

Re-examining narrativity: Small stories in status updates

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Abstract

Social networking sites are an increasingly prominent form of computer-mediated communication that provides a venue for individuals to document their life experience through the publication of “status updates.” The stories reported in updates fall outside the literary, conversational, and electronic narrative canon, but are a rich data source for re-examining key concepts in narrative theory, including factors that give rise to perceptions of narrativity. This article examines the narrative potential of status updates found in the social network site Facebook, based on the analysis of just under 2000 updates posted by British users. The episodic narrativity of the updates is influenced by the online discourse situation where recency is prized over retrospection and updates are distributed within a multidimensional web of connections between Facebook Friends. The narrativity represented in the surface features and genres of the status stories are characterized by the present tense of Breaking News (Georgakopoulou 2007) and archived in reverse chronological order. These narrative characteristics are in keeping with stories in other Web genres (blogs, e-mail, discussion forums) and suggest that the parameters associated with prototypical narrativity are by no means abstract or universal, but constrained by the canonical data from which they were originally derived.

Keywords: narrative; status updates; social networking sites; Facebook; small stories; temporality.

1. Introduction

Contemporary narrative analysis has moved a long way from the universalizing assumptions of structuralist narratology which sought to establish abstract models able to account for the workings of all narrative. Despite recognizing the heterogeneity of the narrative corpus, the tendency to privilege certain

1 story forms over others has left a legacy for postclassical narrative theory in
 2 the form of a perceived narrative canon. The formation of this canon can be
 3 traced to the focus on literary texts in classical narratology and to the influence
 4 of Labov's (1972) work on personal narratives in sociolinguistics. Although
 5 clearly not representative of all narrative analysis, the prioritizing of single-
 6 teller, past event stories has contributed to the categories and qualities associ-
 7 ated with prototypical narratives and from which discussions of narrativehood
 8 and narrativity (Herman 1997) have been derived. In response, there have been
 9 calls to pay closer attention to stories that fall outside the dominant traditions
 10 of narrative analysis (Ochs and Capps 2001; Georgakopoulou 2007), particu-
 11 larly investing value in the fragmentary and ephemeral stories told in everyday
 12 contexts.

13 At the same time that the narrative canon was being challenged, the evolu-
 14 tion of narratives told using digital media provided a range of alternative story-
 15 like forms which enabled theorists to rework key concepts in narrative theory,
 16 including debates about what constituted narrative itself (Ryan 2006). The de-
 17 velopment of digital narratology was prompted initially by the emergence of
 18 electronic literature and the fictional worlds created in video gaming or role
 19 playing simulations. More recently, access to and patterns of Internet usage
 20 have widened the range of narratives available in digital media, and at the be-
 21 ginning of the twenty-first century, the artistic endeavors of electronic litera-
 22 ture are complemented by stories of personal experience that proliferate in
 23 blogs, discussion forums, and social networking sites. The discussion of narra-
 24 tives presented here proceeds from two points of impetus. First, it extends the
 25 analysis of stories that fall outside the canon of personal narrative to include
 26 those that are created in online environments. Second, it calls for a paradigm
 27 shift in digital narratology toward a contextually sensitive account that cap-
 28 tures more adequately the ways in which online storytelling can emerge as
 29 situated practice. The stories under scrutiny here are those published as "status
 30 updates" in a relatively recent form of computer-mediated communication: so-
 31 cial network sites (SNS). I examine the narrative-enabling and -constraining
 32 features of one particularly prominent social network site (Facebook), outlin-
 33 ing the factors which enable status updates to be interpreted as a specific sub-
 34 genre of storytelling.

35

36

2. Social networking sites: definitions and history

37

38 Social networking sites (SNS) began to emerge in the last decade of the twen-
 39 tieth century and have since expanded both in range and in usage. Subject to
 40 sensationalist treatment in the media, sites which use social software to pro-
 41 mote connection between their users (well-known current examples include
 42 Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and Flickr) are now recognized as the mainstay

1 of Internet usage on an international scale. SNS typically combine features
2 which Boyd and Ellison (2007) define as offering users a public or semi-public
3 profile within a bounded system; an articulated list of other users with whom
4 the user shares an interest, and the ability to traverse the list of connections
5 made by themselves and others within the system.

6 Facebook was first launched as a network for a niche community in 2004,
7 when it was made available to Harvard college students only. In the five years
8 following, it achieved remarkable uptake outside that original community and
9 is currently the most frequently used SNS in the United Kingdom, boasting 17
10 million unique visitors each month (Kazeniak 2009). Facebook is clearly em-
11 bedded in a participatory culture (Jenkins 2006), where the more static display
12 of personal profile information is framed by a variety of communicative chan-
13 nels for interaction. Friends can send each other e-mail messages, use an in-
14 stant messenger service, join discussion threads, share photographs and tag
15 one another in them, post public messages on another user's profile (in Face-
16 book terminology, their "wall"), and send messages about their current activity
17 via a "status update" to all the Friends on their list. Facebook's community is
18 best described as a "networked public" (Boyd 2008: 25): a public transformed
19 by the practices and potential of networked media. In particular, the networks
20 in Facebook are characterized by collapsed contexts where groups usually seg-
21 mented in offline contexts are brought together in one environment. Interaction
22 with Friends on Facebook (such as posting an update) might be understood as
23 one measure which offsets the necessarily discontinuous nature of the social
24 relationships between the writer and their Friends (Sigman 1991), acting as a
25 means by which the participants can make social realities like relationships
26 "real" (Leeds-Hurwitz 2005).

