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Lessons from the *Dangers of Narrative* Project: Toward a Story-Critical Narratology*

Abstract:

The essay introduces new methods for applied and "story-critical" narratology that are based on the analysis of a crowdsourced corpus in the *Dangers of Narrative* research project. This analysis suggests that the prototype model of narrative developed by first-wave cognitive narratologists resonates strongly with the popular understanding of what a narrative is and what it can do. Yet, more interestingly, the prototype model also reveals the pitfalls of narrative form in contemporary media. Reliance on individual, unverifiable experience is the most pertinent risk perceived by the informants participating in the crowdsourcing for "dubious" storytelling. The essay also sketches a new theory of viral storytelling spun around the "viral exemplum", a concept created to describe the viral narrative prototype: a personal "true story" which is given undue representative and normative weight via online sharing.

Keywords: applied narratology, viral storytelling, exemplum, experientiality, storytelling

The narrative turn in the humanities and social sciences has coincided with a proliferation of instrumental storytelling in society and culture, but in public parlance the risks of storification have gone almost unheeded. Sharing stories is widely considered and conceptualised as an ethically sustainable practice, while social media has radically changed our narrative environments. In 2016 I started planning a project that would harness narrative-theoretical expertise in the use of different social and professional groups that live by or are affected by the contemporary storytelling boom[1]. Soon it became evident that, at least in Finland, there is an urgent need for easily applicable narrative-analytical methods not only across disciplinary borders but among what the academics nowadays, having been exposed to corporate management jargon, call "stakeholders" – non-academic partners from the private and public sectors.

Journalists and media critics need tools for understanding the professional consequences and social effects of the radical storification – the focusing on individual experience instead of macro-level or complex phenomena – that has swept across

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[1] Cf. Christian Salmon, *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind*, trans. by D. Macey, London and New York: Verso 2010 and Sujatha Fernandes, *Curated Stories: The Uses and Misuses of Storytelling*, New York: Oxford University Press 2017.

media during the last fifteen years. High school teachers yearn for easily digestible narrative-analytical vocabulary with which to supply young people, in order for them to be able to understand what it truly means to "tell one's story" – or even more alarmingly, someone else's story[2] on platforms whose ultimate agenda for sharing it is commercial, political or otherwise unclear. Progressive PR and marketing professionals are eager to know what might come after the storytelling boom, when the majority of audiences have finally grown tired of everyone telling the same "compelling" story of individual hardship and change. Voters are growing more sensitive toward the personal stories with which politicians are campaigning in social media, wondering, among other things, how shareable experiences relate to parliamentary representativeness. People working inside literary institutions are wondering how to reposition artistic narrative practices within today's narrative economy where everyone is trained to be a storyteller.

When we launched our research project *Dangers of Narrative: Contemporary Story-Critical Narratology* in January 2017, we decided to land where contemporary dominant storytelling practices are being shaped: social media. We sent out an open call on Facebook and Twitter to the Finnish audience, asking them to report "interesting, funny or dubious examples of instrumental storytelling" and mark them with the hashtag #mindthenarrative. The volume of the cases reported to us – now approximately six hundred – has wildly exceeded our expectations, and the corpus they form presents the positive problem of being usable as data – or, more precisely, as a large set of exemplary cases whose logic of selection is, up to a point, unaffected by the analysts' own scholarly biases. It enables us to observe the kinds of narrative forms that draw the attention of social media users, study the notions of narrative or narrativity that inform their reports and to determine the professional contexts in which the issues seem the most pertinent.

We analyse selected cases on our Facebook page and archive all cases, along with all analyses of them, whether by our followers or ourselves. Our Facebook activity – with almost seven thousand followers – has made the project a noteworthy participant in many contemporary social and cultural debates in Finland. We have succeeded in popularising narratology on a national scale, but it remains to be seen whether our "story-critical" approach will have an enduring effect on the narratological scholarship. Relying on this crowdsourced case material for some preliminary narrative-theoretical and methodological arguments, we invite our colleagues to consider the possibility of reshaping narratologists' formalist focus into an engaged, critical practice.

Yet introducing a critical approach to storytelling practices or narrative form is by no means an unforeseen innovation. The philosophical "anti-narrative camp"[3] is well known

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[2] See Amy Shuman, *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2005.

