

## **A Narrative Approach to Studying Writers' Weblogs as Interactive Processes of Identity Performance**

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### **Abstract**

Our research is directed at understanding how literary writers together with their readers narratively construct a sense of self through blogging. In this paper, we confront tentative results obtained from our analysis of blogging writers' identity constructions with the observations that followed our analysis of the blogs' reader comments. The aim of this paper is to understand how readers, by commenting, co-construct the identity of the literary writer. To this aim, we elaborate on the extent to which the comments relate to the narratives that make up the writer's blog posts and, through a narrative analysis of the comments, how the blog commentators conceive of the writer in terms of authority and involvement. The rationale that underpins this study follows Alexandra Georgakopoulou's linguistic ethnographic work on small stories that comprehends narratives as communicative, dialogical and locally produced practices of identity construction.

### **Keywords**

linguistic ethnography, online identity, weblog research, literary writers, blog readers

### **New media as transformers of artistic relations**

According to Susan Sontag (1966, p.49-51), artists are granted authority because they possess the sense of a personal and intellectual extremity. This extremity is uttered by behaving

in an anti-liberal, anti-bourgeois, obsessive, morbid, unhealthy or hysterical way. Their “indulgence in suffering” is what makes us admire these artists, Sontag states. The beholder pays respect to their seriousness, their manifest willingness to sacrifice themselves for their truths and views. Respecting this type of life relates to acknowledging the presence of mystery in the world. It appears that sometimes mystery is worth more than the truth, Sontag concludes. Put differently, the audience plays a distinct role in constructing artists’ authority. In *Les Règles d’art*, Pierre Bourdieu (1994, p.76-77) elaborates on the birth and the creation of the artist as a social phenomenon. He compares the symbolic concept of the artist, who is victimized and doomed in this world but consecrated in the hereafter, to the mystique of the Christ figure (Bourdieu, 1994, p.109). According to Bourdieu (1994, p.208-213), the artist is made, authorized, consecrated and acknowledged based on a collective belief in his ‘magic’. Without a world of celebrants and believers his artistic acts would bear neither meaning nor value. This observation applies to the literary field as well. The social position of the writer is related to power, to have at one’s disposal a distinct form of capital that is at the origin of social struggles about who is part of this universe and who is not, who is a writer and who is not (Bourdieu, [1986] 1993, p.163-168). This is the reason why, for instance, it is argued “while film emerged in the early twentieth century as a commercial and collaborative medium, in order to be taken seriously as an art, alongside literature and the visual arts, it needed its own version of the myth of the solitary genius” (Bennett, 2005, p.106). What is important to remember, then, is that in emphasizing the distance between artist and beholder, between writer and reader, readers to a certain extent mystify the author-figure. However, according to Brian Richardson (2006, p.120), writers equally impersonate “distinct authorial selves” that might differ quite severely from the ‘real’ author.

Mass media, too, have played a decisive role in constructing a mythical image of the artist. For instance, through underlining the “ideology of absolute artistic individualism” (Walker, 1993, p.93). Yet, when considering digital media, several scholars argue that, because of the interactive nature of the Internet, both artists and members of the audience can become legitimate meaning creators and, thus, can demystify social authority relations. It is argued that manifestations of social and mobile computing, such as Facebook and YouTube, might realize the avant-garde goal of abolishing the distinction between art and everyday life (Bolter, 2007, p.117). Firstly, because today, as is argued by Alison Oddey and Christine White (2009, p.8-9), more than ever before the audience wants to experience art in an interactive way. This means that the “spectator” focuses principally on what he or she wants to see and that this spectator

