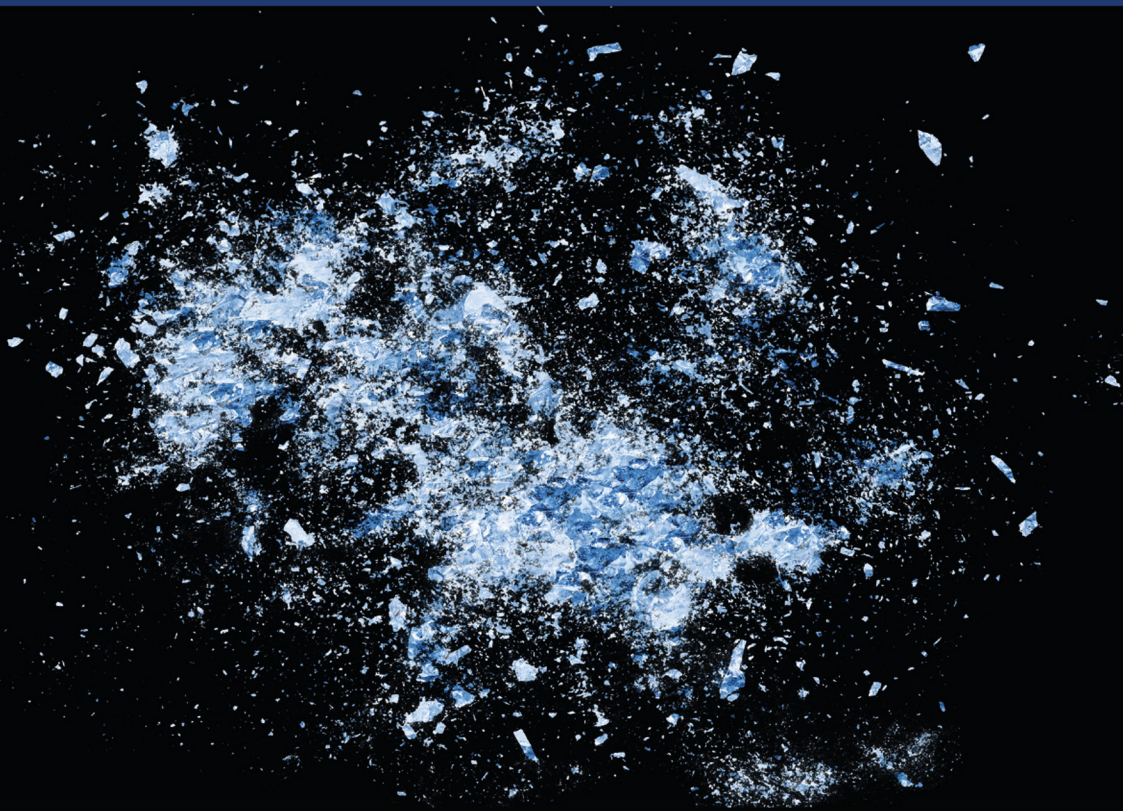


FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE

Telling and Interpreting Stories
in the Twitter Age



CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CITIZEN MEDIA

NEIL SADLER

FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE

With the rise and rise of social media, today's communication practices are significantly different from those of even the recent past. A key change has been a shift to very small units, exemplified by Twitter and its strict 280-character limit on individual posts. Consequently, highly fragmented communication has become the norm in many contexts. *Fragmented Narrative* sets out to explore the production and reception of fragmentary stories, analysing the Twitter-based narrative practices of Donald Trump, the Spanish political movement Podemos, and Egyptian activists writing in the context of the 2013 military intervention in Egypt.

Sadler draws on narrative theory and hermeneutics to argue that narrative remains a vital means for understanding, allowing fragmentary content to be grasped together as part of significant wholes. Using Heideggerian ontology, he proposes that our capacity to do this is grounded in the centrality of narrative to human existence itself. The book strives to provide a new way of thinking about the interpretation of fragmentary information, applicable both to social media and beyond.

Contributing to the emerging literature in existential media studies, this timely volume will interest students, scholars and researchers of narrative, new media and language and communication studies.

Neil Sadler is Lecturer in Translation at the Centre for Translation and Interpreting at Queen's University Belfast. He holds an MA and a PhD in Translation and Intercultural Studies from the University of Manchester and his research centres on the uses and nature of multilingual narrative in digitally mediated contexts, particularly in the Arab world. His work has previously been published in *New Media & Society* and *The Journal for North African Studies*. He has also contributed entries to *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Citizen Media* and *The Routledge Handbook of Arabic Translation*.

