This chapter is divided into three main sections that position digital storytelling within a historical and social context. Firstly I discuss what constitutes a ‘personal story’ and then move on to consider how this rhetorical form has functioned in a cultural context in relation to social change. I argue that digital storytelling inhabits a particular space that sits on the brink of further metamorphosis should it adapt to some of the idiosyncrasies of online realms. I do not ascribe agency to digital storytelling itself, rather to the people and institutions that employ it as a tool. In the second section I describe the emergence of digital storytelling and its uses for personal empowerment, archiving social history, community development, education and social advocacy. I follow this overview with discussion of the cultural significance and critical problems that frequently emerge in scholarly literature on digital storytelling, in particular ordinary people and broadcast access, listening and development, expertise and sustainability and the ways in which context shapes production (coaxing a supposedly authentic voice) and consumption (framing the way that stories are interpreted by audiences). Finally, in the third section, I consider some examples of personal online storytelling in multiple forms including personal blogs (‘Same Plus’), collective themed blogs (‘Born This Way’) and affirmational vlogs (‘It Gets Better’) before moving on to discussion of specific possibilities for digital storytelling in online spaces.

Personal storytelling for social change

Personal stories are shared in a variety of contexts for a variety of purposes. Public speakers, ranging from politicians to stand-up comedians, use both self-deprecating and triumphant anecdotes to connect with an
audience, inviting empathy. The ‘personal’ dimension is intimate, not something that would otherwise be commonly known, and frequently revealing of a small or significant vulnerability. This makes the speaker appear human rather than remote and overly powerful. Thompson calls this the ‘new transparency’ and argues that the blending of personal and public is a constitutive aspect of public life in a hypermediated age (Thompson, 2000).

Personal storytelling also takes many forms, ranging from semi-autobiographical novellas, broadcast documentaries, poems and music through to aphorisms shared at the check-out. Autobiographical stories differ from fiction in that they are narrated in the first person and purport to be factual. Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as a ‘retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality’ (Lejeune, 1989, p. 14). Further, Lejeune argues that autobiographical texts rely upon a pact between author and audience whereby both agree that the content of the narrative is truthful. While Lejeune acknowledges the subjective nature of memory, self-representation and truth, he nevertheless regards this author–audience pact as a measure that distinguishes the respective authority and authenticity of factual versus fictional texts. While audiences tend to regard autobiographical stories as real, biographies on the other hand are conferred authority by the reputation of the author as a researcher or by their proximity to their subject, who is regarded as the ultimate source of truthful insight on their existence (Lejeune, 1989). Popular discourse also links the physical presence of a subject in front of a camera with actuality.

Written texts and sound/image texts diverge at the semiotic level. Written texts are an arbitrary sign system. That is, their material signs, written words, have no physical connection to the real thing that they represent. One does not need the actual thing to represent it in written words. Sound/image texts are a motivated, existential sign system. That is, their material signs, the cinematic sound and image, have a physical connection to the real thing that they represent. The filmmaker needs the actual thing to represent it cinematically.

(Lane, 2002, p. 5)

Lane raises a distinction between autobiographical forms that position audio-visual representations as more ‘authentic’ or ‘truthful’ than text. However, audiences and readers, via post-modernism and increasingly