the workshop facilitators' (2006, 207) as it recognizes that stories are often told in the service of relationships; in the case of digital storytelling the relationship is partly pedagogical (Hartley 2009), partly social (Burgess 2006).

I would like to further the consideration of the coaxing of life narrative in digital storytelling by examining the seven story elements, developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling, which are the foundation of a digital story. These elements outline both the content and the textual features that define the digital story as a genre of life narrative coaxed within the site of the digital storytelling workshop, and form the basis of the 'poetics of expression' distinctive to digital stories (Hartley and McWilliam 2009, 5). The next section summarizes the seven story elements as outlined in Lambert (2006).

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The seven elements of a digital story

The seven elements are an important component of digital storytelling because it is these elements that define digital storytelling as a site of autobiographical storytelling and establish specific 'expectations about the kinds of stories that will be told and will be intelligible to others' and the speaking positions available to the participants (Smith and Watson 2001, 55–6). In briefly summarizing each element as defined by Lambert (2006), I will outline the role it is seen to play in a story's effectiveness (or 'power' [45]) and unpack how the definition of these elements characterizes digital stories as coaxed life narrative.

(1) Point (of view).
(2) Dramatic question.
(3) Emotional content.
(4) The gift of your voice.
(5) The power of the soundtrack.
(6) Economy.
(7) Pacing. (Lambert 2006, 45–59)

The first element, point and point of view, encourages the producer of the digital story to clearly define the 'realization' that they are trying to communicate in the story. The inclusion of a realization of some kind is essential because digital storytelling, as a movement, 'believe[s] all stories are told to make a point' and are ordered by establishing a desire or need in the central character, outlining the course of action taken to address it, and then presenting the 'realizations or insights that occurred as a result of experiencing the events ... and their relationship to our original desire' (Lambert 2006, 46). As Neilsen (2005, 3) has observed, this characteristic of digital storytelling makes it a suitable genre for therapeutic life narrative. The element of point of view also anchors digital storytelling as a medium of personal storytelling, where 'the frank admission of responsibility that the first-person voice provides' is seen as preferable to the 'authoritative, seemingly neutral ... obscure stance of the third person-voice' because of its ability to create authentic narratives (Lambert 2006, 49).[2]

The element of the dramatic question introduces the storyteller to the imperative of keeping an audience engaged and the need for a story to have structure. This explicitly brings the practice of digital storytelling into the sphere of the public, as the producer of the story is encouraged to think about how to construct their vignette in such a way that the structure is strong, but not surface level; audiences should be able to experience the

structure as the answer to a question they detected at the beginning of the story (Lambert 2006, 50). Thus the narrator is responding to the coaxing for a *good* story: one that will satisfy, surprise and engage the viewer (Thumim 2009, 629–32). Indeed, the elements relating to point of view and dramatic question are defined through an appeal to quality; powerful, complex, rich stories are preferred over stories that do not make their intentions clear or fail to resolve the issues they have raised (Lambert 2006, 51).

The need for digital stories to have emotional content is also framed in terms of the ability to hold the audience's attention. The 'fundamental emotional paradigms – of death and our sense of loss, of love and loneliness, of confidence and vulnerability, of acceptance and rejection' are presented as the features that enhance a story's ability to engage its audience and thus be intelligible (52). However, Lambert also warns against foregrounding emotional material for its own sake, where the outcomes may be exploitative, or the producer feels vulnerable. In doing so, producers and workshop leaders are encouraged to consider their lack of control over the story once it is made public, and the potential for unintended reactions or interpretations to occur. Emotional content, then, is presented as a desirable element of the digital story, but something that needs to be treated with caution and respect (53).