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Telling and Interpreting Stories in the Twitter Age

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FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE

Telling and Interpreting
Stories in the Twitter Age

Neil Sadler

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INTRODUCTION

Abstract

The introduction establishes the starting point that we live in a world characterised by fragmentation, proposing that Twitter is emblematic of this shift in the way that its affordances compel users to communicate through very short posts. It proposes that narrative, nonetheless, continues to play a key role in everyday understanding and provides a basic means for coping with fragmentation by allowing otherwise disparate information to be grasped together within significant wholes. This is followed by an introduction to the three contexts from which examples are drawn throughout the remainder of the book, namely the Twitter posts of Donald Trump, the Spanish political movement Podemos and Egyptian activists writing about the 2013 military intervention in that country. The chapter concludes with an overview of the contents of the book.

It is now something of a truism to argue that we increasingly live in and through media. Throughout the twentieth century mass media played a key role in defining what ordinary people saw and the ways in which they saw it, shaping their perceptions of the world as a whole, as well as their position in it. With the growth of social media in the 2000s to the present day, media have spread to many more aspects of daily life. Much routine communication takes place through instant messaging services such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger; discussions on Twitter have become a commonplace aspect of academic life; Facebook is used to stay in touch with friends and organise events; Instagram enables the creation and maintenance of publics around interests and so on. These platforms, as well as the many others in use around the world, differ greatly in their affordances, their users and the

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uses to which they are put. Nonetheless, all follow the logic of mediatization – in different ways, each enables aspects of daily life to be lived through media in ways that, for the most part, previously were not. In recent years a great deal of valuable work has been published seeking to make sense of this shift through concepts such as ‘deep mediatization’ (Couldry and Hepp 2017) and the ‘mediation of everything’ (Livingstone 2009). Peters’ ‘philosophy of elemental media’ argues media have become as important to our daily lives as water is to fish (Peters 2015). Others have shown the extent to which they shape our experience of the world (Hansen 2015), influence our thinking (Hayles 2012) and contribute to defining our very possibilities of being (Lagerkvist 2019; Markham 2020).

The key starting point for this book is that mediatization has also been accompanied by a shift towards increased fragmentation of information. Most social media platforms favour brevity and very short posts are the norm on sites including Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and WeChat. To use most social media platforms is to be confronted with a flood of atomistic bits of information. Very brief individual comments, often from diverse sources and regarding a wide variety of issues, pile up on top of each other, structured only by the affordances of the platforms themselves. Fragmentation is not in itself a new phenomenon. Daily life has included encountering snippets of information from television and radio for many decades, from newspapers for well over a century and from friends and family from time immemorial. Nonetheless, it has accelerated. As the volume of information available has increased, there has been a trend towards the division of information into ever smaller chunks. Nowhere is this clearer than on Twitter and it is from there that most of my examples are drawn. Nonetheless, if I am right about the central importance of fragmentation, it is my hope that the arguments offered here can also be usefully applied in other contexts.

The book title refers specifically to Twitter because I see it as emblematic of this shift. Twitter is by no means the world’s most important social media platform. It is used by a relatively narrow demographic, for a comparatively small range of purposes and popular only in some geographical regions. It does not function in isolation but rather exists within a complex eco system of other platforms and channels (Chadwick 2013; Harrington, Highfield and Bruns 2013; Vaccari, Chadwick and O’Loughlin 2015; Bruns 2019). It is highly problematic to draw simple conclusions from Twitter data about anything other than Twitter itself; nonetheless, the fact that Twitter forces fragmentation through its (current) cap of 280 characters per tweet makes it an ideal site to explore the broader shift towards fragmentation. For this reason, I make few references to Twitter’s (frequently changing) technical affordances but focus on characteristics which are shared with other platforms. In a similar way to how Postman saw the phrase ‘now ... this’ as ‘a compact metaphor for the discontinuities in so much that passes for public discourse in present-day America’ (Postman 1987: 115), I see Twitter as a metaphor for much contemporary communication.

