

# Using Memory and Temporal Hybridity to Give Voice in Storytelling on Social Media

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## ABSTRACT

Memory helps invoke stories of past in the present and for future. Exploration of memory is not something that is or can be finite. One cannot begin to open up memory and reach a point where the exercise is done and can be laid to rest. Every historical moment that offers us the possibility of looking at it through the prism of memory demonstrates that the more you search, the more there is that opens up (Jalil, et al., 2017). Memory can weave past into the present and can bring into play temporal hybridity which is enhanced by digital and social media. Temporally hybrid media and media objects inspire new kind of narratives (Outka, 2011; Engström, et al., 2010). Stories can help in building awareness, comprehension, recognition and empathy (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Stories can be used to empower, humanise and repair broken dignity (Adichie, 2009). Inclusive storytelling helps piece together a fragmented narrative of society by including often excluded people/ groups and build a community (Fajer, 1991). Couldry (2008) brings to focus the role of digital and social media in storytelling and how production, dissemination and reception of stories has changed with the emergence of new media; storytelling has evolved and become an activity of co-creation. Humans of Bombay uses the social media platform of Facebook (among others) to bring us people's stories and has slowly grown to a formidable force that uses memory, temporal hybridity and storytelling with digital and social media to give voice to people: ordinary and yet extraordinary, included and yet excluded, common and yet uncommon which is what this article is attempting to unpack through content analysis of its posts in the month of December 2018.

## Keywords

temporal hybridity; giving voice; digital storytelling; social media.

## 1. Memory and Oral Histories

Memory helps invoke stories of past in the present and for future. Exploration of memory is not something that is or can be finite. One cannot begin to open up memory and reach a point where the exercise is done and can be laid to rest. Every historical moment that offers us the possibility of looking at it through the prism of memory demonstrates that the more you search, the more there is that opens up (Jalil, et al., 2017). Memory can weave past into the present and can bring into play temporal hybridity which is enhanced by digital and social media. Memory also has the ambivalent nature where it plays the "healing and transformative role as well as at the manichaeon hold of the past over the present, so that conflicts from the past continue to impact the present (Terdiman, 1993). Recent theoretical work on memory (Turim, 2001; Radstone, 2000) suggests that the memory of the past, of how the past is recalled or what about the past is remembered may be shaped by more recent experiences. This reverses history's model of cause and effect whereby the present paradoxically becomes the "cause" of memory's representation of the past (Radstone, 2000). Memory must be understood in relation to both cultural narratives and unconscious processes as well as held in tension with its complex and mediated relationship to history and events. Also, a positive affirmative memory of the past has an important role in this process as much as forgetting does, both connected with the desire to move on. Perhaps, the memory of community living that bore a testimony to forms of relatedness between human beings with different religious identities and belonging to different groups living together provided the possibility of the "restoration of a moral universe" in the "memory of a culture".

## 2. Temporal Hybridity

Temporally hybrid media and media objects inspire new kind of narratives (Outka, 2011; Engström, et al., 2010). Engström, et al. (2010) showed how temporal hybridity allows production and presentation of temporally disjointed narratives to audiences as co-aligned and with on-going action. They adapted Manovich's media term 'hybridity' to flesh out the concept of temporal hybridity and show how production environment facilitates the merger between real time and historical data. Outka's (2011) work analysed Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things' and found that Roy had used the device of temporal hybridity in her characters' lives and her narrative structure to show how trauma had a lingering effect and prolonged damage. Outka delved deeper and said Roy had also evoked another temporal zone that was only accessible to her readers and, through this temporal hybridity, the readers could

imagine the possibility of disruption and even radical socio-political change. While Manovich inspired the first set of authors, the second research scholar borrowed the term 'hybridity' from Bhabha's postcolonial theory of hybridisation. Both works, however, are important in the singular observation of media objects holding the power to disrupt existing narratives and allowing for different times to become simultaneous.