27 Status updates appear in the individual's profile in a standardized template
28 where the user is prompted to respond to the question "What are you doing
29 right now?" by completing the phrase "X is . . .".¹ The status update then ap-
30 pears in the individual's profile and is distributed into the news feeds of all
31 Friends listed on the individual's group. Over time, the updates compose an
32 archive which documents an ongoing narrative of the writer's life experiences.
33 At the time when the data for this project was collected, updates appeared the
34 least dialogic of interaction forms on Facebook, for they did not contain a com-
35 menting facility.² Instead, the audience could respond to an update by privately
36 emailing the writer, or posting a semi-public message on their wall. For ex-
37 ample, when a writer announced they were expecting a baby via their status
38 update, their wall was quickly filled with congratulatory messages. Similarly,
39 an update indicating that a writer had received bad news prompted messages of
40 condolence or concern. The variation in response channels makes it difficult
41 to track correlations between status update and specific patterns of feedback
42 within this sample. Thus while the updates must be understood as shaped by

1 their rhetorical context, the following analysis focuses on the status updates
2 themselves.³

3 The sample of status updates was taken from the profiles of 100 white British
4 Facebook users.⁴ The status updates were tracked for a two-month period,
5 yielding a total of 1906 updates. As single teller accounts of life experience
6 oriented to the teller's social self, status updates share some affinity with the
7 genre of life history (Linde 1993). Like life histories, the developing archive of
8 status updates is a necessarily discontinuous and open unit that unfolds over
9 time and is revised in keeping with the writer's life experiences. But the reports
10 posted in status updates are neither extensive in length, nor do they focus on
11 significant episodes in the speaker's history. Instead, status updates typically
12 focus on the minutiae of everyday events. Writers update about a range of
13 topics, including the weather, their mood, travel, leisure activities, preparing
14 food, or domestic chores. The content of the updates contrasts with the dramatic
15 disruptions found in canonical narrative studies (cf. Labov's "danger of
16 death corpus"). Instead, the updates may be aligned with Malinowski's concept
17 of phatic communion, where utterances with unexceptional content are
18 used to signal communicative connection between the writer and their Friends
19 (Jakobson 1988 [1960]). In order to account for these highly non-canonical
20 stories, we need to move beyond prototypical models of narrative structure
21 which emphasize past tense stories with a tellability which emphasizes "conflict"
22 (Herman 2007: 10). Instead, updates are highly suggestive of the genre
23 described by Georgakopoulou (2007) as small stories. Small stories are characterized
24 by fluidity, plasticity, and open-endedness, usually occurring in the
25 small moments of talk, rather than as distinct, fully fledged units (Georgakopoulou
26 2007: 36). As Georgakopoulou's work readily attests, extending narrative
27 analysis to take account of these everyday, interactional stories is a useful
28 means by which key concepts of narrative structure and function can be revisited
29 and reworked. In the same spirit, I approach the analysis of status updates
30 in order to understand more fully the narrative potential of this form of online
31 communication.

32

33

34 **3. The issue of narrative definition**

35

36 Determining the narrative potential of the status updates requires the analyst to
37 confront the well-documented dilemma of trying to define narrative in the first
38 place. This is no simple task. While minimal definitions based on obligatory
39 criteria enabled clear-cut contrasts between whether a text was deemed to be
40 a narrative or not, the verbally oriented nature of definitions was found to be
41 too restrictive and unable to account for the expansive diversity of texts that
42 readers recognized as story-like. On the other hand, opening up the category of

1 narrative so far that seemingly anything might count as a story (such as a list
2 of Facebook wall posts) both idealizes narrative as a form and dilutes its clarity
3 so far as to render it almost unusable (Ryan 2006). In seeking an intermediate
4 position between the polarities of minimal narrative criteria and generic open-
5 ness, attempts to pin down narrative and its characteristics have burgeoned.
6 Binary models of definition have been rejected in favor of perceiving narrative
7 as a fuzzy set where qualities of narrativity enable texts to be more or less
8 easily recognized as narrative-like. These qualities of narrativity are not tied to
9 specific linguistic forms (e.g., past-tense finite verbs). Instead, narrative is un-
10 derstood as a cognitive construct, built in response to stimuli that can be found
11 in various media (Ryan 2004: 8) and shaped by the reader/hearer's pre-existing
12 world knowledge (Herman 1997). The exact characteristics said to contribute
13 to the perception of narrativity are many and various, but notably have been
14 influenced by the dataset typical of the narrative canon. A full survey falls be-
15 yond the remit of this paper, and I refer the interested reader to Ryan (2004,
16 2006, 2007) for a more extensive review.

17 Three semantic properties are significant for the analysis of narrativity in
18 Facebook's status updates. First, narrativity is generated by the recognition of
19 reported events, ordered within a temporal framework, and experienced by an
20 individuated existent who acts as a filtering consciousness which makes sense of
21 them. More contentiously, the inferred connections between temporally ordered
22 events are attributed with distinctive degrees of narrativity. Typically,
23 causal connections are understood as more narrative-like than pure temporality,
24 especially when combined into macro-level sequences which constitute a
25 unified whole (Giora and Shen 1994). Strong narrativity is associated with se-
26 quences which signal a teleological focus, an over-arching framework of com-
27 plication and resolution, and/or a clearly defined point of closure which is often
28 laden with interpretive significance.