Personal point of view and emotional content are unified by the formal textual element of the voiceover, an element characterized as 'the gift of your voice' (Lambert 2006, 54). It is the voiceover that, according to Burgess, gives the digital story its potential for 'strong affective resonances' (2006, 210). For Lambert, voiceover enables a story to inspire reverie in its audience by producing a flow of associative memories that 'wash over us' as we listen to the story (2006, 54). As a textual feature, a voiceover does much of the work of engendering the identification between viewer and author, where affect is used to communicate similarity and foster empathy. So too, the soundtrack (element number 5) is understood as a formal component of the text which can underscore or emphasize the emotional content of the story (55).

The formal features of economy and pacing bring to the fore that digital storytelling is a multimedia form. Economy of text (which becomes voiceover) is desirable to produce effective juxtaposition with images, and in this element digital storytelling, in its pedagogical role, facilitates understanding of the relationship between different components of a multimedia text. As a textual feature, economy also focuses on a qualitative characteristic of 'good' storytelling, the potential for the narrative to produce closure: 'In any story we use a process called closure: "Closure means recognizing the pattern of information being shown or described to us in bits and pieces, and completing the pattern in our minds"' (57–8). Juxtaposition and closure are concepts used to introduce storytellers to the role of symbolism and metaphor in storytelling, with a clear preference in digital storytelling for 'implicit' meaning, which is related to the element of point of view. Like economy, pacing brings attention to the editing process, and the importance of considering how the story works as a whole. Lambert instructs digital storytellers that 'Good stories breathe' and again an emphasis on creating space for reverie and consideration by the audience is given (59).

Examining the seven elements of a digital story as the foundation of the way in which autobiography is coaxed in digital storytelling workshops supports Burgess's suggestion that 'as a cultural form it is marked by a fairly predictable, if not uniform, range of ways to represent the self' (2006, 209) not only because of the institutional nature of the practice as a means of distributing life story (as Burgess proposes), but also because the genre of the digital story is so explicitly defined and delimited. The impact of the seven elements is that, as a site of autobiographical narrative, digital storytelling coaxes life stories in

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response to very specific expectations about what constitutes a 'good' story (closed structure, dramatic question, economy and first-person perspective) and how that story can be made intelligible to its intended audience (emphasizing affect, reverie, identification and the use of universal themes).

It is important to pause here and acknowledge that the exploration of a life story as a coaxed text is not intended as a means to invalidate or undermine the truth claims of that text or the benefits, both social and personal, which may stem from its telling (as implied by Burgess 2006). Nor are coaxed life narratives to be imagined as being situated in an implied binary with some imaginary 'original' texts that are posited as being free of coaxing or coercing. As recent scholarship has shown (e.g. Whitlock 2007; Jolly 2008; Smith and Watson 2001; Miller 2002; Poletti 2008), all autobiographical acts, from the literary to the popular and everyday, can be usefully examined as contextual and relational instances of self-representation that respond to a range of ideas and philosophies about the uses of life narrative, as well as being attempts to construct and manage affective relationships with their audiences. Contextualizing the ways in which particular genres and instances of autobiography are coaxed furthers our understanding of the motivations for the telling of life story and allows us to situate the given texts within their broader textual, social and political contexts. Such analysis refuses the common dismissal of personal stories as being isolated from their context, resisting the positioning of autobiography as a 'low' or popular genre lacking in merit, or by limiting the autobiographical to the private and personal sphere, as though it had little to contribute to the furthering of knowledge about the world (I will return to this second question in my consideration of digital storytelling as an intimate public). For considerations of new media practice and the paradigm shift to user-generated content, the concept of coaxing furthers our thinking beyond the professional/amateur, producer/consumer binaries which are of less relevance to many areas of contemporary culture (Hartley 2009; Burgess 2006), and aids our analysis of the dominance of certain modes, textual elements and discourses in new media environments. However, it also provides a much needed way of positioning new media practices in relation to existing social, bureaucratic and cultural sites where life narrative serves a range of purposes.