The move towards greater fragmentation has not been an entirely one-way street. Social media platforms themselves have increasingly introduced features

which enable, while not forcing, users to share less fragmentary content. Twitter has extended its character limit from 140 to 280 and, at the time of writing, allows users to post threads which join an unlimited number of tweets together, allowing for longer and more complex statements. Facebook and Instagram have introduced features that allow and encourage users to post videos expressing more complex ideas, albeit with the caveat that the videos posted disappear after 24 hours. A range of additional tools such as TweetDeck and Hootsuite, some developed by social media platforms themselves, others independent, are also available that allow advanced users to maintain separate feeds organised by hashtags, keywords, individual users and so on. Services such as ‘Thread Reader App’ and Storify 2 provide ways of presenting threads of individual tweets as a continuous, more conventional text. More broadly, there has been a rapid, and well-documented, rise in the use of algorithms to make sense of vast quantities of information. Many platforms have moved away from the strict chronological ordering of their early days, towards algorithmically structured feeds which present content on the basis of its ‘relevance’ to users, determined according to opaque and shifting criteria based on user profiles built up from the digital ‘traces’ left by almost all internet activity. It is increasingly accepted that algorithms are a major driver of contemporary culture and politics and a significant literature is developing regarding their implications for society (Langlois 2014; Bishop 2018; Williams, Brooks and Shmargad 2018; Kotliar 2020), culture (Striphas 2015; Seyfert and Roberge 2016; Seaver 2017) and politics (Bucher 2018). These developments provide ways of organising chaotic flows of information. In different ways they direct the flow of fragments but the chunks of information remain small and are not presented to users within meaningful wholes. They make it easier to cope with fragmentation without running counter to the logic of fragmentation per se.

Previous discussions of fragmentation have tended to present it as a bad thing. Bogart (1989: 1–2), for example, argues that ‘the very profusion of unconnected bits of information may well create a sense of disorder and chaos, which can lead to civic apathy’. Postman’s classic *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1987), meanwhile, argues that the constant stream of fragmentary information characteristic of television and what he calls the culture of ‘now ... this’ has led to a general degradation of public discourse. At the dawn of the ‘information age’, there were fears that it would be impossible to cope with the torrents of fragmentary information the internet made available. Gitlin (2001) warned of the dangers of being overwhelmed by ‘supersaturation’ while for Manovic (2001: 217) we had ‘too much information and too few narratives that can tie it all together’. The fear expressed in sentiments like this seems to be that fragmentation is intrinsically negative and something to be resisted.

Without dismissing these arguments, the view presented in this book is less pessimistic. It begins from the premise that ordinary people clearly do manage to cope just fine with fragmentation in their everyday lives. Langlois suggests that if this is possible, it is because social media platforms provide the structure we need to do this, arguing that ‘in the social media context, it is the platform that

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increasingly organises our world for us' to such an extent that in 'making sense of the world [it] increasingly displaces the human element' (Langlois 2019: 160). I do not agree with this position. Social media and their algorithms can juxtapose fragments but they cannot assemble them into meaningful wholes. Algorithms still cannot 'understand' anything. As I argue throughout this book, a human act of grasping together remains essential. That this continues to be possible, I will argue, is due not to the outsourcing of sensemaking to algorithms but rather because the human capacity to interpret and comprehend seems to have largely kept pace with increases in fragmentation. As Ong (2017: 14) puts it: 'by the same token as it is an information age, our age is an interpretation age'. I share his view that the fracturing of information, characteristic of the digital, has brought with it increased demand for interpretation, characteristic of the hermeneutic. Fragmentation may make interpretation more complex but it clearly does not make it impossible. One of my basic assumptions is that encountering the world through fragments in no way makes it less meaningful.

Theorising the kind of interpretation demanded by fragmentation is the primary goal of this book. The shift towards fragmentation, coupled with a general increase in the availability of data, has been accompanied by major epistemological changes within the academy. Big data approaches take full advantage of the increased volumes of information while the increasing importance of visualisations for the representation and interpretation of large datasets has produced a broad shift towards spatial metaphors (Halpern 2015). The metadata hidden in social media posts has allowed for increasingly sophisticated network analyses to be conducted, allowing for large-scale studies of, as one early paper described it, 'who says what to whom?' (Wu et al. 2011). It has accelerated a shift towards structuring information following the logic of the database (Manovich 2001) where vast amounts of individually atomistic information can be quickly retrieved according to the wishes of the user.