29 The perception of temporality, a framing consciousness, and a holistic se-
30 quence are by no means the only qualities that contribute to the identification
31 of narrative. Nor does the reiteration of these qualities resolve the hegemonic
32 status of the canonical texts that underpin notions of prototypical narrativity.
33 Rather, these narrative characteristics are regarded as a starting point which in
34 turn might be stretched and enriched by the examination of data that is a far cry
35 from the lengthy complexity of literary narratives or self-contained narratives
36 of personal experience.

37

38

39 **4. Narrative characteristics of the status update**

40

41 As a self-contained unit, the status update can be interpreted as bearing cer-
42 tain narrative properties. First, the update always contains reference to an

1 individual who reports their experiences: the writer themselves. The articula-
 2 tion of a named individual is automatically generated in the update template by
 3 the Facebook interface as the start point from which any and all updates are
 4 completed. The stated name is crucial information for both narrative produc-
 5 tion (self-representation) and reception (for the audience to know who the up-
 6 date is about). Facebook's template also generates a timestamp, which appears
 7 at the header and footer of each update and fixes the report of events chrono-
 8 logically with a date and time. As the time of narration is understood to be near
 9 simultaneous with the time of reported events, this enables the audience to
 10 reconstruct a chronological position for the updated events. Within updates,
 11 writers may also report multiple events which are structured around a temporal
 12 sequence, as the following examples indicate.

13

14 (1) June 20

15 Nancy wishes Jacob had never started the 'let's chalk on the patio' game
 16 . . . every inch of it is covered now and he's started up the fences and
 17 house . . .

18 10:20am

19

20 (2) February 16

21 Sandra has had a lovely week end with the bestest of friends and great
 22 church in nicetown. goin to bed now as robert needs lift at 4.00 tomorz
 23 ugh!!!

24 11.51pm

25

26 (3) June 9

27 Veronica declared war on vegetation in the front garden yesterday and is
 28 hoping to go back to the front line for a while this evening without being
 29 eaten alive by bugs!

30 6:43pm

31

32 Even a cursory glance at these examples shows that the temporality constructed
 33 in the status updates is quite distinct from the past-tense forms typically used
 34 to narrate more canonical personal experience narratives or life histories.
 35 Against the backdrop of a-personal cosmic time, the writer's status updates can
 36 be seen in Ricoeur's (1984: 52) terms as an attempt to "make time human" by
 37 selecting particular events as worthy of narration while other material is not.
 38 However, the human time depicted in the updates themselves is not constructed
 39 as a linear string of dates that positions the events in the distant past. Rather, as
 40 Ochs and Capps (2001: 157) put it, human time is "sensed holistically" where
 the past and future are brought to bear on the present moment.

41 The use of the present tense in storytelling is not unusual, and has been
 42 documented as a means of segmenting narrative (Wolfson 1978) and coincid-

1 ing with evaluative high points (Schiffrin 1981) when used as an alternative
2 to conventions of past-tense reporting. However, we might interpret the sig-
3 nificance of the “pull of the present” found in these status stories in terms of
4 the particular context created by the social network. Superficially, the pre-
5 eminence of the present moment in status updates may be in part a result of the
6 immediate discourse situation. After all, the prompt for the status update asks
7 the writer what they are doing “right now,” not what they were doing at some
8 point earlier in their life. Given that the English present tense is described as
9 “timeless” (Wolfson 1978: 222) and able to incorporate reference to a range of
10 times (Schiffrin 1981: 46), the ambiguity can be deployed here in order to
11 bridge the temporal gap between the times of narrative production and recep-
12 tion caused by the asynchronous nature of computer-mediated communication.

13 The importance of the present moment is reflected in the categories of sto-
14 ries that are told in the status updates. Since Labov’s work on personal narra-
15 tive, others have recognized that stories are not always narrated in the past
16 tense (Ochs and Capps 2001; Norrick 2000). Georgakopoulou’s (2007) work
17 on small stories provides useful additional distinctions that can be used to clas-
18 sify story types, especially those that report events characterized like the up-
19 dates by “some kind of immediacy” (2007: 40). Georgakopoulou identifies a
20 range of small stories, which include “Breaking news stories” where “tellers
21 seem to wish to share the reported events straight away, as they are still unfold-
22 ing” (2007: 42) and “Projections” where the speaker constructs a taleworld of
23 events which have not yet happened (2007: 47). The key distinction between
24 these story genres appears to rest on the direction of the temporal span inter-
25 preted between the assumed time of the reported events and the time of narra-
26 tion. Past event stories emphasize retrospection, where the reported events are
27 deemed to have taken place prior to the point of narration. Breaking news sto-
28 ries represent reported events as taking place near-simultaneously with the act
29 of narration. Projections are anticipatory in character and report events which
30 will happen later than the point of narration. There are at least three sets of cues
31 that the reader may use when interpreting the temporal span between the nar-
32 ration and the reported events (and hence the small story genre): the time of
33 narration indicated by Facebook’s timestamp; references to time within an up-
34 date (e.g., later, tomorrow); and the use of verb tenses.

