The Private in Networked Publics

As storytellers decide what images, sounds and words they use to tell their stories they negotiate new and old meanings with friends and family members, the first stage of networked identity work. As they decide what line to tread between publicness (socially acceptable revelations) and the privacy that protects them from stigmatisation, they consider safety and risk for themselves, as well as their intimate publics.

This chapter starts at a macro level by examining what opportunities digital storytelling offers for participation in the public sphere. I consider how storytellers constitute themselves as ‘a part of’, or ‘apart from’ imagined publics. I canvas various understandings of the public sphere, particularly Berlant’s ‘intimate publics’, and describe storytellers’ capacities to imagine and internalise the responses of unknown publics. Rather than delineate face-to-face and online communication, I consider communication with publics that are always already networked, mediated by social and digital connections. I reflect upon the difficulties and opportunities that arise from social convergence and context collapse and the specific mechanisms storytellers use to curate their digital identities.

I group examples around three approaches to constructing a text of self – visible, bounded and pseudonymous – and three modes of content sharing – targeted, ad hoc and proxy. Storytellers’ understandings of privacy and publicness change shape as they undertake digital distribution of their stories. The agency they wield in creating these self-representations and the ownership they demonstrate as they share them, constitutes a new form of digitally enabled citizenship. I contend that the iterative labour of this networked identity work constitutes Intimate Citizenship 3.0. This in turn has a formative influence on the evolving expressions of non-normative identities.
Publics and audiences

How do storytellers, traditionally situated as audiences themselves, think about audiences for their creative products? What expectations do they have of democratic communication and civic participation in the public sphere? This section considers the differences between ‘publics’ and ‘audiences’ through discussion of theoretical and vernacular understandings.

Sonia Livingstone contends that publics and audiences, and indeed ‘private’ and ‘public’ can no longer be understood as discrete categories or binary oppositions (Livingstone, 2005). However, from the perspective of my research participants, there is a distinction and, in order to reflect that understanding, I use publics rather than audiences. While they tend to conceive of audiences as consumers of digital stories (or ‘the people I’m making my story for’) publics are understood mostly in the sense of ‘general public’. Within this amorphous category lies a wealth of meanings, constituted by shifting alliances with publics that storytellers are apart from or a part of, reflecting their complex relationship to and membership within groups they imagine viewing their stories.

Critiques of the Habermasian model of the public sphere highlight the exclusion of women, the working classes and a host of minority groups who lack the cultural capital to participate (Warner, 2005; Wolfe, 1997; Young, 1997). Fraser proposes that the elimination of social inequality (rather than the ‘bracketing’ conceived by Habermas) might be achieved by the social inclusion of multiple publics, both ‘strong’ and ‘weak’. Debates or public discourse must also encompass the traditionally excluded issues and concerns of the private domain (Fraser, 1990). This best of all possible public spheres would ‘facilitate a debate tolerant of diverse discursive modes, leading to a compromise among a range of interested rather than disinterested publics (plural)’ (Livingstone, 2005, p. 30). Meanwhile, Young proposes storytelling (among other communicative modes) as a means of reaching understanding among divergent publics (Young, 1997).

This revised model of a public sphere is pertinent to queer activist-oriented digital storytellers – a ‘weak’ public drawing on stories that originate in the private domain in order to address social inequities.

Livingstone surveys definitions of publics and audiences with democratic discussion as her frame, and locates them in various historical and epistemological contexts. She considers how technology has transformed ‘rational-critical’ debate into something less distinctly ‘political’