Framing digital storytelling in this way allows us to consider how the movement increases the cultural availability of a particular mode of autobiographical storytelling by taking it into the community and teaching it through workshops. I will now extend this analysis by considering the impact that this mode of storytelling, and the speaking positions it facilitates, can have in the public sphere by examining digital storytelling as an attempt to initiate an intimate public (Berlant 2008).

As one of a number of contemporary theorists currently working on the proliferation of publics and the variety of ways in which they are constituted, Lauren Berlant opens up new ways of thinking about the intersection of the personal and the political in contemporary culture and media (1997, 2008). In *The Female Complaint* she makes a claim for the potential for (a kind of) formalist criticism to contribute to 'an analysis of the mechanisms that enable the reproduction of normativity not as a political program, but as a structure of feeling, and as an affect' (2008, 266), and her close reading of the texts which form a female intimate public in America demonstrates the continuing value, methodologically speaking, of attentive, engaged textual analysis. At the heart of Berlant's analysis of women's culture, and the theorization of intimate publics, is the tracking of the movement between the personal, the affective, the social and the political through the consumption of a range of texts (including films, novels, television shows, advertising, and citizenship training manuals), the modes of identification they foster, and the kinds of aspirations they

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make possible. In what follows I will outline Berlant's theory of how the intimate public functions and suggest how digital storytelling can be positioned as an attempt to construct a globalized intimate public through the production and reception of life narrative, and its explicit positioning as a 'movement'. In doing so I build on the incisive analysis recently published by Nancy Thumim of the tensions surrounding self-representation in the *Capture Wales* and *London's Voices* projects (2009) and contribute to the analysis of the variety of investments and aims which inform digital storytelling.

Defining an intimate public

In applying Berlant's theory of the intimate public to digital storytelling I will focus explicitly on her analysis of the role played by sentimental narratives in an intimate public, and the capacity that these narratives have for both sustaining and limiting demands for the recognition of experiences and ways of being different from those traditionally given 'voice' in the public sphere. Berlant articulates the issues at hand by observing:

> … when sentimentality meets politics personal stories tell of structural effects, but in doing so they risk thwarting the very attempt to perform rhetorically a scene of pain that must be soothed politically. Because the ideology of true feeling cannot admit the non-universality of pain, its cases of vulnerability and suffering can become all jumbled together into a scene of the generally human, and the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a passive and vaguely civic-minded ideal of compassion. The political as a place of acts oriented towards publicness becomes replaced by a world of private thoughts, leanings, and gestures projected out as an intimate public of private individuals inhabiting their own affective changes. Suffering, in this personal/public context, becomes answered by sacrifice and survival, which is, then, recoded as the achievement of justice or liberty. Meanwhile, we usually lose the original impulse behind sentimental politics, which is to see the individual effects of mass social violence as *different* from the causes, which are impersonal and depersonalising. (Berlant 2008, 41–2; emphasis in original)

In this formulation Berlant articulates what could be described as the unintended consequences of second-wave feminism's insistence that the personal is the political. As she acutely observes, the expression, or merely the identification, of the personal gets mistaken for doing the work of the political. For digital storytelling, the question of whether the outward projection of individualized experiences of revelation generates a 'passive … civic-minded ideal of compassion' in its audience is a critical one for the movement's capacity to contribute to the diversification of voices in the (elite) public sphere where structural political change occurs. John Hartley raises this issue when he suggests that digital storytelling needs to be able to be used for more than the communication of personal experience to reach its potential to bring about the 'emancipation of large numbers of otherwise excluded (or neglected) people into the "freedom of the internet"' in a way that meaningfully challenges how knowledge is constituted, understood and disseminated through the media (2009, 139–40). Thumim has also observed that the potential for digital storytelling to effect change to the power afforded cultural institutions to organize and codify 'ordinary people' is limited in its current form (633). The limits to the potential for change within the way digital storytelling is practised and framed as identified by Hartley (2009) and Thumim (2009) are replicated at the level of the texts the practice produces, where narratives of revelation and closure anchored in the singular experience of the narrator work to close down associations between the personal and the structural.