### 3. Storytelling: giving voice and community building

Stories can help in building awareness, comprehension, recognition and empathy (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Stories can be used to empower, humanise and repair broken dignity (Adichie, 2009). When we say "storytelling," we mean something more visceral than charts, graphs, and a three-part structure of a main idea (Schwertly, 2014). Inclusive storytelling helps piece together a fragmented narrative of society by including often excluded people/ groups and build a community (Fajer, 1991). "Inclusive" storytelling-that is, telling as wide a variety of stories as possible, serves at least two functions. It both builds community among members of the storyteller's group and adds missing tiles to the mosaic of history that enrich society's understanding of itself (Delgado, 1989). When members of excluded groups begin to create their own histories, the growth of a greater sense of community within the group often follows. Their stories often reflect circumstances and emotions common to many in the group. Community building through storytelling has been a particularly important aspect of the modern women's movement. Women report finding solidarity and strength through sharing the details of their lives with each other. Storytelling creates a common ground between the storyteller and the listeners, validates the listener's own undiscussed experiences, and provides both incentive and protection for the listener to relate stories of her own (Massaro, 1988). Once experiences are shared, no member of the group needs to feel as though her problems are unique. As Delgado (1989) noted, "stories create their own bonds, represent cohesion, shared understandings, and meanings. The cohesiveness that stories bring is part of the strength of the outgroup. An outgroup creates its own stories, which circulate within the group as a kind of counter-reality". In the 2004 book, 'Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling' edited by Marie-Laure Ryan, the discussion is focused on what does it take in static images to evoke story that extends over time. In the words of Áron Kibédi Varga quoted in Hoogvliet (2010), "the image is not a second way of telling a tale, but a way of evoking it". Almost everyone has experienced this form of storytelling, which ranges from the exchange of personal reminiscences to family and cultural histories.

### 4. Digital and Social Media

Lister et al. (2009), in the second edition of their book *New Media: A Critical Introduction*, described, "... the term 'new media' actually refers to a wide range of changes in media production, distribution and use. These are changes that are technological, textual, conventional and cultural." They added that since the mid-1980s, some of the main terms in discourses about new media are digital, interactive, hyper textual, virtual, networked, and simulated. boyd & Ellison (2007) defined Social Network Sites (SNSs) as, "... web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site."

In an essay for *Social Media + Society*, boyd (2015) gave some further insight into social media which has, "... more to do with its cultural positioning than its technological affordances. Rooted in the broader "Web 2.0" landscape, social media helped engineers, entrepreneurs, and everyday people reimagine the role that technology could play in information dissemination, community development, and communication." The characteristics of new media augur a democratic and participatory environment, the promise of which raises expectations of a freer flow of ideas and content (Jenkins, 2006). Couldry (2008) brings to focus the role of digital and social media in storytelling and how production, dissemination and reception of stories has changed with the emergence of new media; storytelling has evolved and become an activity of co-creation.

### 5. Storytelling on Social Media

Storytelling has always been a social activity where a narrator/ characters tell(s) a story with or without different setups, props, etc. to an audience who had very little role to play except be at the receivers' end of the communication exchange. However, with social media, these roles are no longer as easily defined. Interactivity and co-creation are two affordances of social media platforms that allow senders and receivers to exchange positions and blur the clear-cut boundaries of these roles. Storytelling in social media is a continuous on-going and improvisational process, made up of interlinked content (Singh and Sonnenberg, 2012). In fact, most brands have caught onto the fact that storytelling on social media is an effective way of engaging consumers and marketing to them (Pulizzi, 2012).

Page (2013) identified that social media is a highly effective platform for storytelling given its affordances are well suited to different features like formats e.g. seriality, and narrative styling and its various types. Elaborating on this, Alexander and Levine (2008) wrote, "Stories now are open-ended, branching, hyperlinked, cross-media, participatory, exploratory, and unpredictable. And they are told in new ways: Web 2.0 storytelling picks up these new types of stories and runs with them, accelerating the pace of creation and participation while revealing new directions for narratives to flow." They also address another social media feature that plays a role in storytelling i.e. micro content. This micro content allows many more entries into storytelling and, with interactivity and easy co-creation possible on Web 2.0, a new environment for storytelling on social media is created.

