



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Discourse, Context & Media

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/dcm

Narrative aftershocks: Digital retellings of an earthquake in Emilia-Romagna, Northern Italy

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 December 2017
Received in revised form 1 April 2018
Accepted 2 April 2018
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Blog
Counter-narratives
Collective identity
Digital narrative
Emilia-Romagna (Italy)
Earthquake
Stance

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the rapid diffusion of traumatic digital storytelling after a lethal earthquake damaged many towns across the northern Italian region of Emilia-Romagna in May 2012. This natural disaster produced a large amount of online narratives by and about the survivors and their family members and acquaintances. Through an analysis of the interactional dynamics between these storytellers and their commenters in blogs, this article explores how these traumatic stories can be reshaped and manipulated for different ends and how a politicized collective identity among bloggers and commenters can be (co)-constructed, contested, and solidified through blogging. More specifically, this article shows how these digital counter-narratives attempt to transform an allegedly sympathy-based virtual community into a community enraged by the purported causes of all the widespread suffering and distress. In this way, these virtual communities' emotional stances are redirected more to environmental politics than to sympathy and grief in interesting ways. Besides investigating the pragmatics of narrative interaction in virtual environments, this article extends linguistic anthropological analytical and methodological tools to digital discursive practices.

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'[I] can't live in my house anymore.
[I] can't go back to my house and see everything on the floor,
all the broken dishes, all my paintings and ceramics on the floor
in pieces.
[I] stay out as much as [I] can and
[I] walk like a ghost through this [small] town full of debris
everywhere.
Everything is collapsing. Another quake and [we] are all dead.
[I] am terrified, and [I] can't sleep anymore.
[I] pray to mighty God, but [it] doesn't get us anywhere, [we]
are afraid here [...].'¹
(an earthquake victim, Emilia-Romagna, May 2012).²

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¹ Italian original version: "Non posso più vivere a casa mia. Non posso rientrare in casa e vedere tutto per terra, tutti i miei piatti rotti, i quadri e le ceramiche per terra a pezzi. Resto fuori il più possibile e cammino come un fantasma per questa città piena di cocci dappertutto. Tutto sta crollando. Un'altra scossa e siamo tutti morti. Sono terrorizzata e non dormo più. Prego il Buon Dio ma non serve a nulla, abbiamo paura qui [...]."

² All translations from Standard Italian to English are mine unless otherwise stated.

1. Introduction

On May 20th, 2012, at 4:03 a.m., a lethal earthquake struck the northern Italian region of Emilia-Romagna where I had taken twelve American students for a two-month study abroad program.³ During that month, two major earthquakes occurred in Emilia-Romagna, causing 27 deaths and widespread damage both to new buildings and to antique constructions considered parts of the national historical and artistic patrimony. The first earthquake, registering a 5.9 magnitude, struck about 22 miles north of the main city of Bologna. The epicenter was between the three small towns of Finale Emilia, Bondeno and Sermide. Soon afterwards, two aftershocks of 5.2 magnitude occurred, one approximately an hour after the main event and another approximately eleven hours after the main quake. Seven people were killed. A 5.8 magnitude earthquake struck the same area nine days later, on May 29th, at 09:00 a.m. local time, causing an additional twenty deaths and widespread damage, particularly to buildings already weakened by the earlier major earthquake. That time, the epicenter was in the small town of Medolla at a depth of about 6 miles. After the first earthquake at

³ The study abroad program was sponsored by the Center for Global and Intercultural Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2018.04.001>

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least 100 structures of historical significance were damaged or destroyed.⁴ After the region was nationally declared under a state of emergency, an economic and political crisis followed these disasters, accompanied with widespread distress and fear by the local population across Central and Northern Italy.

Not only did many images of the earthquake and aftershocks circulate over the international media, including the Internet, but people's stories did as well. Oral narratives of trauma could be heard in interactions in the streets and in individuals' homes, as the opening epigraph of this article demonstrates. My informants and other ordinary speakers I met in the streets⁵ seemed to be worried about the damages, losses, the collapsing castles and churches in town, the removal of debris, the reconstruction of antique buildings, and the uncertain future of this region.

In the virtual realm, online stories of suffering circulated quickly, through professional news media interviews with people from the region as well as through amateur, first-hand videos posted on YouTube, Facebook, and blogs. Through this virtual community, the earthquake victims could share their experiences, thus creating a "collective identity" (Van De Mieroop, 2015) through their shared stories which were re-told and recontextualized as a way to offer support and consolation to people. As Van De Mieroop has demonstrated in her work on narratives produced by migrants in Antwerp, Belgium, collective identities can be formed and solidified when participants shift in and out of certain groups or associations (Van De Mieroop, 2015). In this way, a sense of solidarity among virtual participants who share the same orientation in their storytelling events, can be (co)constructed in the digital realm as well. For example, the public Facebook solidarity group called "Terremoto Emilia Community" ("Earthquake Emilia Community") was created soon after the first earthquake with almost 10,000 people participating in it within the first two weeks. Besides sharing useful information such as how to find immediate assistance for the damages in private homes and properties, this group posted many stories of desperation and disarray that could be addressed by the community members. In other words, a "sympathy"-based collective identity was co-constructed through narrative retellings across many digital platforms. Yet, traumatic stories can take different, unpredictable directions in some digital platforms, such as blogs.