35 As Georgakopoulou notes, unlike the predominance of past event stories in
36 conventional narrative analysis, Projections and Breaking News stories occur
37 frequently in conversational data, but have been marginalized in narrative
38 analysis on account of their non-canonical features. Similarly, the stories told
39 in status updates reverse the trend of canonical narrative, for reports of non-
40 recent events are relatively rare while Breaking News and Projections are more
41 common. All 1906 status updates were classified according to the type of small
42 story they contained. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Distribution of small stories in the status update sample*

Projections	Past tense	Breaking News	Total
21.16%	15.76%	63.09%	100.00%

4.1. *Past events*

Although status updates can report past events, this was the least frequently occurring type of small story (15% of the sample). Unlike life stories or danger of death accounts, the time span referred to in the updates usually extends only into the recent past. Of the sample considered here, references to past moments of time only go as far back as a week prior to the point of posting:

(4) July 25

Maureen wishes it was this time last week . . . I was poolside :-(
2:18pm

But more often, status updates report events so that they appear to have occurred immediately before the time of narration. Frequently, the past tense verb is preceded by the modifier *just*, as in the following examples:

(5) May 14

Lily has just had a lovely chinese! Yummy!
7:50pm

(6) April 15

Karen just shut her finger in the car door :(.
7:13pm

(7) May 19

Thomas has just made the best sandwich ever.
2:56pm

The past time of status updates is not one of distant retrospection, but of events in close proximity to the present moment of narration.

4.2. *Projections*

Writers may also update their status with projections of events to take place in the future, accounting for approximately 21% of the updates in this sample. As with the past events, Projections usually refer to the time span near to, if not immediately following, the time of the update. In the examples that follow, when writers refer to precise points in the future, these are localized, such as *tomorrow* and *then*, or allude to close temporal proximity to the time of reporting with the phrase *about to*.

- 1 (8) July 5
2 Sienna is off to the school summer fayre then the cricket club for a nice
3 wee drinkie!
4 2:42pm
5 (9) July 6
6 Gerry is about to eat scrambled eggs.
7 11:35pm
8
9 (10) July 18
10 Samantha is sad that it's Keira's last day tomorrow! What will we EVER
11 do without her?
12 1:57am

13
14 The events told in Projections are in the irrealis mode, so may not be consid-
15 ered as high in narrativity as retrospective reports of actions which are as-
16 sumed to have actually occurred. Nonetheless, even while operating in the
17 realm of as yet unrealized actions, these status updates are still emplotments,
18 albeit of the most minimal kind. Sienna's update contains temporally ordered
19 plans, while Samantha invites shared speculation as to the outcome of a shared
20 loss.

21

22 4.3. *Breaking News*

23

24 By far the most frequently occurring small story genre was Breaking News,
25 accounting for 63% of the status updates in the sample. The kinds of stories
26 reported as Breaking News are highly heterogeneous. Within this dataset, three
27 sub-types were identified: those which concern Events, External States, or In-
28 ternal States. Each has different qualities of narrativity.

29

30 4.3.1. *Breaking News: events.* Examples of Breaking News stories
31 which report events include the following:

32

- 33 (11) April 12
34 Michael is medium term planning!
35 6:22pm
36 (12) June 25
37 Robert Pushing back from the gate at LHR.
38 4:55pm
39 (13) June 24
40 Simon is giving flowers to all the poorly ladies he knows.
41 11:23am
42

1 Breaking Stories are characterized by the use of the present tense, especi-
 2 ally when combined with the progressive aspect. This may result in part
 3 from the default setting in the status update prompt, which begins “X is. . .”
 4 This formulation anticipates that the writer will most likely post an up-
 5 date in the present tense (the writer will have to make a conscious effort
 6 to delete the verb particle *is* if they wish to write something other). Nonethe-
 7 less, it is worth exploring the narrative effects of the present tense in this
 8 context. The present-tense narration creates the illusion that the reported
 9 event is happening at the same time the update is being written. Of course,
 10 there is usually a delay caused by the operation of actually writing the update:
 11 it is not that the narrative tempo exactly coincides with the time of narration.
 12 However, this convention is generally understood, and the illusion of the
 13 update being anchored in a present moment is shared by both writer and audi-
 14 ence.

15 Both the simple present and the present progressive are low in telicity, such
 16 that the boundedness of the reported event is not clear (Hopper and Thompson
 17 1980). The reader cannot be sure exactly when the reported event started or
 18 will finish. Together, these semantic qualities explain why the present tense is
 19 not the default for reporting (written) narratives. Instead, Schiffrin (1981)
 20 points out that the progressive aspect typically occurs in the Orientation and
 21 Evaluation sections, where the function of providing either ongoing situational
 22 information or an effect of immediacy is critical. In status updates, both the
 23 effects of continuity and immediacy are apt as a means of constructing a dis-
 24 course of a shared present moment. Although the writer and their audience may
 25 not be online at the same time and the audience can only experience the update
 26 retrospectively, the temporality typical of the Breaking News stories allows
 27 readers to participate in the illusion that they are co-spectating on the writer’s
 28 life experiences as the events themselves are happening. The human time of
 29 the status updates is thus inherently social in its potential to forge connections
 30 between storytelling participants.