### 6. Humans of Bombay on Facebook

Inspired by *Humans of New York*, Karishma Mehta started *Humans of Bombay* in 2014 without any specific training in photography or storytelling. She literally walked on the streets of Mumbai and spoke with strangers urging them to share their stories and requesting for a photograph. These are stories of joy and sorrow, success and failure, hope and heartbreak (Singh, 2015; Behal, 2016; Joshi, 2016). Mehta believes everybody has a story and they want to share it; all we have to do is ask them simple questions to pull out their powerful, touching narratives. These narratives have not only moved people to share them further on social media,

but also driven people to express support verbally and through actions like donating money for causes. Mehta has started several funding campaigns on Facebook to raise money for social causes (Singh, 2015; Behal, 2016).

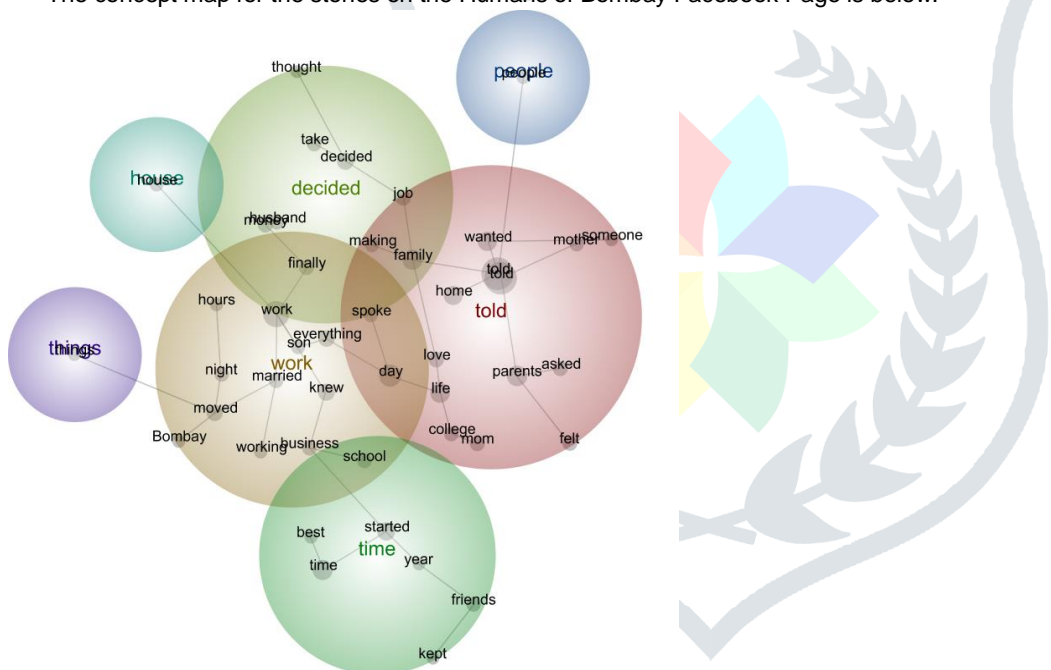
Joshi (2016) interviewed Mehta to find her childhood was driven by storytelling and her craft secret is bringing out narratives of people who have battled abuse and exclusion and came out of their struggles with a hopeful eye towards the future. The secret which allows her to do that is asking strangers who are willing to talk what their happiest memory is. Mehta said they are more willing to start conversations with this question and are usually smiling while talking about their happiest memory which makes for a good photograph. Mehta spoke to Behal (2016) and highlighted how her audience participates in her stories by reacting (like, love, etc. on Facebook), commenting and sharing on social media. They also shut people with negative comments down without her having to do anything.