[3] See Matti Hyvärinen, "Foreword: Life Meets Narrative", in: *Life and Narrative: The Risks and Responsibilities of Storying Experience*, ed. B. Schiff, A. A. McKim, and S. Patron, New York: Oxford University Press 2017, p. IX–XXVI; Hanna Meretoja, *Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2014 and *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017.

for its critique of the generally story-positive accent within the humanities and social sciences. The philosophical criticism of narrative is mostly directed to narrative identity[4], emplotment of historical events[5], or it expands into a general poststructuralist critique of language and representation[6]. Instrumental uses of narrative have been widely studied in the rhetorical tradition[7]. Narrative studies in social sciences have traditionally had a considerate attitude toward stories as research material. The ethical issues of storytelling confronted by a sociologist working with empirical data mostly pertain to the research uses of other people's stories[8]. Yet recent years in social-scientific narrative study have witnessed the emergence of research and theories that acknowledge the pitfalls of storytelling, and especially instrumental storification as driving social change[9].

Our project wishes to introduce into the field of interdisciplinary narrative studies applied narratology that is not based on a top-down theory about storytelling but instead derives critical tools from a close analysis of contemporary narrative practices. If successful, this critical theory of narrative affordances will complement other critical theories that have more to do with the social conditions of use and circulation of stories. By affordances I refer, following Caroline Levine's influential theory[10], to the formal potential and constraints of a specific text type or medium. In the context of the *Dangers of Narrative* project, we have delimited the critical study of the affordances of narrative as a text type to the experiential prototype erected by first-wave cognitive narratologists. In the context of cognitive narratology, however, narrative as a text type cannot be separated from the general notion of narrative as a cognitive schema[11]. The other approach to the affordances of contemporary storytelling practices introduced by the *Dangers of Narrative* project has to do with the affordances of social media as a storytelling platform. The practical aim is to develop new narratological methods for narratologists,

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[4] Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity", *Ratio* 2004, vol. 17, pp. 428–452.

[5] Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1987.

[6] Crispin Sartwell, *End of Story: Towards the Annihilation of Language and History*, Albany: SUNY Press 2000.

[7] For a recent example, see Stefan Iversen and Mikka Lene Pers-Højholt, "Interlocking Narratives: The Personal Story and the Masterplot in Political Rhetoric", in: *Narrativity, Fictionality and Factuality and the Staging of Identity*, Berlin: de Gruyter [forthcoming].

[8] See Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage 2001, pp. 204–231; see Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi & Singapore: Sage 2008, pp. 196– 199.

[9] E.g. Shuman, op. cit., Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever. Storytelling in Protest and Politics*, London: University of Chicago Press 2006, Francesca Polletta and Pan Ching Bobby Chen, "Narrative and Social Movements", in: *Oxford Handbooks Online: The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, online publication, June 2017, Fernandes, op. cit., Lois Presser, *Inside Story: Why Narratives Drive Mass Harm*, Oakland: University of California Press 2018.

[10] See Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2015; see also Eva von Contzen, "Experience, Affect, and Literary Lists", *Partial Answers,* vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 315–327.

[11] See, e.g. David Herman, "Description, Narrative, and Explanation: Text-Type Categories and the Cognitive Foundations of Discourse Competence", *Poetics Today* 2008 vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 437–472.

scholars coming from other disciplines as well as general audiences and non-academic professionals by reshaping and re-evaluating existing narrative-theoretical concepts and theoretical frameworks. The theoretical aim is to reframe narratology and narrative theory as practices that would include in their agenda such societal issues as the late capitalist instrumentalisation of viral storytelling or post-truth politics.

In the following, I will give a brief intermediate report on the constantly evolving methods as well as empirical and theoretical findings in this ongoing narratological project of ours which is in many respects a somewhat exceptional venture for scholars with a background in literary studies. First, I will focus on the prominence of the experiential narrative prototype in our corpus in order to argue for the applicability of first-wave cognitive-narratological methods to its analysis. Second, I will sketch a theory of viral storytelling based on the distinct story logic induced from the crowdsourced narratives and their contexts of use, as described by our informants and further examined by the research team members. The first goal has to do with the affordances of narrative form, while the second concern comes close to social-scientific study of narrative practices as it focuses on the narrative affordances of social media.