31

32 4.3.2. *Breaking News: external and internal states.* There are many
 33 Breaking News updates that do not appear very event-like at all, and we
 34 may go as far as to question whether these updates count in their own
 35 right as narrative. Many updates report states that describe the writer
 36 (rather than their actions) in some way. These descriptions can detail the
 37 location of the writer (an external state), their feelings or personal attributes
 38 (internal states). Examples of each are given below:

39

40 (14) May 29
 41 Frances is in starbucks.
 42 5:25pm

- 1 (15) July 11
2 Joanna is at home.
3 2:18pm
4 (16) May 12
5 Verity is tired.
6 11:29am
7
8 (17) June 11
9 Michael is pissed off at the taxman.
10 2:09pm
11 (18) April 13
12 Sharon is bored.
13 5:58pm
14
15 (19) May 20
16 Cheryl is a cake lover!
17 7:29pm
18

19 According to Labov's model, these status updates provide Orientation material
20 about the narrative participants and their location. From a textual perspective,
21 clauses containing Orientation material were not considered to be part of the
22 narrative skeleton (Labov 1972: 361), providing a static background to narra-
23 tive action (Georgakopoulou 2007: 79). However when storytelling is under-
24 stood as a situated practice, Orientation material might be reconsidered as
25 contributing to the plotline. The rhetorical situation created by updating in
26 Facebook is a case in point. Status updates are posted and distributed within
27 time, but unlike fictional serials, the material reported in the update is assumed
28 to match (approximately) the time and events of the update-writer's lived ex-
29 periences. Information about the writer's mood or location is not interpreted as
30 a once and for all state that will hold true in the context of future events re-
31 corded in later updates. Instead, updates that document the writer's position or
32 stance within their lifeworld are assumed to hold true at the time of narration
33 (indicated by the timestamp) but not necessarily for any longer. Indeed, where
34 an internal or external state is sustained until the next update, the writer usually
35 marks this as unusual, as the following two pairs attest.
36

- 37 (20) June 25
38 Josh is tired!! Must be the lack of proper coffee.
39 10.34am
40
41 Josh is still tired!! Even with the expensive coffee!!!
42 11.03am

- 1 (21) July 1
 2 Pete is not feeling very well :-(.
 3 9:05pm
 4
 5 July 3
 6 Pete is STILL not feeling very well :-(.
 7 7:09pm

8 Crucially, the narrative interpretation of these updates is enabled because
 9 status updates do not exist in isolation, but are part of an ongoing archive
 10 which unfolds over time. Updates which announce a writer's personal attribute
 11 may be interpreted as relevant to later events and hence the interpretation of
 12 narrative sequence. In the following example, the writer's self-depiction as a
 13 "cake-lover" does not constitute a narrative in itself, but within the archive
 14 becomes important as the "plot" of her resistance to eating cake emerges.

- 15 (22) May 20
 16 Cheryl is a cake lover!
 17 7:29pm
 18
 19 May 21
 20 Cheryl is giving up the cake . . . as of tomorrow!!
 21 7:21pm
 22
 23 May 22
 24 Cheryl did not eat any cake today . . . result!!
 25 6:10pm

26 The narrativity of the Breaking News stories thus varies both in kind (whether
 27 the stories depict events or states) and in degree, where events are deemed to
 28 be more story-like than states. However, even where updates concern states
 29 rather than events, the rhetorical context of the update archive enables the
 30 Breaking News to be incorporated into a wider narrative of documented life
 31 experiences.

32
 33

34 **5. The narrativity of the status stories archive**

35

36 Facebook's online environment constitutes a multifaceted database, of which
 37 status updates are just one of many components. Unlike other databases, which
 38 exhibit little internal development and are even interpreted as anti-narrative
 39 structures (Manovich 2001), the catalogue of status updates in Facebook ex-
 40 hibits certain narrative-like properties. As the status updates cited in earlier
 41 sections illustrate, the consistent reference to a named individual's experience
 42 functions as a unifying interpretive frame across individual episodes, episodes

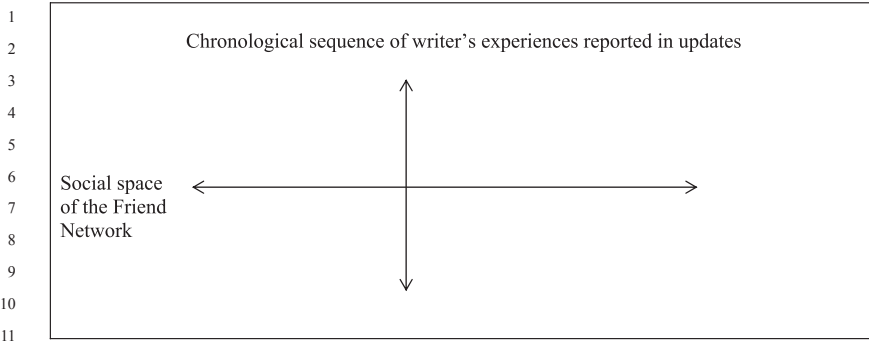
1 which are narrated over the course of time as marked by Facebook's timestamp
 2 and thereby imbued with chronological order. However, the narrative proper-
 3 ties associated with the archive of status stories depart from the conventions of
 4 canonical narrative and are shaped significantly by the distinctive characteris-
 5 tics of the discursive context created by Facebook.

