

Lives in Circulation: Personal Storytelling, Post-Truth Digital Publics, and Narrative Epistemics

This dissertation examines personal storytelling on Instagram as a narrative practice through which individuals negotiate power, visibility, and epistemic authority across diverse contemporary contexts. Bringing into dialogue narratives emerging from war and displacement in Palestine and Israel, struggles over repression and censorship in Iran, and migration and mobility within the Iranian diaspora, the project investigates how first-person stories shared on social media shape public discourse, collective affect, and shared imaginaries. Rather than treating these contexts as isolated case studies, I approach them as interconnected sites in which experiential narratives confront, supplement, and sometimes contest institutional forms of truth.

At the center of the project lies a defining tension of our time: the struggle between lived experience and aggregated, “objective” knowledge – a tension that narrative hermeneutics has identified as constitutive of modern forms of understanding (Meretoja 2018). In digital publics often described as “post-truth,” personal testimony can function both as ethical intervention and as destabilizing force (Dawson / Mäkelä 2022; Papacharissi 2014). This dissertation neither treats lived experience as self-evident truth nor subordinates it to statistical or institutional authority. Instead, it examines how experiential storytelling makes epistemic claims – asserting credibility, mobilizing authenticity, and inviting recognition – while circulating within narrative ecosystems shaped by audiences, counter-narratives, and platform logics.

Drawing on digital ethnography and narrative analysis, the study examines posts, short videos, captions, stories, and audience interactions on Instagram produced by ordinary users and more visible public figures. I approach these stories not as representative voices of entire communities but as situated contributions that take shape in relation to other stories, responses, and circulating interpretations. Through narrative mapping, I trace how individual testimonies accumulate and crystallize into broader formations of meaning, revealing how narratives gain force through repetition, resonance, and contestation.

In contexts of war and displacement – including Palestinian documentation of bombardment and Israeli hostage families’ accounts – storytelling operates as documentation, ethical witnessing, and affective mobilization (Chouliaraki 2015). In the Iranian context, the focus encompasses a wide spectrum of first-person testimonies: parents mourning children killed in protests, former detainees, women punished under dress-code enforcement, and voices aligning with state discourse. These stories reveal a contested terrain in which personal narrative becomes a site of resistance, loyalty, grief, and moral positioning under censorship and repression. Within the Iranian diaspora, migration stories foreground aspiration, precarity, nostalgia, and self-fashioning, showing how neoliberal promises of mobility coexist with new inequalities and ambivalences.

Across these various settings, the dissertation analyzes the aesthetics, politics, and ethics of personal storytelling. It attends to the visual and affective forms through which authenticity is performed (Georgakopoulou 2025), the structures that shape what can be seen and said, and the

ethical stakes of digitally mediated publics. Instagram's affordances and algorithms are treated as active mediators of narrative visibility and reception.

By positioning personal digital storytelling as a constitutive force in contemporary narrative formation, this dissertation contributes to narrative theory and digital cultural studies, demonstrating how intimate experiences become sites where political realities are contested, moral claims articulated, and collective futures imagined.

Works Cited

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