This work is undeniably valuable. It allows for analysis of human interaction at a scale and level of detail which was previously impossible.¹ These methods provide ways to take advantage of, rather than merely cope with, the increase in information. There is, however, clearly a huge gulf between these interpretive methods and the way that most ordinary people cope with fragmentation in their daily lives – it seems safe to say that most users, when scrolling through Twitter on the train to work, do not stop to produce network graphs. The main question underpinning this book, then, is how are we able to make sense of fragmented content in everyday interpretation? My approach to providing an answer to this question is phenomenological; my goal is not to lament fragmentation or even, for the most part, to critique it in terms of its social, political and cultural implications. Like Markham (2020), I see little value in calling for a return to a, probably mythical, vision of 'the way things were'. Instead, my aim is to thematise, or make explicit, routine and everyday ways of interpreting as they apply to fragmented information, particularly as found on social media. My principal argument is that narrative plays a central role in doing this.

The ongoing relevance of narrative

The argument I will attempt to make in the chapters that follow is that narrative is crucial to the intelligibility of fragments. At first glance, this may seem absurd. Lev Manovic convincingly argued almost two decades ago in his classic book *The Language of New Media* (2001) that we are witnessing a shift from narrative forms for organising information, based around linearity and causal inference, towards the non-linear, retrieval-on-demand logic of the database. As the production of information has continued to accelerate, and fragmentation has increased, this trend has in many ways continued. Algorithms for interpreting and retrieving information are much more strongly orientated to database than they are to narrative; in most cases, they select and order bits of information but without giving them the form of stories, as traditionally conceived. An apparent move away from narrative is also suggested by the peripheral position of stories and storytelling within most contemporary new media theory.² Where narrative is invoked, as for example in Papacharissi's work (e.g. Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012; Papacharissi 2015a), it is left largely untheorised. New technologies disclose new ways of being-in-the-world, revealing otherwise hidden ontological possibilities (Gualeni 2015; Hansen 2015; Markham 2020). Perhaps, then, the increasing significance of fragmentary and non-storylike modes of communication themselves presage a deeper shift away from the story-based ontology which seems to have characterised much of human history as *homo narrans* (W. R. Fisher 1987) or as a 'story telling animal' (Macintyre 1985: 216).

Clearly, non-narrative modes of seeing the world and existing within it matter a great deal. Yet, in a host of other ways, narrative is as important as ever. First, stories continue to play an enormously important role in politics and social life. Political divisions continue to be conceptualised in terms of competing narratives. The seemingly endless arguments in the UK regarding the country's departure from the European Union are grounded in disputed accounts of the current status of each country, based largely on disagreements regarding the past events which led to their current state and, equally or more significantly, what might happen in the future. In the late 1970s, Jean-François Lyotard (1984) announced the demise of the metanarrative – grand stories about the meaning of life, the universe and everything – and the rise of local narratives as the defining characteristic of post-modernity. Today, in an era sometimes characterised as 'metamodern', or 'post-postmodern', while self-mediation has further emphasised the significance of the local as Lyotard predicted, it also seems clear that metanarratives are as important as ever. In the chapters that follow, I make the argument that this is at least partly attributable to increased fragmentation as social media enable greater expression of the local, at the same time as they reaffirm reliance on metanarratives.

Second, it is important to note that narrative has always co-existed with other, non-narrative modes of understanding and existing. The 'logico-paradigmatic' (Bruner 1986; 2002) interpretive scheme of scientific inquiry works according to a fundamentally different set of principles to those of stories, grounded in abstract

laws rather than specific relations between concrete events. Yet the existence of the logico-paradigmatic mode, and its clear utility within many spheres of human activity, has not led to the eradication of storytelling nor even diminished its importance. Rather, it highlights the need for multiple epistemological and ontological schemes as well as drawing attention to their respective potential and limitations. Something similar, I suggest, is happening now. Data visualisations, for example, offer a way of understanding the relationships between large numbers of data points (and an alternative way of conceptualising ‘data points’ themselves) based on a spatial metaphor which differs in important ways from either the linear causal chains of narrative or the abstract laws of science. Yet they supplement rather than supplant one another, opening new interpretive possibilities without closing off old ones.