2. The *Dangers of Narrative* Corpus and the Cognitive Prototype

The most fundamental general observation to be made from the corpus of reported cases is that the type of narrative most frequently considered harmful or misleading is *an instrumentalised story of personal experience*, conforming seamlessly to now widely accepted cognitive-narratological definitions of "narrativity as mediated experientiality"[12] and the narrative prototype[13]. This group of narratives features urban legends that end up affecting political decision-making; advertisement campaigns that exploit touching "real-life" stories; tear-jerking fundraising stories; personal conversion narratives by life coaches or proponents of alternative medicine; Victorian benefactor narratives on politicians' public social media profiles; cases where an individual's identity has been usurped and instrumentalised for affective storytelling; counter-narratives of godforsaken individuals that courageously fight the evil system; counter-narratives usurped from marginalised groups to support some hegemonic agenda; falsified "true stories" that are still going viral.

David Herman's definition of a prototypical narrative, grounding itself in cognitive psychology, counts among the most influential conceptualisations in postclassical narratology. According to Herman, a representation most commonly framed as a narrative by the receiver's cognition is "a situated account that conveys an ordered temporal and causal sequence of events, a storyworld with particulars, an event that disrupts this storyworld, and the experience of what it is like for a particular individual to live

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[12] Monika Fludernik, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, London and New York: Routledge 1996.

[13] David Herman, "Introduction", in: *Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. D. Herman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, pp. 3–21 and *Basic Elements of Narrative*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 2009; Marie-Laure Ryan, "Toward a Definition of Narrative", in: *Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. D. Herman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, pp. 22–36.

through this disruption"[14]. Herman does not verify his model by empirical research; our crowdsourcing for instrumental storification can be considered to answer his call for empirical testing[15]. Stories that our informants find dubious typically centre around an individual experience, have immersive storyworld details, and recount a narrative of radical change – often conversion. Another influential model generated within the paradigm of first-wave cognitive narratology is Monika Fludernik's redefinition of narrativity primarily as "mediated experientiality"[16]. According to Fludernik's theory, "there can […] be narratives without plot, but there cannot be any narratives without (a) human […] experiencer of some sort at some narrative level"[17]. Furthermore, embodiedness is key to Fludernik's notion of narrativity – a concept that helps one understand why storytelling is an act of domestication: reducing complexity into the experiential and bodily parameters of a human individual. I will call this model adopted for our pragmatic purposes from Herman's and Fludernik's theories the "experiential narrative prototype".

The most intriguing observation that can be made of the corpus is not only that the reported cases conform to this cognitive-narratological prototype, but that the commonly perceived risks inherent in narrative form can be outlined by using the experiential prototype model. The most representative case reported to us via crowdsourcing fulfils all Herman's criteria and, moreover, verifies Fludernik's theory of narrativity as mediated experientiality: the narratives are pronouncedly centred on individual experience, not verifiable events. Thus, the same cognitive stimuli that make a story "compelling" in contemporary media environments emblematise features of narrative that can lead to "dangers of narrative" reported or hinted at by our informants. Admittedly, our call for "interesting, funny or dubious examples of instrumental storytelling" potentially results in a heterogeneous set of narratives. We specifically did not want to give too many guidelines for the crowdsourcing activity, in order to retain the low threshold for affective audience responses. The accompanying messages by the informants have, however, been surprisingly elaborate as regards the risks perceived in certain types of narrative forms and practices. Of course, many popular narrative genres, such as jokes, are low in experientiality, but such storytelling instances are rare in our corpus; our call, specifically targeting the boom in instrumentalised storytelling and not just any narrative entertainment, seems to mainly attract the experiential narrative prototype. Keeping the particular nature of our corpus in mind, the dangers of the experiential narrative prototype and its conventionalised uses can be roughly summarised as follows:

(A) "Dubious" narratives tend to use a small variety of stereotyped plots. As diverse societal and professional groups as well as individuals are increasingly resorting to stories of personal experience, the merging of storytelling contexts leads to the saturation

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[14] Herman, *Basic Elements*, op. cit., p. 14.
[15] Ibid., p. 4.
[16] Fludernik, op. cit., pp. 12–13, 28–30.
[17] Ibid., p. 13.

of storified experiential knowledge and the particular types of (bodily) affective respons-es they bring about, as well as the banalization of narrative ethics. The omnipresence of inspirational stories of hardship, change and human kindness is a case in point.

(B) Storyworld construction and the requirement of particularity[18] counter the log-ic of fact, information or data. Personal stories are increasingly supplanting scientific or expert knowledge, but the cognitive experiential prototype does not support systematic collection and distribution of information. The logic of selection of storyworld particulars is, by definition, embodied and experiential, and as such far from providing an en-compassing representation of, say, a pertinent social issue. Furthermore, an individual's experience is beyond verification or falsification. From this it follows that fact checking is often an inconsequential measure as far as experiential narratives are concerned: what's the point of checking "facts" that exist mainly to support the rendering of *qualia* (the felt quality of experience[19])?