does no longer settle for merely viewing the work of art. Rather, the spectator wants to engage in a more active way. Secondly, it is mentioned that in the context of contemporary art the relation between art, social reality and the artist as a person has changed (Kraemer, 2007, p.197). Therefore, the artist's opinion needs to be equated with visitors' statements of the work of art in order to attain an all-embracing interpretation of the artwork (Kraemer, 2007, p.201). Also, new media are considered as a way for the artist to engage with offline as well as online communities and, hence, to maintain a connection with the social world. It is argued that the focus of artworks online seems to be more about the social use of technology than about the technology itself, "joining art and life through an activation of or intervention into the social fabric" (Cook, 2007, p.114, 118). Finally, it is stated that the distinct characteristics of the technology itself stimulate the emergence of a new type of relation. Interestingly, this does not merely concern digital media. Walter Benjamin (1985, p.20-35), in his essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', stated that the mechanical reproduction of art (which no longer was a case of unicity and authenticity, yet of mechanically produced and reproduced cultural objects) led up to a situation wherein the exchange of the positions of the artist and the public became easier. He argued that this specific way of creating cultural objects allowed the beholder to become a critical expert and even a creative author, since the opportunity to take part in these art forms was greater than before. These ideas re-emerged in the 1960s when Marshall McLuhan repeatedly pointed out that technologies such as TV and other electric media instigated a stress on audience participation "as close to the total involvement of man in his work as of artist in his studio" (McLuhan, 1966, p.134). Following McLuhan, each development of the electric age demands a high degree of participation from the audience. He perceives this as the end of the mere consumer phase and as the beginning of a new relation between the artist and the audience. Whereas the artist is turned to presenting the creative process in favour of public participation, the audience becomes more actively and communally involved in this process as maker (McLuhan, 1966, p.148-153, 174-175), since the spectator now "must supply all the connections" (McLuhan, 1966, p.viii). Today, Simon Lindgren (2007, web), for one, connects Walter Benjamin's writings on mechanical media to his own reflections on Web2.0. Lindgren applies the analytical concept of Benjamin's *flâneur* to the current web surfer in order to understand the transition towards an interactive Internet environment. This transition, Lindgren states, should not be understood as a revolution. Rather, we witness a continuation and intensification of an already existing move from simple media consumption towards increased participation and interaction.

## **Blogging and de-/mystification of literary authority**

In this study, we intend to understand how the weblog, as a distinct digital medium, is used by contemporary literary authors in interaction with their readers to construct a sense of self and the other party and how this, as a result, affects their relationship. Contrarily to Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd's approach (2004) that intends to understand how cultural transformations influence and explain for the emergence and the use of weblogs, other authors aim to comprehend the extent to which the use of digital technologies such as weblogs transforms traditional cultural norms. In other words, Miller and Shepherd (2004, web) see the blurring of public-private boundaries, the expansion of celebrity culture and voyeurism, and the mediatization of society as the context in which individuals use blogs to regain the balance that is lost in one's self-identity. They add that apart from self-expression, blogs also fulfill a need for community building. Hence, they function as a way of overcoming the post-modern flux of subjectivity and destabilization. Laura J. Gurak and Smiljana Antonijevic (2008, p.64-65), conversely, understand weblogs as media that are both private ("writing oneself" through stating past and present experiences) and public ("rewriting oneself" through interaction with the audience) and, thus, as media that invoke the creation of a new, "semiprivate or semipublic" identity, hence stimulating the blurring of social boundaries between public and private. Gurak and Antonijevic (2008, p.65) speak of blogging as incorporating "both an old human need – the need for temporal structuring and integrating of past and present experiences – and a new way of doing that – relying on speech, reach, anonymity and interactivity of Internet communication". Considering both viewpoints, José van Dijck (2004, web) argues that "the diary and lifelog should be studied both as a cultural form or genre, while also taking into account the materiality and technology of (hand) written diaries and lifelogs, as well as the cultural practice of diary writing in comparison to the activities of so-called bloggers". Following van Dijck (2004, web), blogs are characterized by a reinvention of old rituals that are adapted in a new way to the modalities of digitization and, thus, can be viewed as both personal artefacts of identity formation and as facilitators of a social process of exchange, participation and community construction.