Focusing on digital storytelling between Italian bloggers and their commenters, this article shows how stories of trauma were re-narrated, recontextualized (Bauman and Briggs, 1990), and "countered" (Bamberg and Andrews, 2004) by some critics as revealing deeper stories of environmental exploitation and political corruption. Through an analysis of the interactional dynamics in blogs, this article shows how these traumatic stories were reshaped and countered by some virtual participants for different ends, producing a different kind of "participatory" solidarity based on a re-channeling of fear, frustration and anger. In particular, this article shows how traumatic narratives can take a different trajectory, a politicized one, since commenters might be more worried about stories of fracking in the earthquake area as the real cause for the loss, destruction, and suffering. Thus, instead of a more "sympathetic" collective identity, these counter-narratives (Bamberg and Andrews, 2004) construct an "antagonistic," debate-like, politicized framework as a reaction to these traumatic events. In this respect, a more politicized collective identity is not only co-constructed among bloggers and commenters, but is also

solidified globally given the transnational reach of these digital platforms.

This article thus explores two key aspects in which politicized collective identities emerge and get solidified in Italian blogs: (1) How Italian bloggers and commenters recontextualize, oppose, and reorient, stories about natural disasters, such as earthquakes--through an analysis of narratives-as-practices, vs. narratives-as-texts; (2) how bloggers and commenters' various enactments of these stories not only help create and solidify their virtual sense of a shared community, but they are also key in the (co)construction and solidification of their digital collective identities. This article thus extends linguistic anthropological and sociolinguistic theories and methods used in face-to-face interaction and narrative studies to the digital world. Before turning to the analysis of ten examples of narrative practices in blogs drawn from my data, I describe the main theoretical framework and the digital sites featured in this article with reference to the Italian sociocultural and political landscape to better contextualize these cases.

2. Digital narratives as discursive practices in blogs

Written and oral narratives have always been primary modes in human communication and engagement across cultures and have been used as key analytical tools in numerous disciplines. In recent years, however, narrative studies have experienced a significant shift from a text-oriented to a practice-oriented perspective of storytelling (Schiffrin, 1996; De Fina, 2003; De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012). In this vein, linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have recently studied narratives as performances embedded in their sociocultural context, and not as isolated texts. As De Fina and Georgakopoulou write, "[a] significant consequence of the fact that stories are not told in a vacuum but by tellers to audiences in specific settings and for specific purposes is that the mechanisms through which performers contextualize meanings for their audience come to the forefront" (2012:61). Thus, both storytellers and audience members actively participate in the co-construction of their stories and this is true for digital stories as well. Interactions between bloggers and their virtual audience influence not only how stories get (re)configured at every comment posted, but also participants' experiences and reactions in the digital world.

Storytelling events are thus understood as complex, multidimensional processes in which speech participants' (re)enactments in interaction can reconstruct, retell, and assign various meanings to past, present, and future events. In this respect, offline and online narratives cannot be studied as decontextualized, denotational texts, because they are dynamically and continuously (re)configured by the interactional moves of their speech participants (Schiffrin, 1996; Wortham, 2001; De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012). Scholars across various disciplines have recently recognized that internet-based digital storytelling is as important as face-to-face oral storytelling. Social media such as texting (Gershon, 2010; Gershon and Manning, 2014), Facebook (Lee, 2011; Georgakopoulou, 2017; Simões Marques and Koven, 2017), Twitter (De Fina and Toscano-Gore, 2017), WhatsApp, YouTube (Chun and Walters, 2011; Chun, 2013; Mendoza-Denton, 2016; Perrino, 2017), and blogs (Myers, 2010; Walton and Jaffe, 2011; Page, 2011) have been fertile sites for the production and circulation of digital stories. By sharing their traumatic stories about a lethal earthquake, for example, virtual participants engage in discussions with friends and with other participants who can align or disalign with them. In particular, since blogs' creation in the 1990s, the production of online narratives about social suffering and traumas has been studied as a site in which interactions between bloggers and their virtual commenters can yield different,

⁴ For an example of the damages to historical buildings, see this video by the Italian national TV channel RAI: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VypAlp7mLKg> posted on YouTube soon after the first earthquake (last accessed, October 14, 2015).

⁵ While this article features online storytelling, focusing on blogs, I collected many oral narratives from ordinary speakers in the towns struck by the earthquakes for comparative purposes.

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