(C) Experientiality, particularity, and the "human scale" as core features constitute the limits of narrative form. As Richard Walsh argues, narrative evades complexity, and complex issues with emergent agency and action such as climate change or evolution are unnarratable at heart[20]. At the wake of the storytelling boom in business and journalism, even scientists are urged to tell "compelling stories". Just a quick look at the anatomy of a "compelling story" indicates however, that much of scientific knowledge is not ame-nable to emplotment, let alone to the narrative prototype with an individual experiencer and a discernible "world disruption" or "breach"[21], or "Trouble"[22] at its core.

I am not, however, suggesting – and neither are our informants – that experiential-ity and particularity would inevitably result in misrepresentation. Nor am I claiming that particularity is simply bad and generality good, or that contemporary storytelling should outright adopt representational practices from scientific discourse. A narrative without particularity ceases to be narrative, and a narrative without experientiality is a weak one at that. Rather, the "danger" inheres in the one-sided notion of narrative affordances and their uncritical, context-unaware use, focusing on compellingness and ignoring the cognitive flipside – the limitations brought about by the requirements of experiential-ity, particularity, temporal sequence and world disruption. In our ongoing collaboration with diverse professional groups in the *Dangers of Narrative* project, one of the central aims is to develop methods for recognizing issues and contexts, such as the climate change or the social inheritance, that would benefit from some other type of representa-tion, either supplementing or replacing the experiential narrative prototype.

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[18] On particulars see also Herman, "Introduction", op. cit., Ryan, op. cit.

[19] See Herman, *Basic Elements*, op. cit., pp. 143–153.

[20] Richard Walsh, "Sense and Wonder: Complexity and the Limits of Narrative Understanding", in: *Narrating Complexity*, ed. R. Walsh and S. Stepney, Cham: Springer 2018, pp. 49–60.

[21] Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality", *Critical Inquiry* 1991, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 1–21, (quotation from pp. 12–13).

[22] Ibid., p. 16.

As an example of the conformity between the experiential narrative prototype and the prototype in our *Dangers of Narrative* corpus, I will take one prominent cultural "masterplot"[23] commonly found in feature journalism and business storytelling: the conversion story of a wellbeing professional. This masterplot is so frequent in our corpus that we can very well call it a contemporary "genre" of instrumental storytelling. It features an individual whose resources have been exhausted by the hectic pace of contemporary working life and Western capitalism at large. The individual who has up to this point fulfilled all the expectations for good citizenship suffers burnout or depression and is forced to re-evaluate life goals and values. Next, a sudden revelation or encounter changes the life course of this person, and he or she ends up a generative role model who is able to benefit the society in a new, better way after having faced personal ordeals and learned a lesson[24]. This new role is concretised by setting up a wellbeing brand or writing a book, thus instrumentalising one's personal story of change for profit. Ultimately, the informants who have sent representatives of this "genre" to us point out the commercial double logic behind such storytelling: through telling a story of personal change, the interviewee provides journalism with an easy-to-sell inspirational story, while at the same time boosting the visibility of his or her business or new self-help book.

To illustrate the basic elements of this "genre", I quote the web headlines of some journalistic feature stories or "cases" reported to us – all of them are in Finnish, and the translations of the headlines are mine:

(1) "The forest saved Mirja Nylander: 'Trees started talking to me'" (Women's magazine *Eeva*, July 4, 2017)

(2) "Depressed by other people's expectations until finding peace in the forest – an encounter by a pond changed her whole life" (News website of the national broadcasting company *Yle*, May 21, 2017)

(3) "Willingness to help others is a virtue, but it can also drain you – having done charity work for years, a man from Turku tries to learn how to say no" (News website of the national broadcasting company *Yle*, August 19, 2018)

(4) "Engineer's radical reevaluation of core values – even a sworn materialist can be genuinely happy" (News website of the national broadcasting company *Yle*, February 3, 2018)

(5) "Emily Esfahani Smith realized that happiness is not a life goal and wrote a bestseller about it" (The leading Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, October 8, 2018)

The fact that the narrative prototype makes for effective clickbait is evident in these examples. The "genre" makes ample use of all the prototypical narrative elements listed by Herman: canonical temporal ordering relying on the model of the Christian conversion narrative, experientiality, storyworld disruption, immersive and relatable storyworld

[23] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative,* 2nd Edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008, p. 192.