6 7 8 5.1. *Sequence in the status story archive*

9
10 5.1.1. *Locating the start of the sequence.* The narrativity of an event
 11 sequence is usually predicated on the inferred relationship between
 12 adjacent events (for example, reported in the consecutive clauses of
 13 personal narrative, episodes in print literature) and on the event's position
 14 relative to a perceived beginning and end of the sequence as a whole.
 15 Often the beginning and end of the story are understood in relation to the
 16 discourse's point of inception and closure; moments which may function
 17 as coordinates of interpretive reference in narrative literature (Rabinowitz
 18 2002). However, the organizational infrastructure of Facebook complicates
 19 locating fixed boundaries for the sequence of material formed by status
 20 updates archives.

21 Recency dominates not only the story genres and tellability of the status
 22 updates, but also influences the structure in which they appear in the archive.
 23 Like e-mail inboxes and blogs, status updates appear in their archive in reverse
 24 chronological order, so that the most recently added post appears at the top of
 25 the list the reader encounters when opening their profile. If the reader wants to
 26 reconstruct the updates in the chronological sequence in which they were
 27 posted (and inferred to have occurred), they have to visit the writer's profile
 28 page, extract the status stories from the archive of wall interaction, and read
 29 backwards from the furthest point in the list. The sequence of status updates
 30 has at least two points of inception: the assumed chronological beginning of
 31 the reported events (at the end of the writer's archive), or the position of the
 32 most recent update (at the start of the reader's news feed). The second of these
 33 will continue to change over time as further updates are added to the archive
 34 and the less recent updates move further down the list.

35
36 5.1.2. *Sequences within a social space.* Unlike blogs and e-mail inboxes
 37 which build a single archive of an individual's interactions, when status
 38 updates are posted, they appear both in the writer's profile and distributed
 39 via news feeds into each of their Friends' profiles. Individual status updates
 40 are thus simultaneously positioned in multiple sequences within the social
 41 space of the Friend network. The relationship between the sequences
 42 can be explained in part drawing on Bakhtin's (1981) concept of the



12 Figure 1. *The status updates as a chronotope*
13
14

15 Chronotope. The Chronotope plots two intersecting parameters: the time
16 and space of a narrative, here re-appropriated to plot the temporally
17 unfolding sequence of status updates that appears in the writer's profile
18 against the spatial distribution of the updates as they appear in the news
19 feeds of each person in the writer's Friend list. Figure 1 represents the two
20 parameters diagrammatically with the time sequence of the writer's status
21 story archive (the vertical axis) juxtaposed against the social space of their
22 Friend list (represented as the horizontal axis).

23 Heuristically, we might think of the vertical axis as the “narrative of the
24 individual”—the series of the writer's life experiences documented in status
25 updates. This intersects with the horizontal parameter that emerges as a “nar-
26 rative of the social network”—the sequence of all Friends' Facebook activity
27 constructed by the RSS technology into a temporal series. The status update
28 “knots together” the life documentation of the individual with their position in
29 the social network, forming a point of intersection between the writer's profile
30 and its distribution across the online context of the Friend community. How-
31 ever, the position of the individual update will continuously change relative to
32 the subsequent Facebook activity generated by an individual (it will move fur-
33 ther down the archive as new activity supersedes it as the most recent), and
34 also according to the news feed that it is distributed into across the network. As
35 each news feed is generated uniquely by the ongoing activity of the Friend list
36 of each Friend's contacts, the individual update will be distributed into poten-
37 tially hundreds of differently combined sequences. It then becomes very diffi-
38 cult to think of the archive as a sequence of status updates constructed as a
39 single chronological thread, with a clear starting point and unified trajectory.
40 Instead, the position of any given status update will occur in constantly chang-
41 ing combinations within the multidimensional networked space of the online
42 community.

1 The variable distribution of the status updates, both in the writer's profile
 2 and across the network, means that individual updates are not interpreted in
 3 relation to a fixed (and meaningful) beginning or endpoint of the text. Instead,
 4 the emphasis is thrown upon interpreting the updates as self-contained units.
 5 However, while updates *can* be read without reference to preceding material
 6 in the sequence, readers are remarkably adept at creating narratives from
 7 nonadjacent story-like material. Prompted by textual and contextual cues that
 8 activate narrative scripts stored in the reader's consciousness (Herman 1997),
 9 the reader may go on to infer narrative-like connections not explicitly articu-
 10 lated in the updates themselves. In particular, the reader's ability to narra-
 11 tivate the updates combines the assumption of a temporally continuous self
 12 as the most basic form of coherence (Linde 1993: 107) along with the human
 13 dynamic of anticipation where "each recounted event potentially projects
 14 one or more possible next event(s)" (Ochs and Capps 2001: 156). Thus when
 15 one status update is posted, this prompts the expectation that another event
 16 in the life of writer will follow, whether or not that event is reported in a
 17 subsequent update. The timestamp and the participant's name given in every
 18 update provide the minimal textual cues at work here, combined with the
 19 reader's world-knowledge of the writer's life (for most Facebook Friends
 20 are known to each other in the offline world as well as through the online
 21 connections).