Third, narrative is a way of interpreting as much as it is a way of representing. The fact that fragmented information is not presented in narrative form does not preclude narrative interpretations. Indeed, as I attempt to show, the emphasis on events in much social media communication leads directly towards storied interpretation and effectively demands it. It may well be true that social media causes action to be ‘atomized’ (Papacharissi 2010: 131). Stories, nonetheless, provide a way of grasping together atomistic happenings, actions and bits of information within meaningful units, producing relational interpretations which enable recognition of their significance. Nonetheless, it seems clear that the concept of the narrative as traditionally conceived, particularly if literary narratives are taken as prototypical, is poorly equipped to deal with the confusion and multivocality of social media. When I say ‘storied interpretation’, I do not mean that to interpret fragmented interpretation means to impose a neat, clearly defined and thematically grasped structure upon otherwise chaotic inputs; rather, I understand narrative as a way of ‘grasping together’ things that happen in order to see their relational significance, even if this story is itself never clearly grasped or thematically viewed.

The approach to narrative I put forward to do this, sketched out initially in Chapter 1 and further developed in each of the following chapters, draws on a variety of traditions. Several of these were explicitly developed with narrative as a key theoretical concept: classical and contemporary narratology, narrative historiography, narrative sociology, narrative psychology and the narrative hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. By combining elements from these traditions I propose an understanding of narrative encompassing textual, social, mental and existential elements. I am concerned primarily with what narrative *does*, rather than with precise definitions of what narratives *are*. I propose that stories play a central role in both everyday knowledge of the world and our being within it. How we see the world, and the ways that we can see it, depend to a significant degree on both the stories we tell and the broader narrative environment within which interpreters are located.

To supplement narrative theory, I also draw heavily on concepts from the hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamer and, most significantly, the early work of Martin Heidegger. I am neither a philosopher nor an expert on Heidegger but believe that his approach has a great deal to offer any attempt to theorise fragmentation. The

following ideas recur throughout the book and underpin many of the arguments I put forward: 1) to understand interpretation, it is necessary to go back to the more fundamental level of being and existence as the necessary ground for all factual, that is, specific, acts of interpretation; 2) interpretation should be understood as drawing out, or ‘disclosing’ potential meaning rather than as ‘meaning making’ which suggests that meaning is called into being through acts of interpretation. Quasi-mystical as this sounds, this helps to account for the relationship between meaning and things, recognising both the broad scope for variant interpretations as well as their limits; 3) an emphasis on ‘everyday’ interpretation characterised by ‘absorption’ and ‘circumspection’ provides a powerful framework for conceptualising complex acts of interpretation which are nonetheless made quickly and nonthematically; 4) thinking in terms of hermeneutics brings an emphasis on the interplay between part and whole, the basic characteristic of the hermeneutic circle, while acknowledging that in everyday life there is no need, and it may be impossible, to bring the whole in question directly into view.

It is my hope that this book will contribute to the fields of new media studies, citizen media studies and narrative theory. With regard to the first, while references to narrative are relatively common in work on new media, there has been a notable lack of studies directly addressing the question of stories. Ruth Page’s excellent body of work represents a notable exception to this (Page 2010; 2012; 2018; Page, Harper, and Frobenius 2013). However, her work differs significantly from the approach presented here; Page’s work is grounded in sociolinguistics, with a particular emphasis on the construction and negotiation of personal identities. The approach presented here, on the other hand, is more philosophically orientated. It emphasises the interpretative process itself, the factors that may shape it and understands narrative itself in a much broader sense – as a mode of being, as much as a method for communication.

The question of interpretation and meaning in new media environments, moreover, has received comparatively little emphasis in comparison to platforms, structures and media power (Livingstone 2019: 174). By drawing on the wealth of theoretical work in hermeneutics, I seek to provide a nuanced account of everyday interpretation as it functions in fragmented contexts. I am not the first to do this. There have been attempts in the past to conceptualise digital media interpretation through hermeneutics (e.g. Capurro 2010), and Heidegger’s thought has been previously brought to bear specifically on media (Scannell 1996; Gunkel and Taylor 2014; Scannell 2014). Yet, as Gunkel and Taylor (2014: 40) note, while Heidegger’s approach can provide powerful insights into new media, it has not been extensively used to date. The literature applying principles of Heideggerian hermeneutics, whether directly or not, to new media specifically is particularly thin (Langlois 2014; Frosh 2019; Lagerkvist 2019; Markham 2020). This work highlights the value of Heidegger’s approach while leaving much to be done in drawing out what it can tell us about contemporary media and communication practices.