This combination of private and public characteristics, however, is not without its impediments. According to Laurie McNeill (2005, web), "the diary is a centuries-old practice associated with the spiritual, the therapeutic, and the strictly private, while the Internet, home of the "New Media", has been celebrated for its publicity and accessibility". As a result, McNeill emphasizes that readers expect blogs to be personal, while at the same time they understand the

blog as a shared, public space in which they intend to encounter the blog author as well as other readers. The blog author, for his part, is in light of this paradoxical situation looking for stability, order and reliability rather than for change. Hence, the uses of the weblog can be understood as decisions about self-presentation, on the one side, and decisions about social interactions on the other side. It is argued that both issues influence the “development and performance of identity” through weblogs (Dennen, 2009, p.23). As a result, the self is multiple given that both the blogger and the readers are involved in creating it, although the blogger’s voice “remains the main center of the self-representational text” (Serfaty, 2004, p.61-62). Bloggers, hence, seem to be confronted with an ambivalent situation in which the blog functions as both veil and mirror. The veil implies that the Internet allows the diary writer to construct and disclose himself as he intends (Serfaty, 2004, p.13), thus to build a personal narrative. The mirror, on the other hand, can be found in the presence of a readership of the online diary because, as Serfaty (2004, p.57) highlights, “the function of the mirror is to provide a medium for the identification to others as well as for separation from others”. Serfaty concludes that:

The frontier between writer and readers is no longer impassable, diarists relinquish some of their centrality, and readers are in fact expected to contribute to structuring the text of the blog by participating in the collective writing of entries, thus imprinting their mark on the diary. (Serfaty, 2004, p.65)

Hence, the reader, Lena Karlsson (2006, p.14) claims, should be acknowledged as “co-creator” of the blog genre. However, she essentially understands readers’ participation as an act of reading instead of an act of writing. Readers’ engagement and activity in the text, Karlsson (2006, p.3) states, is influenced by “assumptions about the identicalness of author/narrator/protagonist and the textual world and the “real”” and, thus, not only by “the possibilities of readers to leave their marks on the text”. In this context, she emphasizes that most blog readers refer to the notion of a “autobiographical contract” – thus suggesting a reference to an older medium in which mere identification with the protagonist seemed to be where most readers’ activity was situated – when describing their relation with the blog text (Karlsson, 2006, p.50). Susan Herring et al.’s (2005, p.160-161) viewpoint on the blog as a heterogeneous genre is alike: “In blogging for purposes traditionally associated with other genres, people inevitably carry over some of the practices and conventions of those genres into their blogging practices”. Hence, according to Karlsson (2006, p.40), readers don’t really want to become writers themselves, they are not eager to participate visibly and seem to be constrained in their relation with the blog author. Moreover, even when participating, they tend

to confirm the author's performance. Karlsson, thus, argues that authority remains intact and is even strengthened in blogging, irrespective of the interactive opportunities offered by the blog medium:

The readerly responses to the questions on interactivity point to the endurance of the ideology of both authorship and autobiography. The diary blog form appears postmodernist (in its technologically inscribed multi-voicedness, in its relation to other texts/other selves, in its open nature whose ending is deferred); however, the readerly assumptions are steadfastly modernist. (Karlsson, 2006, p.49)

Equally, Chris Chesher (2005, web) claims that weblogs perpetuate, coexist with and transform conventional authorship. He argues that the so-called death of the author as a result of the interactive and democratic opportunities offered by the Internet is greatly exaggerated. "The Author is alive and well, and has a blog", he says. According to Chesher, the features and conventions of blogs ascribe a certain cultural capital to the blog writer that corresponds to the Romantic cultural convention of the author as an individual, mysterious and even magical genius. Hence, paradoxically to the predictions of theorists celebrating the liberating potentials of the social web because of its less unidirectional and more interactive qualities, it seems that blogs succeed because they are less innovative than other online forms, Chesher concludes. He, thus, seems to imply that people still prefer conventional and recognizable patterns:

[Blogs] reinvent and reaffirm authorship as the dominant paradigm for the metacommunication associated with written texts. The synchronous inverted narrative structure maintains consistent of voice and visual presentation with events marked location, giving a sense of actual space and real time. The dialogue with readers through comments compensates for the lack of careful editing and conversational style. As a text travels further from its context, the author looms larger. Therefore, blog authorship is most prominent outside the blogosphere – in the culture that is still trying to comprehend new media. (Chesher, 2005, web)

A similar view is held by Internet researcher Geert Lovink (2008, p.20) who states that blog readers' comments are not of equal value to the blog author's postings: "users are guests, not equal partners, let alone antagonists". Mathieu O'Neil (2006) utters a similar explanation for the fact that authority has not been dissolved by the blogosphere: "if social networks have migrated online, it is logical to assume that the processes of differentiation, hierarchisation and control

which, by all accounts, structure offline human interactions, have also done so” (O’Neil, 2006, p.2).