22 In some cases, the writer posts a series of updates that follow a thematically
 23 connected topic. These sequences contain reference to an event or action that
 24 is carried over across more than one update, usually signaled by lexical repeti-
 25 tion. For example, consecutive updates can chart the writer's ongoing progress
 26 through an extended process, such as completing a domestic chore (as does
 27 Fiona):

28
 29 (23) June 27

30 Fiona finished her painting - more tomorrow!
 31 7:49pm Comment

32
 33 June 29

34 Fiona the hall is getting it tomorrow!!
 35 10:14pm

36
 37 June 30

38 Fiona the hall is getting it today!
 39 11:55am

40 Fiona is exhausted. painted all day and cleaned all night. still loads to
 41 do!

42 11:49pm

1 July 2

2 Fiona is done cleaning.

3 11:44am

4 Fiona is done cleaning. the pain this morning getting up was bad!

5 12:08pm

6

7 The episodic unfolding of updates in real time can also document the writer's
8 ongoing anticipation of a particular event such as a holiday or birthday:

9

10 (24) April 21

11 Graham is 21 in 3 days!!!

12 2:55pm

13

April 22

14 Graham is 21 in 2 days!!!

15 9:59am

16

17 April 24

18 Graham says THANK YOU TO EVERYONE for their birthday wishes!

19

x.

20 11:40pm

21

22 However, it is relatively rare to find sequences of status updates that are
23 thematically connected to a particular topic in this way. It is much more fre-
24 quent for the status updates to report apparently disparate episodes in the
25 writer's life experiences, as seen in the following update sequences from Jayne
26 and Owen.

27

(25) May 10

28 Jayne is not impressed with the random cat that strolled into my living
29 room as bold as brass. Little bastard.

30 10:54am

31

32 May 13

33 Jayne Is it the weekend yet????

34 6:27pm

35

36 May 14

37 Jayne was gonna go to the gym but is drinking wine instead. Why does
38 this keep on happening to me??

39 7:23pm

40

(26) June 23

41 Owen is thinking oh well its Monday then!

42 12:29pm

1 June 25

2 Owen guess what the train that should stop at Birmingham international
3 isn't! but i'm on it so what shall i do!!!!

4 5:56pm

5 June 27

6 Owen is thinking the service on my car will be how much!!!!

7 9:23am

8
9 Sequences like these where there is little thematic connection between updates
10 are much weaker in narrativity than those centered on particular topics. Al-
11 though the writers might make references to time, for example “the weekend”
12 or “Monday”, these are too generalized to anchor the update at specific points
13 on the calendar from which a defined temporal sequence can be reconstructed.
14 While the ongoing reference to a central participant acts as an interpretive
15 frame, there is no textual content in the updates themselves that would enable
16 the reader to infer logical connections between the reported events to form a
17 cohesive whole. In Herman’s (2002: 82) terms, these sequences are “mere suc-
18 cessions of doings,” rather than exhibiting the tightly knit, interdependent con-
19 nections required of narrative sequences in its strictest sense.

20 Instead, the cues which enable the reader to interpret these disparate se-
21 quences as stories are found in their discourse context. Although the examples
22 of update sequences are represented here synchronically, that is not how the
23 updates are experienced within the context of Facebook. Instead, the readers
24 receive the updates diachronically, successively ordered according to the time
25 at which the update is written. Because the update is assumed to reflect the
26 writer’s thoughts, feelings, or actions at the moment they are being posted,
27 then the events are deemed to be similarly ordered in chronology of the
28 writer’s life experience. As noted earlier, the chronology of the discourse cre-
29 ation is marked on the update by Facebook’s timestamp, which records to the
30 minute the date and time of each occasion of Facebook activity. In this sense,
31 it is the machine that generates the chronological structure of the status ar-
32 chive, and makes the update archive unlike sharply non-narrative genres like
33 databases or discourse colonies (Hoey 2001).

34 The sequential character of the status update archive meets the minimal re-
35 quirements for narrativehood in that it contains updates that are marked by
36 temporal order and consistent reference to the same experiencing agent (the
37 writer). However, the narrativity of the archived updates contrasts with the
38 logical interdependence between units and single overarching structure associ-
39 ated with canonical narratives. In the status archive, these are replaced by epi-
40 sodic narrativity, loosely connected by chronology generated by the act of dis-
41 course creation rather than the material reported in the updates themselves.
42 This episodic narrativity is typical of storytelling in online contexts where

1 recency is prized over retrospection and the smaller installments of narrative
2 material are readily suited to distribution within a networked space and to
3 the limitations of being presented on a screen rather than a printed page.
4 Given the trend toward using mobile devices (cell phones, e-book readers
5 such as the Kindle) for connecting to Internet services, the importance of small
6 narrative units in online text capable of episodic distribution looks set to
7 continue.

8 Rather than arguing that this episodic narrativity is non-prototypical, its
9 presence in an increasing range of everyday stories told using forms of
10 computer-mediated communication suggests that our understanding of what
11 characterizes a prototypical narrative (and hence narrativity) is limited and
12 may be even less representative of contemporary narrative practice than has
13 been previously thought. We need, then, to enrich our understanding of narra-
14 tive forms and functions that have not yet been given as much attention as
15 those that have dominated in fields of sociolinguistic and discourse-oriented
16 narrative analysis.

17 While the status archive may not resemble canonical narrative, it does share
18 certain characteristics with other story forms, especially the chronicle. The
19 chronicle is usually distinguished from other narrative subgenres (even in
20 some cases excluded from the category of narrative altogether) because while
21 the chronicle contains reported events connected by chronological sequence,
22 they are not organized around a unifying theme or single evaluative focus
23 (Linde 1993: 85). In the same way, the status archive is structured purely by
24 chronological order of posting, rather than by a unified development around
25 a single plot. Individual status updates might contain embedded narratives
26 but these are not arranged around a global structure with a pre-determined
27 teleological end point. Instead, the archive is like a personalized chronicle,
28 where the events are unified by their concentrated focus on the life experiences
29 of the individual writer. The self-portrait that emerges from the archive is
30 analogous to one continuously being created using a pointillist technique. In
31 order to perceive the sequence of status updates as a coherent whole, one must
32 adjust perspective away from seeking linear connections between individual
33 entries in isolation and “fill in the gaps” between status updates, online and
34 offline experience to assume an evolving version of the writer’s account of
35 their life.