Mehta (2014) writes on the about section on her Humans of Bombay Facebook Page, "Humans of Bombay catalogs the beat of the city, one story at a time." It uses the social media platform of Facebook (among others) to bring us people's stories and has slowly grown to a formidable force that uses memory, temporal hybridity and storytelling with digital and social media to give voice to people: ordinary and yet extraordinary, included and yet excluded, common and yet uncommon which is what this article is attempting to unpack through content analysis of its posts in the month of December 2018.

## 7. Findings

The stories on the Facebook Page of Humans of Bombay, for December 2018, have been thematically analysed with the use of content analysis software, Leximancer. Smith & Humphreys (2006) outlined the importance of this software "...for transforming lexical co-occurrence information from natural language into semantic patterns...." Using different algorithms for each stage i.e. semantic and relational, it employs nonlinear dynamics and machine learning for content analysis and knowledge discovery for data that is too vast to analyse manually. It starts out by giving the users a holistic concept map. This map lays out the major concepts and themes derived from the content and shows how there are common threads and connections between them. As you click on each of the concepts individually, the software morphs to show how that particular concept is related to others and its themes within. The charts that reveal these interrelationships throw light on how concepts and themes are placed in the content we are analysing and revolve around each other at each of the aforementioned stages.

The concept map for the stories on the Humans of Bombay Facebook Page is below.

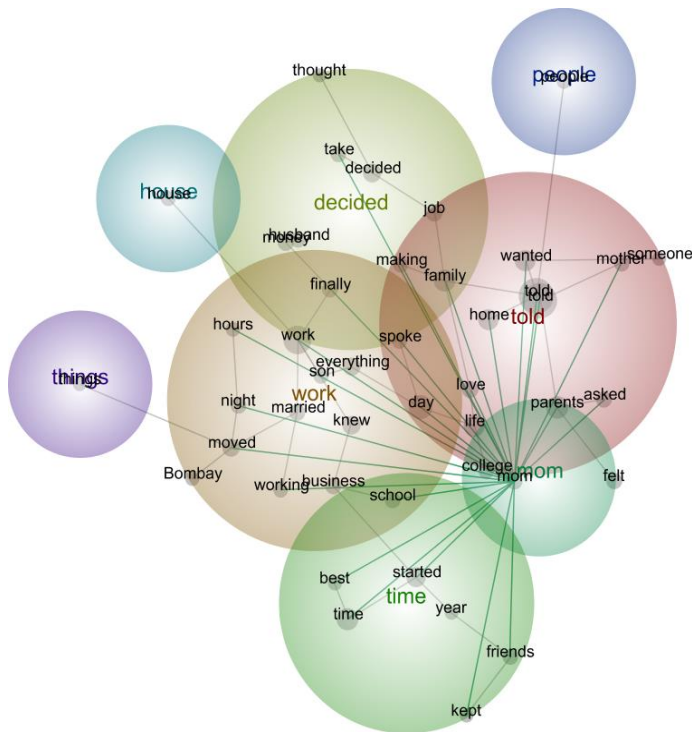


**Figure 1 Concept Map of Stories by Humans of Bombay on their Facebook Page from December 2018**

Figure 1 talks about the major concepts and themes derived from the stories by Humans of Bombay on their Facebook Page from December 2018. The coloured circles denote the major concepts which are as follows:

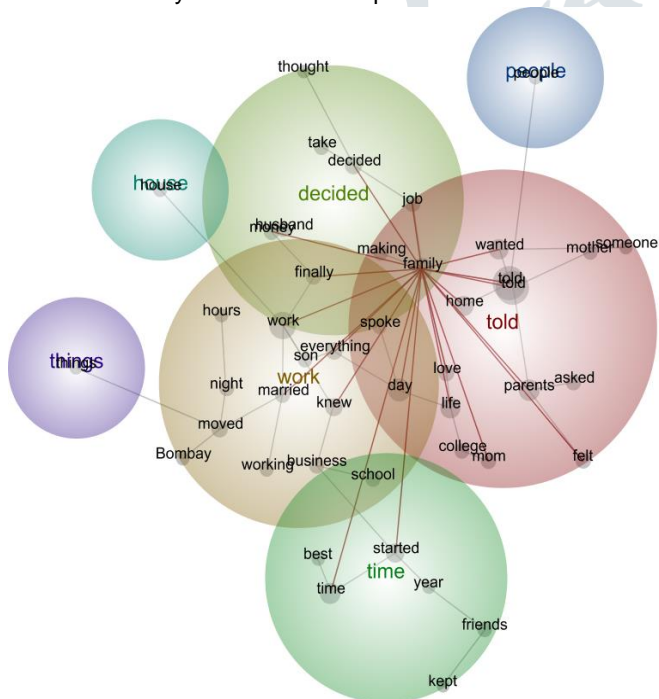
- Told (as the stories are being told)
- Work (the interviewees discuss their work life in the stories)
- Decided (the interviewees talk about their decisions)
- Time (mostly related to how they spend their time, which they discuss in their stories)
- House (where they live and stories around their house)
- Things
- People

These circles of concepts also highlight the major themes within them. For instance, the concept of 'Told' has the themes, 'Parents', 'Family', 'Home', etc. under it. These connections reveal the interrelationships between concepts and themes at the semantic and relational levels. From the various concepts and themes emerging from the software run on the stories, this paper looks at the following concepts.



**Figure 2 The Concept 'Mom'**

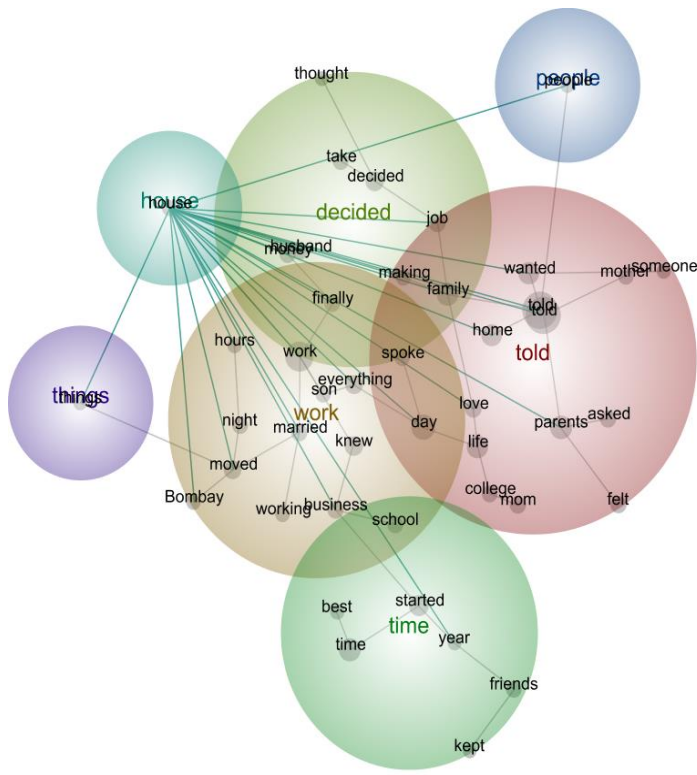
'Mom' is related to most of the other concepts. Others forming stories around 'Mom' are 'College', 'Love', 'Life', 'Work', 'Told', 'Time', 'Moved', 'Work', 'Money' and 'Husband'. Hence stories which discuss the concept of 'Mom', which is also a theme, talk about the other already mentioned concepts in detail.



**Figure 3 The Concept 'Family'**

'Family', as a concept, is related to a lot of themes which are spread across in all the concept circles. 'Life', 'Mom', 'Felt', 'Work', 'Told', 'Married', 'Job', 'Money', 'People' are the concepts and themes which are related to 'Family' in the stories.





**Figure 4 The Concept 'House'**

Figure 4 shows the mapping of 'House' which is a concept as well as a theme. It is linked with other concepts and themes like 'People', 'Things', 'Told', 'Money', 'Parents', 'Moved', 'Married', 'Bombay', 'Parents' and 'Love'.