At stake here is how digital storytelling, as a programme for the production of life narrative, brings its participants into publicness via the genre of digital story as defined by

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the seven elements. One reason why digital storytelling can be understood as an example of an intimate public is that it *does* achieve the important effect of 'legitimat[ing] qualities, ways of being, and entire lives that have otherwise been deemed puny or discarded. It creates *situations* where those qualities can appear as luminous' (Berlant 2008, 3; emphasis in original); and this is evidenced by the testimonials available on a range of websites showcasing digital storytelling projects and watching the stories themselves. There is no doubt that as a movement being taken up in media-rich countries digital storytelling is creating communities of mediated storytelling (Lundby 2008); however, for Berlant, 'What makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience' (2008, viii). The digital storytelling movement is clear in its desire to make a contribution to the public sphere, and what marks that contribution as an attempt to create an intimate public is its insistence on the pre-existence of 'story' and the universality of themes such as 'life, loss, belonging, hope for the future, friendship and love' (Burgess 2006, 212). These themes, posited as self-evident but actually the product of the movement's own discourse, are presented as the common historical experience shared by the participants. The seven story elements, as guides for participating in digital storytelling (and the 'stuff' its participants consume), coax life narratives in such a way as to encourage individuals to shape their heterogeneous experiences into stories of personal reflection on these dominant themes.[3] The emphasis on impact and quality is the reason given for an insistence on each individual's story being able to be ordered by these pre-existing themes and modes of narration (Hartley 2009; Thumim 2009).[4]

With an explicit focus on bringing the voices of ordinary and marginalized people into the public sphere, digital storytelling has been taken up by a range of public institutions seeking to respond to the changing political and social environment and its attendant suspicion about authoritative, elite sources of knowledge (Matthews 2007; Thumim 2009). However, it also offers something much more affecting than this, an experience of inclusion and community building which 'flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain kind of experience of belonging' (Berlant 2008, viii). This promise occurs at the level of defining the site of life storytelling as authentic, powerful and dealing with universal themes that unite the community, at the site of the workshop where empowerment and collaboration between professionals and amateurs is foregrounded (Thumim 2009, 630), and, as I have shown, at the level of the text where formal elements designed to foster identification and reverie are used. This affective response to the process of making and watching digital stories 'provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live' (Berlant 2008, viii), and it is here that the inherent hegemonic function of coaxed life narrative may create barriers for the political aspirations often attached to specific digital storytelling projects (Thumim 2009, 630) and the movement more generally. Considering the central role of life narrative in digital storytelling in light of Berlant's analysis of the mediation of intimacy through institutions (including the media) and the reciprocal relationships such mediation creates between the personal and the collective provides a productive way to frame the complexity of coaxing life narrative into the public sphere through a pedagogical practice such as digital storytelling. Analysing digital storytelling as an attempt to create an intimate public sphere allows us to remain attentive to the issues of power attendant in institutional environments (Thumim 2009), but also to the structures of feeling that the texts and practices of digital storytelling create.

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Notes

1. See Thumim (2009, 627–9) for an analysis of the tensions forming around the use of digital stories for the construction and maintenance of community.
2. Hartley (2009) raises useful questions about the impact that this insistence on the first-person perspective and voice has on digital storytelling's ability to contribute to the democratization of knowledge.
3. See Matthews' (2007) discussion of obedient participants in *Video Nation*.
4. See Burgess (2007, 199–241) for some insight into how digital storytelling practitioners deal with tensions arising from these requirements in two examples, the BBC's *Capture Wales* project, and QUT's *Kelvin Grove* project.

Notes on contributor

Anna Poletti is Lecturer in English in the School of English, Communications and Performance Studies at Monash University. She is the author of *Intimate Ephemera: Reading Young Lives in Australian Zine Culture*, and in 2008, co-edited a special issue of *Biography* on the theme of autographics with Gillian Whitlock.

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