From local to global: Visual strategies of glocalisation in digital storytelling

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ABSTRACT

This paper's main goal is to explore the function of images in the structuring of digital stories and their role in the construction of global meanings from personal experiences. Findings presented here come from the analysis of thirty digital stories taken from several specialised websites on the Internet. The methodology we used is a mixture of the traditional Labovian narrative schema (Labov, 1972) and a multimodal – mainly visual – analysis (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996). Among the most interesting results, images play a significant role as evaluative mechanisms by which local, culturally specific elements in digital narratives interact with a global perspective for a universal audience.

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the structural and multimodal characterisation of a new genre of narratives, that of digital stories.[2] In digital stories, people from different geographical locations, social backgrounds, and cultural traditions can tell personal experiences to different audiences around the world via the Internet. In the line with the recent phenomenon of glocalisation, this practice allows the interaction of local cultural aspects with universal matters and so raises a number of questions as for the way in which such stories can be interpreted by an audience with different cultural values and interests. This is the main motivation behind this article.

The meaning of the term *glocalisation* is apparently quite straightforward, i.e. it is a combination of globalisation and localisation. However, the term is so widely used that it is difficult to find a comprehensive definition for it. Most of all, the term, as much as that of globalisation, has been primarily used in the fields of economics and marketing as "the process whereby global corporations tailor products and marketing to particular local circumstances to meet variations in consumer demand" (Maynard, 2003: 6), but it has become a very popular concept and transcended boundaries in order to become commonplace in sociological, cultural matters, including education, language, media, art, literature, translation, politics, etc.

Even if the concept itself is not completely new, i.e. adapting foreign, global tendencies to local needs and habits, the popularity of the blend has much to do with recent concerns on globalisation and with the widespread fear that globalisation

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actually involves a threat to local, cultural specificities, especially as it seems to be always Western habits and values which are extended and imposed on the rest of the world. However, since its very beginnings (Robertson, 1992, 1995; Swyngedouw, 1997; Bauman, 1998), the term was coined in order to convey the idea that globalisation does not only involve homogeni-sation and that global and local must not be regarded as opposite concepts. On the contrary, glocalisation is conceived as the interaction between global and local forces and so, the concept emerges as a solution: "Glocalisation means that local cultures can be valorised and revitalised through the means and opportunities offered by globalisation in order to make them a source of enrichment for all the individuals involved".[3]

Considering all the above, digital stories reveal the perfect paradigm of glocalisation, as there is a constant interaction between local and global elements both in their original motivation and in their final appearance and structure. Thus, the goal of this paper is to explore the visual mechanisms by which i) local and global perspectives interact in digital narratives and ii) a global, multicultural audience can understand and get identified with the personal, culturally specific events narrated in them. To achieve our purposes, thirty digital narratives were selected from different nongovernmental and nonprofit organisation websites on the Internet and analysed applying the traditional Labovian schema of oral narratives of personal accounts (Labov, 1972; Labov and Waletzky, 1967/1997), combined with a multimodal approach which takes into account the integration of textual, visual and, to a lesser extent, acoustic elements in the stories (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996).

2. Digital storytelling and glocalisation

Digital stories are short multimodal narratives by which people who are not professional in literature nor computer technologies attend to a workshop and learn to create a short narrative, usually on very personal experiences and worries, that combines digital images and photos with their own recorded voice and then publish them on the Internet. The genre was first developed at the Centre for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in California in the early 1990s and has since expanded all around the world.

Undoubtedly, digital stories can be claimed to be "glocal" from their very beginning. Usually told in the first person or a false third person, most digital narratives report on a difficult personal experience that the author eventually overcomes, and encourages others to fight against adversity. Indeed, these narratives tend to have an exemplary purpose and so contain some kind of moral or advice which is available via the Internet for anybody at any other time (years or decades later) and at any other place (maybe thousands of kilometres away). This mixture between traditional everyday communicative practices – telling personal stories, collecting, and sharing personal images – and new production and distribution formats is charac-teristic of glocalisation (Burgess, 2006).

In the combination of text, images and voice that integrate digital stories, glocalisation also comes into play. Even if the textual part of the story may be neutral and culturally unspecific, the images and the music, which tend to be text supporting, contextualise the story in a distinct culture and locate the story in a particular place and time. It must be noted, though, that much of this is the result of the process of creation of these stories in workshops, as they are often carried out in a community with specific interests or problems. In other words, although the narratives analysed are created individually and deal with personal topics, there is a collective goal in their construction and an exemplifying purpose in their publication by the organisations which host them. As a matter of fact, many of the stories which integrate our sample were uploaded onto the Internet by nongovernmental organisations with specific aims, such as fighting social rejection to HIV, promoting education in poor areas, improving the quality of health care in Africa or India, etc. As these workshops are held in communities sharing interests in a small town or neighbourhood, they help establish links in those communities, encouraging local social cohesion. So, for instance, Bristol stories[4] claim as its main aim "to gain deeper insight into Bristol's history and know more about the cultural tapestry conformed by the people living in the city". To this effect, much has been said about the alleged democratising potential of digital stories as they allow "or-dinary people" to be heard and take part in the cultural life of their area (Burgess, 2006: 6). Also, the adoption of the Internet, a global network, for local communication within a neighbourhood is considered by Hampton (2010) as an effect of glocalisation itself.

In sum, it becomes evident that digital stories are, from their original conception, a good example of glocal activity, in which local and global elements are in a constant interplay. They embody the slogan "think globally, act locally", since they are created at a completely local basis, but are thought to transcend those limits and reach a global audience. Also, they narrate culturally specific events, but intend to deal with more general, universal worries and fears. Finally, they are traditionally conceived as storytelling, but technologically implemented and distributed.

Taking into account the issues raised by glocalisation in this new emerging genre, we aim at examining how local and global aspects interact in digital stories and the role of images in this interaction. Also, we intend to explore which pictorial evaluative devices allow a global audience to be identified with individual, personal experiences in different parts of the world.

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[3] In *Glocalisation. Research Study and Policy Recommendations*, edited by CERFE group, the Glocal Forum and the Think Tank on Glocalisation. http://www.cpi.hr/download/links/hr/4297.pdf.

[4] http://www.bristolstories.org.