Chapter 2
Reading the Stories

ABSTRACT

The life stories of the surveilled are contained in the digital representation and their analog presence. These stories make up the narrative bits—narbs—that eventually create the profiles of institutions and people. These narbs eventually become the big data that offer the information that the watchers seek.

INTRODUCTION

A story that I have often used in my classes and lectures deals with the time period of 2009 when the digital network, Facebook, was quite popular among the teenagers in the USA. Simultaneously, there was not much concern about protecting the information from prying eyes. Thus many youngsters would present significant amount of information on Facebook and would be unconcerned or unaware of the amount of information or the details that were available.

As such, in 2009, I faced a situation where I had to rely on my own abilities to explore information about different people only through what was available in the "public domain" in the digital space. The notion of public domain referred to what was not explicitly protected, to keep information private, by an individual or on behalf of an individual. These explorations into the data made it clear to me, and others who were

doing similar work, that there was sufficient data in the public sphere about individuals that it was possible to construct a brief narrative of the person's life. Indeed, Facebook invited people to tell their life stories. This phenomenon only underscored an important aspect of everyday life – stories are important in our lives and we live by stories and sometimes make important decisions based on the narratives we hear.

This led to my 2014 book, *Digital DNA: Social Networking and You,* where I elaborated on the way different ways in which narratives take on a significant role in how we live our lives on digital networks and virtually lay out our genes in the digital space. In this chapter, I draw liberally on my book. Here I lay out the importance of narratives in our lives pointing to the theories that frame the discussion of narratives, then I propose the notion of short narratives in the digital space and finally connect the process of digital narrativizing with the development of representations of people and institutions. Given, the significant reliance on theories, this chapter is a little different in tenor from the other chapters but offers the foundation to make the connection between surveillance and narratives.

Narratives

In laying out the digital DNA of an individual I had made the argument that any person can be constructed around a set of narratives. This idea draws from the work of American communication scholar Walter Fisher (1931-2018) who introduced the notion of the narrative paradigm. In most analysis of human activity, the traditional approach towards understanding human behavior, particularly in terms of the way people make decisions, has been analyzed from two broad traditional perspectives. Some have argued that humans are rational beings and make decisions based on reason. Thus, one may decide to carry an umbrella if there it is a cloudy day because a "cause-effect" relationship is established. Children are acculturated around this model where they are taught that good behavior may result in rewards whereas bad behavior will be punished. Within this rational model it is possible to bring "reason" into the decision-making process and understand why people would behave in a particular fashion. A second way in

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