**Figure 5 The Concept 'Money'**

The mapping shows that concepts related to 'Money' in the stories are 'Job', 'Decided', 'Life', 'Work', 'Moved', 'Time', 'Husband', 'Day', 'Mother' and 'Wanted'.

Interestingly, when we juxtapose these findings with the social media engagement metrics of the Humans of Bombay Facebook Page, the following revelations are made. Based on the story most liked/ reacted to, the narrative that pulled people's attention was about a lady who chose to defy all odds and become a doctor despite family opposition. Her inspiration was her grandmother who was a healer herself. Her family opposed her decision because they thought she would never get married if she became a doctor! Nonetheless, she did become a doctor, got married and also set up a free clinic in memory of her grandma. She also happened to deliver the baby of a stranger she met on the train with barely any supplies and realised how grateful she was that some parents don't let their girls settle and helps them pursue their dreams. The findings from the software when collated with this story show that the concepts and themes of 'Decided', 'Family', 'Felt', 'Home', 'Husband', 'Job', 'Life', 'Married', 'Parents', 'People', 'Time', 'Told', 'Wanted' and 'Work' are related to this narrative.



Figure 6 Stories with the highest social media engagement

Similarly, the story most commented on was about the deep bond of friendship and how you keep it safeguarded in your heart, against all odds. The narrative is that of a woman who made a best friend out of someone who was from a very different background than hers. In the face of a grave difficulty, they were separated and then, due to the 'power' of WhatsApp, were reunited after decades! She equated the deep bond of friendship with cycling because muscle memory never lets you forget how to ride a bike once you've learned. The concepts and themes found here were: 'Bombay', 'Day', 'Decided', 'Family', 'Felt', 'Home', 'House', 'Husband', 'Life', 'Married', 'Mom', 'Mother', 'Moved', 'Parents', 'Time', 'Told' and 'Wanted'.

Finally, one of the most shared stories was that of a train accident survivor whose life completely changed after she lost her right hand. She was studying to become an architect and her dream was heavily compromised after the accident. Incidentally, she braved all odds, received a lot of help and support as well as media attention and had a movie made on her accident and recovery without her knowledge! She narrates how she is now a teacher and does everything any other person does despite many people sharing their reservations about her future. The concepts and themes related were, 'Bombay', 'College', 'Day', 'Decided', 'Family', 'Felt', 'Home', 'Life', 'Mom', 'People', 'Things', 'Told', 'Wanted' and 'Work'.

It is very interesting to find here that the most popular stories are those of women who have fought and won against different difficulties in life. From a feminist perspective, it sure is a clear case of using the tools of memory, temporal hybridity, storytelling and social media to give voice to a segment which is usually ignored and/ or highlighted for very different reasons, especially in mainstream media.

## 8. Conclusion.

Human of Bombay used two powerful tools to become the platform it is today: Storytelling and Social Media. What is unique about this platform is that they use the additional features of memory and temporal hybridity to give voice to ordinary and yet extraordinary people. The interviewees are using their memories and oral histories to recount their experiences of joy and sorrow, hope and despair and fighting and surviving in life which not only serves the purpose of giving them a voice to share their narratives, but also inspiring readers looking for common and yet uncommon sources of motivation. While their stories are set in the past, their photographs are a window to their present and the hybridity of these narratives of the past with representation of the present brings a temporal juxtaposition that elevates the stories and centres on the inclusion and yet exclusion these people have faced. Additionally, the potential of readers' acceptance by way of reaction, commenting and sharing brings in another temporally hybrid means of giving their voice acceptance in the future. These interviewees that Humans of Bombay has chosen to share stories of on their Facebook Page are rather unique. They fuel and are fuelled by the stories they share and the impact that has on readers. This is, perhaps possible because of the affordances of the art of Storytelling and the new media technology of Social Media. For now, the platform has restricted itself to sharing stories and aiding some support (including funding, in some cases) and only time will tell how far it goes.

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