Much of the existing research is grounded in either the ‘active audience’ tradition (e.g. Bird 2011; Livingstone 2015; 2019) or the ‘digital literacy’ tradition

(e.g. Koltay 2011; Simsek and Simsek 2013; Pangrazio 2016). The approach presented here differs from these two bodies of work in important ways. With regard to the first, the concept of the ‘audience’ is seldom used in this book, partly due to the well-documented issues with reifying diverse groups of readers into homogenous and commoditised audiences (Ang 1991), and partly due to the fact that the narrative approach largely rejects thinking in terms of relatively static concepts, such as audiences, in favour of a more dynamic approach built around individual and group stances vis à vis the stories in circulation in a given context. Work in digital literacy, on the other hand, typically has a pedagogical focus and, in its critical variant, often emphasises the production and reproduction of inequality arising from unequal levels of digital literacy within populations. In this case, a capacity to critically interpret new media content is understood as an acquired skill.

The focus of this book, on the other hand, is on more fundamental issues. Rather than empirically addressing the reception practices of concrete audiences, it asks basic questions about the forms that stories take on social media and in other fragmented environments and the kind of interpretive processes which are needed in order to make sense of them. Rather than asking what skills are needed to critically assess content online, it asks about the conditions for the intelligibility of fragmented content and its grounding in human existence. As such, it does not seek to supplant these traditions so much as to put them on a stronger footing by addressing more basic questions about interpretation in this context.

With regard to narrative, it first seeks to further contribute to synthesising insights from the diverse traditions of narrative inquiry, drawing on narrative psychology (Bruner 1986; Polkinghorne 1988), historiography (Mink 1970; White 1978; Carr 1986), philosophy (Macintyre 1985; Ricoeur 1980; 1984; 1985; 1988; 1991b) and sociology (Somers and Gibson 1994), as well as work in literary narratology (Fludernik 1996; Wolf 2003; Ryan and Thon 2014b) and translation (Baker 2006; 2013). There is no doubt that contemporary narrative theory is far more interdisciplinary than in the past. Nonetheless, Hyvärinen’s (2006) argument, made over ten years ago, that the traditions of narrative inquiry have remained largely siloed from one another, particularly with regard to literary and non-literary approaches to narrative,³ still largely holds. Beyond synthesising traditions, I hope to enrich narrative theory more broadly by engaging substantively with hermeneutics. Hermeneutics have not been entirely ignored by narrative theorists (Brockmeier and Meretoja 2014; Schmitt 2014) and are central to Ricoeur’s work. Nonetheless, they remain marginal in most accounts of narrative. My hope, following the lead of Ricoeur, is to further demonstrate not only the significant insights that hermeneutics can bring to the study of narrative but, more specifically, to show the value of hermeneutic theory to the study of fragmented and digitally mediated narrative.

Finally, the book seeks to contribute to current debates on citizen media and digital citizenship. I approach the unaffiliated citizen as a complex figure capable of both obedience to, and subversion of, authority. I explore this through consideration of the impact of narrative fragmentation and increased opportunities for self-mediation on the relationships between citizens and institutions. My argument

is that the implications of narrative fragmentation are profoundly ambivalent in this regard. On the one hand, the pressure towards fragmentary communication forces a greater responsibility for interpretation onto citizens, who are compelled to pro-actively interpret if atomistic pieces of information are to be comprehensible. This, I suggest, is the primary way in which the notion of the ‘producer’ should be understood – not in terms of ordinary citizens publishing content of their own (although this can be important) but as users being inevitably engaged in a ‘writerly’ (Barthes 1974) process of interpretation. This necessarily limits the power of authors to constrain interpretation, freeing space for oppositional and counter-hegemonic readings with potentially emancipatory implications.

On the other hand, as the power of institutions to act as ‘author-gods’ decreases, I argue that interpreters’ existing ‘horizons’ of interpretation come to play an increasingly important role in supplying the necessary structure for the reading of narratives from isolated accounts of events. This may act to effectively close down interpretation, depending on the existential possibilities available to the reader, even if the lack of defined narrative structure in fragmented contexts theoretically permits a very wide range of interpretations. While my arguments are grounded in existential concerns rather than the accounts of hegemony and coercion which characterise much of the literature (cf. Hintz, Dencik and Wahl-Jorgensen 2019: 29–31), I will argue that increased fragmentation ultimately favours institutions over unaffiliated citizens by leaning toward narratives which are already hegemonic, without necessarily facilitating the kinds of storytelling able to disrupt the world as already disclosed.