[24] Cf. Dan McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005 on the American masterplot of redemption.

particulars. Accordingly, the informants' criticism directed against this genre displays all the previously listed "dangers" that I have attributed to the prototypical elements of narrative. One recurring complaint has to do with major Finnish news media increasingly providing the readers with personal conversion stories that could as well have been published in a self-help book or as a commercial campaign for a wellbeing company. What for critics seems like the traditional journalism's loss of agenda can, of course, be reconceptualised as "service journalism". This is how many journalists have, in fact, justified the contemporary dominance of "survival stories". Yet a critical re-evaluation of the narrative experiential prototype reveals the pitfalls of this masterplot.

What is the personal story representative of, exactly? With this question, the other two major dangers listed above become relevant: are the conversion stories an inclusive and comprehensive description of the forms of recovery from conditions such as depression or burnout? No, they are not. If journalism chooses to promote survival stories, do "human-size", strongly embodied stories of transformational encounters with trees (such as in the exemplary headlines 1 and 2) end up eroding reliance on non-individuating, statistics-based medical expertise that deals with unnarratable processes? Our informants think that this is indeed happening right now across media. Another dire consequence brought up in the crowdsourced reports and having to do with the requirement of particularity and the individuating nature of narrative is the fact that the masterplot of conversion and survival effaces structural injustice. Are the writing of a self-help book or setting up a wellbeing company solutions available for everyone who is ready to "tell one's story"? An ensuing tentative hypothesis worth probing has to do with dominant storytelling practices at large: does the contemporary dominance of personal narratives across media and platforms set up biased norms and values? I will dig a little deeper into this question by describing the logic of viral storytelling as manifested in the *Dangers of Narrative* corpus.

3. The Viral Exemplum

The most typical viral story in our corpus is a sentimental "true story" that almost without exception conforms to the experiential narrative prototype. Indeed, a common reason for a story to end up in our corpus is its virality; informants may report on the life cycle of a narrative and often express their concern over its uncritically enthusiastic reception. Typically, social media users justify the sharing of a story of individual experience by its "representativeness" – it is felt to illustrate some pertinent issue or concern and it teaches a "lesson". The genre is used strikingly similarly by politicians on their social media profiles, self-made social media celebrities and the traditional media, as this story genre often guarantees maximum visibility. These narratives represent, evidently, the experiential narrative prototype. From a narrative-rhetorical perspective, however, they merit further analysis that takes into account the changing constellations of reception and sharing – and not least because it is precisely the viral circulation of experiential narratives that ultimately brings about the latent dangers of the experiential

narrative prototype. The following general concerns related to personal stories going viral in social media emerge from the reports we have received via crowdsourcing:

(A) They give undue representative and even normative weight to one subjective experience. Social media prompts which urge users to "tell your story" or share "what's on your mind" not only direct the life-storying of individual updaters, but provide a dominant frame of telling and sharing in general: in social media, individual experience becomes knowledge.

(B) They are immune to fact checking: even falsified "true stories" can be used in social media to argue for representativeness and to set up moral norms. Sharing a story on social media primarily means sharing a particular kind of reaction – your experience on someone else's experience (on someone else's experience). This affect-based shareability creates a consensus that shields the story from criticism.

(C) They promote social-political reductionism. For example, viral stories "giving voice" to the oppressed scale down structural problems into simple moralistic stories with conservative positioning – Victorian benefactor narratives of "deserving poor" being one of the dominant social media story genres.

(D) Online story sharing promotes affective consensus and ethical conformity up to a point where users end up judging narrativised information by its righteousness, not by its referentiality or genuine representativeness. In a nutshell: in viral storytelling, the end justifies the means.

These dangers of viral storytelling stem from the previously listed dangers of the experiential narrative prototype, yet they are by no means reducible to stable generic features. In order for narrative theory to get a grip of viral storytelling, it needs to attend to the life cycle as well as the social and political consequences of "compelling" narrativity. The general storification of Western cultures and societies is partly due to social media narrative environments that prompt individuals to foreground their immediate personal experience, regardless of the individual's social or institutional role. The social media platforms also prompt the updater to foreground their experience of other people's experience[25]. As already noted, social and political reductionism is a pitfall that characterises narrative form at large: conditioned by experientiality and particularity, it fails to account for statistic, structural and other phenomena that surpass the embodied, experiential human scale. Thus, storification tends to reduce complex social problems to the level of the ethics of encounter between individuals, and virality maximises this bias in information or scope[26].