36

37

38 **6. Conclusion**

39

40 A contextualized approach that understands storytelling as situated practice is
41 vital in order to assess the narrative potential of status updates. Viewed as text
42 alone, the present tense, autobiographical episodes distributed across social

1 network sites in status updates contrast with the fully fledged, past-tense ac-
2 counts of personal experience typically scrutinized in sociolinguistics, and are
3 even further removed from the lengthy complexity of literary narratives. How-
4 ever, the difference between status update stories and canonical narratives sug-
5 gests as much about the narrowness of the corpus from which notions of pro-
6 totypical narrativity have been derived as it does about the narrative potential
7 of the status update. The parameters often proposed for identifying degrees
8 of narrativity perhaps should not be understood as abstract, decontextualized
9 qualities but rather implicitly shaped by specific nature (medium, context, and
10 genre) of the canonical narratives from which they were originally derived.
11 Without question, these parameters are an important resource that provides
12 points of comparison against which diachronic and generic variation can be
13 plotted, but we must be careful not to endow them with a normative status that
14 marginalizes other, perhaps more prolific examples of storytelling.

15 The relationship(s) between source data, context, and narrativity is clearly
16 important in assessing the narrative potential of status updates and their ar-
17 chive. The affordances of digital media, especially as filtered through the
18 specific environment of Facebook, influence the distinctive temporal and se-
19 quential nature of status update stories. The importance of recency in online
20 technology (Walker Rettberg 2008: 65) lies behind the predominance of Break-
21 ing News stories and the emphasis on present time events rather than distant
22 retrospection in the updates. Recency similarly drives the reverse chronolog-
23 ical order sequencing of updates within profile archives. The networking
24 capacity of digital technology enables the multi-dimensional distribution of
25 status updates into numerous, constantly changing sequences of Facebook ac-
26 tivity, generating a networked web of story episodes rather than a single series
27 of events with a defined point of inception and closure.

28 The network of Facebook is not simply a digital infrastructure, but is pro-
29 foundly social. The distribution of stories may be carried by the technology of
30 news feeds, but the stories are written and read by people who know each
31 other. The priority of the ongoing, present-tense stories within the network thus
32 enables a sense of shared experience highly appropriate in an environment that
33 helps you “connect and share with the people in your life” (Facebook home-
34 page), for one effect of an ongoing narrative present is one of intimacy,
35 “through mutual embracing of the temporal context (Dasein) we come to
36 understand one another and our own being as well” (Bennett 2000: 13). The
37 world knowledge brought by the writer and reader to their processing of status
38 updates is also critical in determining the narrative status of these episodes of
39 life experience. It is the experience of producing and receiving status updates
40 diachronically, coupled with the assumptions of ongoing human experience
41 that enables readers and writers to infer a coherent life story behind the per-
42 sonal chronicle that emerges in the archive of updates.

1 Rather than dismiss status updates as ephemeral, fragmentary forms that fail
 2 to match the criteria associated with prototypical narrativity, these small stories
 3 have provided fertile territory which enable us to examine the ways in which
 4 temporality and sequence are reworked by the online context created in Face-
 5 book. As new forms of online collaboration and communities emerge, no doubt
 6 our understanding of what might count as story-like will continue to be en-
 7 riched and extended, providing ongoing debate for the field of narrative theory
 8 for years to come.

11 Notes

- 14 1. Subsequent to the collection of status updates considered in this research, Facebook mod-
 15 ified the status update template so that it invited users to “share [. . .] what’s on your
 16 mind” in order to distinguish the site from its rival, Twitter. How far the change in ques-
 17 tion influences subsequent updating is beyond the scope of the present essay, but would
 18 prove of merit to investigate.
- 19 2. The data was collected in May–July 2008, immediately prior to Facebook changing to a
 20 new interface. In “old” Facebook, different types of activity were archived separately
 21 (e.g., as “wall stories,” “status stories,” “relationship stories”) whereas the new Facebook
 22 interface collates all activity together on a single wall. Status updates in new Facebook
 23 were given a comment box, enabling Friends to post responses in relation to a particular
 24 update.
- 25 3. The new Facebook interface would enable further study of the relationship between pat-
 26 terns of commenting, social network, and narrative style, but lie beyond the scope of the
 27 present data set.
- 28 4. The participants who took part in this study all agreed that the information from their
 29 profiles could be used as part of this project following the BAAL guidelines for good
 30 practice. In the following paper, where examples of updates are given for illustrative pur-
 31 poses, all names and places have been changed in order to protect the identity of the in-
 32 dividual. However, spellings and punctuation used in the original updates have been
 33 retained. Facebook’s infrastructure does not categorize members according to ethnicity.
 34 However, it is clear that ethnicity may well bear on discourse style (indicated through
 35 code switching, terms of address, orthographic conventions). In order to limit additional
 36 variation, the sample was constrained to one ethnicity: White British.

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