Introduction to the three contexts referred to throughout the book

While the principal aims of this book are theoretical, the claims I make are based largely on analysis of Twitter activity in three major contexts: 1) multilingual Arabic and English reporting on the 2013 military intervention in Egypt, when the Egyptian Armed Forces forcibly removed the former Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi and placed him under arrest; 2) Spanish language content posted by the Spanish political movement Podemos over the last few years; 3) the contemporary communication practices of Donald Trump. The rationale for selecting these three contexts is that each represents a very different level of authority and power, and they each occupy a very different position on the distinction between citizens and governments and institutions which characterises much contemporary discussion of citizenship (Baker and Blaagaard 2016b; Hintz, Dencik and Wahl-Jorgensen 2019). In other ways, all three also subvert a simple binary between these two poles.

Trump, as president of the USA, is the world’s most powerful individual person as the representative of the most powerful institution in the world. His communication practices, moreover, are famously fragmentary and he has been frequently criticised by his opponents for being incoherent. Twitter is clearly an extremely

important medium for Trump but it is by no means the only communication channel open to him – he also enjoys almost unlimited access to coverage in the mainstream mass media as well as having access to institution specific communication channels such as press conferences and White House statements. Yet, while enjoying the trappings of institutional power, and in contrast to most US presidents, he also communicates as an individual, representing himself as well as the presidency. Moreover, his anti-immigration, and at times overtly racist, positions can be understood as performances of citizenship, albeit of a chauvinistic and narrowly construed variant which receives little emphasis in the largely optimistic literature on the emancipatory potential of digital media (Hintz, Dencik and Wahl-Jorgensen 2019). Indeed, Trump's disregard for the norms of governance in the USA, and the presidency specifically, suggests a significantly lesser degree of alignment, or affiliation, between him and the institution of the presidency than has generally been seen in the past.

Podemos, on the other hand, has a more ambivalent position. Its origins lie in the mass protests against austerity, unemployment and neoliberalism of the 15-M movement in Spain which ran, with varying degrees of intensity, from 2011 to 2015. As a formal political party, Podemos was established under the leadership of the leftist academic Pablo Iglesias in 2014 to provide a vehicle to contest elections. As such, it is strongly grounded in citizen activity and the reconfiguration of the relationships between citizens and elites in Spain is one of their central goals. The discourse of citizenship features heavily in the language they use – major decisions are taken, for example at 'Asambleas Ciudadanas' [Citizens' Assemblies] and, as of the time of writing, 'Garantías Democráticas y de Ciudadanía' [Democratic and Citizen Guarantees] feature prominently in their political programme. Nonetheless, the group has also institutionalised to a significant degree. Despite its horizontal organisation, it has a clearly defined leadership, a centralised power structure and it works within the framework of Spain's constitution. The party's relative success in European, national and local elections, including joining a ruling coalition with the centre-left socialists in November 2019, have given it access to communicative resources typically only available to institutions. Even before entering government, Podemos politicians were frequently invited to participate in programmes on Spanish television and radio, giving them significant access to mass media audiences.

The third group are Egyptian activists writing in English and Arabic at the time of the 2013 military intervention in Egypt, when the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated president, Mohamed Morsi, was ousted by the country's armed forces. Activists such as @Sandmonkey, @Bassem_sabry, @Zeinobia and @TheBigPharaoh made extensive use of social media, primarily Twitter, during this period to self-mediate and report on events happening within Egypt to external audiences. All were 'crowdsourced to prominence' (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013) and developed followings of tens of thousands and roles as important mediators. They embody citizen media in the sense that they were not associated with, and did not operate under the aegis of, an institution. Nonetheless, even they cannot be characterised as entirely unaffiliated in Baker and Blaagaard's terms. Beyond 'crowdsourcing to

prominence' (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013), many such activists had their influence significantly boosted through their inclusion on 'who to follow' lists published by major news outlets (e.g. Hounshell 2011; M. Fisher 2013b; 2013a; al-Jazeera 2014). Many such activists were also called upon to comment on unfolding events for international media organisations and seem to have actively courted such attention, bringing with it something of the logic of the institutional media. Nonetheless, they had access to nothing like the range of communicative channels available to Donald Trump and could not rely on the extensive media coverage available to Podemos in Spain, leaving them far more reliant on social media.