Moreover, it can be questioned whether literary writers actually want to use the Internet as a participatory medium. Following Piret Viires and Virve Sarapik’s (2010, p.353-354) research, writers intend to maintain their artistic authority in cyberspace. It appears that, paradoxically, the participatory connections between writers and readers, which are enabled by the Internet, stimulate the author to tighten control of his utterances. Rather than being interested in engaging in a dialogue with readers and, as a result, being influenced when creating, the writers mainly intend to get their message forth and stay in control, either by reacting to readers’ comments, closing down their blogs or editing already published texts. Contrarily, Rebecca Lyle Skains’ research on online novel communities offers a more optimistic view on “the shifting author-reader dynamic” (Lyle Skains, 2010, p.95). She elaborates on the way writer-created communities might bridge the old habit of reading print literature with the new engagement with digital literature. In contrast with Viires and Sarapik’s findings, Lyle Skains (2010, p.96) states that these online novel communities expand the dynamic between authors, texts and readers since they allow readers to “influence and shape the texts the author is creating, through feedback and reader-contributed material”. For instance, she states that blogs can be used to build a reciprocal conversation between the author and his readers who can use this medium to ask questions, to forward ideas or to give feedback. However, she confirms that it is the author’s choice to change this author-reader dynamic and to engage in an online dialogue (Lyle Skains, 2010, p.100-103). Lyle Skains (2010, p.104) is rather optimistic, as she believes that the author-reader relationship will become more equal. For not only does the reader become a co-author, the author also becomes a reader and recipient of the text inspired by his own story. Larry Friedlander’s understanding of digital stories and the way these exemplify the emergence of “a radical new era of storytelling, one that reflects in exciting but uncomfortable ways the cultural transformations of our time” (Friedlander, 2008, p.177) can be situated between both aforementioned standpoints. Friedlander underlines the new roles for author and reader that return us to premodern ways of storytelling in which storytelling was a collaborative and public act. According to Friedlander (2008, p.182), “the nonhierarchical, improvisatory, open-ended, or non-ended nature of these narratives undermines authority and ownership”. Yet, Friedlander (2008, p.185) equally moderates his standpoint in saying that “digital worlds cannot function without some equivalent to the relationships of authority and trust”.

An important consequence of the appearance of these multiple uses, i.e. the blog as personal narrative and as social medium, seems to be the presence of competing narratives. As research (e.g. Gomez, 2010) has shown, bloggers can at the same time sustain and undermine traditional myths and relationships in the narratives that underpin their blog posts. Weblogs can, thus, be grasped as media in which distinct functions and features of the analogue and digital genre coexist and co-evolve into hybrid practices of both individuality and collectivity; private utterances and public encounters; memory (personal archive) and experience (social communication and personal evolution) (van Dijck, 2004, web).

### **Weblogs as linguistic ethnographic constructions of online identity**

Given the weblog's hybrid character, we try to understand, here, the interaction between blogging writers' narrative identity-constructions and commenting readers' conceptualizations of literary authority and involvement. To this aim, we build on the work of Alexandra Georgakopoulou on small stories, which are understood as "communicative practices enmeshed in people's social lives" (2007, p.ix). Studying these stories means taking into account the spatio-temporal contexts of local narrative constructions of self and relating these actions of agency to extra-situational and structural roles and identities (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p.1-8). By focusing on small stories, i.e. non-canonical or atypical narratives, Georgakopoulou (2007, p.17-19, 106-108) intends to emphasize the importance of studying relational, dialogical processes of self sense-making that story not only the self but also the other through practices of making out, challenging or defending larger social identities. Georgakopoulou (2007, p.123), here, makes use of the notion of "positioning" as a way of understanding how, through narrative performances and language practices, selves and others are located in a distinct space and identity. As a result, it is argued that people at the same time position and are positioned, for positions of self implicate positions of other and vice versa (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p.124, 140). These positions involve culturally familiar codes as well as micro-culturally shared codes. Moreover, the author's research has shown that distinct identity constructions, such as femininity, should be understood as creative and critical reworkings of widely available discourses (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p.142). In sum, larger contexts of roles and social identities shape and are shaped by local narrative tellings (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p.149).