Yet when the informants comment on the reasons behind virality and risks related to it, ethics and normativity are emphasised even more than in commentaries concerning only individual interpretations of a narrative. Therefore, I have labelled the viral narrative prototype prominent in our corpus – and undoubtedly familiar to all social media users – "the viral exemplum". The logic of the viral exemplum is that of a chain reaction from

[25] Cf. Shuman on story ownership and the critique of empathy, op. cit.
[26] See also Walsh, op. cit.

experientiality through representativeness to normativity. When shared, a relatable individual experience becomes representative in a concrete, material sense. Furthermore, representativeness creates normativity as the affective consensus created by liking and sharing sets up an ethical norm. In this process, repetition replaces authority. In fact, my tentative hypothesis is that the viral exemplum generates *emergent authority*.

The narrative-rhetorical dynamics of experientiality-representativeness-normativity establishes viral emotional stories as normative exempla. Their ultimate "truth" lies in the affirmation of affective doxa instead of, or beyond, referentiality. This notion of truth resembles the Christian doxa underlying the premodern exemplum tradition that did not foreground the division between fact and fiction as rhetorically or epistemologically relevant, as the "truth" and the "moral" of the story was to be located on the level of universal maxims, and not that of referentiality[27]. Yet unlike the premodern exemplum, the viral exemplum sets an example for a righteous affective response to the narrative. The contemporary use of exempla comes with an experiential twist, as the shared values, authorised by God or other fixed authority, are replaced by an individuating notion of personal experience as the ultimate narrative "truth". Therefore, even a falsified "original" experience may lead to normative conclusions and political action. Furthermore, social media favours narratives that are structurally, rhetorically and ideologically unambiguous, because sharing ambivalent content is a social risk. This leads to a new dominance of highly conventional forms derived from the Christian canon such as redemption or conversion narratives and moral exempla. Generally speaking, an uncritical celebration of experiential narratives in journalism, education, self-help and business consultancy, reverberating also in contemporary humanist pleas s for the cognitive, psychological, social and moral benefits of narrative fiction, lends representativeness and ethical value to viral exempla.

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An emerging trend in social-scientific narrative studies advocates a critical reassessment of the social and cultural impact of the storytelling boom created by, on the one hand, civil rights movements and identity politics, and on the other hand, the narrative turn in the Humanities and social sciences. The basic tenet in these contributions[28] is the recognition of social risks within narrative practices of groups or individuals whose cause is, simply put, "good". Our study in the *Dangers of Narrative* suggests that also narratologists should pay attention to this pertinent question posed by the researcher of social politics, Sujatha Fernandes: "What are the stakes, and for whom, in the crafting and mobilization of storytelling? Rather than being the magical elixir we imagine, might curated stories actually inhibit social change?"[29]. For example, a typical report

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[27] See, e.g., Eva von Contzen, "Why Medieval Literature Does Not Need the Concept of Social Minds: Exemplarity and Collective Experience", *Narrative* 2015, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 140–53 and Maria Mäkelä, "Exceptionality or Exemplarity? The Emergence of the Schematized Mind in the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Novel", *Poetics Today* 2018, vol. 39, no. 1, pp. 17–39.

[28] Shuman, op. cit., Polletta and Chen, op. cit., Fernandes, op cit.

[29] Fernandes, op. cit., p. 3.

on a dubious use of narrative comes from within an ideologically homogeneous group such as a political party – people report "dangers of narrative" in the storytelling of like-minded people. If indeed the problems in contemporary storytelling practices arise primarily from the affordances of *form* rather than the (ideological) content, then narratological methods for a close analysis of these affordances could provide valuable support for these claims and practical conceptual support for storytellers and their audiences in the proliferating narrative economy. The question of form and content is not, of course, that straightforward: ideological content is not tied to social media "bubbles" nor to other collectives, but is constantly being shaped and reshaped in culturally dominant, replicating masterplots. Theories of virality and affect place storytelling at the centre[30], but do not define narrativity or elaborate on the repercussions of narrative form in the viral dynamics of social change and participation. A story-critical approach provides narratologists with a topical agenda vis-à-vis viral storytelling.

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