The three contexts are similar in important ways. They all focus strongly on political issues of public concern and therefore reward analysis through the lens of citizenship and all three strongly emphasise reporting, and determining the meaning of, events. All involve situations of crisis in one way or another. This focus is, admittedly, narrow and there are clearly differences between communication in contexts such as this and, for example, the more everyday communication practices studied in much of the existing literature on social media storytelling (e.g. Page 2012; Dayter 2015; Georgakopoulou 2016). My contention, however, is that the interpretation of fragmentary narratives is always grounded in existence and being-in-the-world, even if this may lead to highly divergent factual interpretations in different contexts. In recent years there has also been increasing recognition of how everyday life and politics are intertwined. Billig (1995) showed that nationalism largely resides in 'banal' daily practice while Highfield (2016) emphasises the intermingling of the political with the everyday. Citizenship is practiced through structured activities like voting but can also be found in routine practices and interactions (Hopkins and Blackwood 2011; Hirsiaho and Vuori 2012; Hopkins, Reicher and van Rijswijk 2015). Agamben (2005) argues that we now live in a permanent 'state of exception' in which crisis moves from a temporary deviation to a constant state of being. This blurring of the exceptional and the everyday, the political and the banal, suggests a need for theory which recognises the diversity of human life and activity without relying on boundaries and distinctions which may be ultimately difficult to sustain.

Overview of chapters

The basic idea underpinning this book is that narratives are more fragmented now than in the past, due in large part to the rise of social media-based communication. Nonetheless, I aim to show that, despite the increase in narrative fragmentation, it remains both useful and necessary to examine communication in terms of stories, even when the fragments we are called upon to interpret at first glance bear little resemblance to traditional narratives. The splintering of narratives into smaller fragments, broadly speaking, shifts the onus for interpretation onto readers and requires more 'writerly' approaches to interpretation. I will argue that both the production and interpretation of stories are changed by this. Nonetheless, I propose that these changes largely represent an intensification of pre-existing tendencies rather than completely new phenomena. I also attempt to explain, from a hermeneutic

perspective, why the expanded opportunities for self-mediation offered by social media have not necessarily produced emancipatory results. I argue the reasons for this run far deeper than problems such as biased algorithms and the domination of social media by corporations which has been the subject of much recent research.

Chapter 1 presents the theory of narrative which underpins the rest of the book. Drawing on scholarship from philosophy, psychology, literary theory and historiography, I present an interdisciplinary theory of narrative in which stories play a central role in being and knowing. In the first part of the chapter I argue that our capacity to produce and understand explicitly narrated stories rests upon a fundamental role of narrative as part of existence itself. To do this, I make extensive reference to Heidegger's account of being-in-the-world and its arguments regarding the central importance of interpretation to the uniquely human way of existing – Dasein. I suggest that a prethematic capacity for narrative as a part of being is required for it to be possible for happenings to emerge as events within meaningful wholes in the first place. Only on the basis of this prior narrative articulation of events is it possible to tell explicit, thematised stories. In the second part of the chapter I present an operational definition of narrative to clarify the limits of storytelling. I suggest there are four key dimensions of all stories, whether thematised or not: 1) temporal and spatial specificity and a grounding in factual happenings; 2) relationality of parts in the sense that stories are relational wholes and only exist in relation to the broader contexts within which they are situated; 3) figuration, in the sense that all stories have a structure of some kind, even if the sources of that structure may be varied and often difficult to pin down; and 4) 'a sense of an ending', understood as all stories projecting not only forward but towards an ending of some kind, even if it is not always clear.

Each of Chapters 2, 3 and 4 address an aspect of Ricoeur's account of three-fold mimesis (Ricoeur 1984). Chapter 2 focuses on mimesis₂ – 'configuration' – by examining narrative structure. It begins with a discussion of the distinction between narrative and chronicle made by some historiographers, arguing that narrativity varies significantly depending on both the writing practices of users and the reading practices of interpreters. I propose that the opportunities social media provide for chronicling, in the sense of recording chronological accounts of events without explicitly positioning them within narrative wholes, represents a significant shift, empowering unaffiliated citizens in previously unseen ways. The second half of the chapter introduces three major orientations to narrative structure in fragmented contexts which I term 'vertical' (characterised by episodic accumulation of narrative elements), 'horizontal' (characterised by projecting forward and back in time) and 'ambient' (characterised by contributions to connectively produced and largely unknown wholes). While all three approaches are available to all users in principle, I argue that in practice the range of viable storytelling methods depends on the level of influence of the narrator: powerful users able to command sustained attention can mix and match as they please; less influential users, on the other hand, are largely confined to limited contributions to ambient narratives.