In this paper, we focus on our analysis of three case studies (BM, TVL, CP) that were selected based upon the fact that 1) the selected blogging writers have published already at least two literary works with a professional publisher, which makes them 'established' or 'well-

established' writers; 2) the selected weblogs are personal weblogs that have a lively nature, meaning that they were updated on a regular basis, i.e. multiple times a month, and that they attract reader responses; 3) these blogs are specifically targeted at disseminating writers' reflections on their life, work and the entwining of both, rather than on commercial promotion; and 4) these writers regularly, online or offline, utter their opinion about the role, position or identity of contemporary writers. It should be remarked that these reflective writer blogs are sometimes embedded in a larger context of reading promotion, as is the case for the first case study that was published in 2008 when the Flemish writer Bart Moeyaert acted as blogger-in-residence for one month on the website of the Flemish Centre for Children's Literature. Although the writer has his own personal weblog, we decided to use the in-residence blog since he extensively used this blog to air reflections about his personal life and work, and, more importantly, readers commented on a regular basis to his blog posts, whereas reader feedback is not made possible on his personal blog. Hence, the lack of dialogue and narrative dynamics, crucial to the understanding of weblogs (cf. *supra*), compelled us to analyze the in-residence blog rather than the personal blog. Our study of the two other cases comprised an analysis of at least 100 consecutive blog posts, as well as the related blog comments, that were published on the writers' personal blog in 2010. The tables that are inserted in the appendix show the literary and blogging context of each of the three case studies.

In disentangling the interaction between writers' blog posts and readers' blog comments, four main steps were followed in our research, consistent with the thematic narrative analysis approach as described by Catherine Kohler Riessman (2008, p.53-76). In a first instance, we closely read all the selected blog posts and coded words and phrases that could be related to the self-representation and identity construction of the literary writer. Secondly, we classified these self-writings in thematic groups, by examining the codes against the aforementioned theoretical-conceptual framework (Riessman, 2008, p.66-67). Thirdly, we found that these thematic groups could be coupled into several central narratives that each in a specific way related to the concepts of authority and engagement, on the one hand, and to the institutionalized notion of writerhood versus an individualized understanding of the writer, on the other hand. Fourthly, these writers' self-narrations then functioned as the starting point from which to understand the readers' comments. Keeping the writers' blog narratives in the back of our head, we applied the same three steps as described above to expose the readers' narrative constructions of writerhood and of the individual writer, in the comments section. This analyzing process, thus, followed an ethnographic approach "making connections between the

analytical concepts (etic) and the participants' own sense making devices and ecologies of meaning (emic)" (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p.22). Inspired by the work of Georgakopoulou, our micro-level narrative analysis focused on understanding the self as relational, fragmented, inconsistent, contradictory and ongoing. This ethnographic analysis as a result provided "context-enriching" accounts that concentrated on identifying traces of participants' natural histories, sense-making and understandings, whether tacit or articulated in the data, rather than ascribing a priori prevalent frames to the data (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p.18-21). In other words, following Alexandra Georgakopoulou's (2007, p.39-40) understanding of narrative analysis, our study is grounded in the epistemology of "Linguistic Ethnography" (LE), which combines the characteristics of a textual taxonomy with a social practice-based view of narrative. LE, thus, takes into account the embeddedness of stories in a discursive context as well as the dis-embeddedness and re-embeddedness of stories in different contexts (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p.74).

### **Writers' weblogs as performances of controlled interactivity**

In a first instance, our research was aimed at understanding how weblogs are used as means to construct a sense of self, by way of a thematic narrative analysis of writers' weblog posts. Contrary to media theoreticians who stress the participatory and close relations between cultural content producers and cultural content consumers and contrary to media scholars who emphasize the reinforcement of existing authority by means of digital media, we found that blogging writers make use of multiple narratives at the same time to construct their online identity. In short, we have described these narratives as follows: 1) the writer as artist (N1), 2) the writer and the system (N2), 3) the writer and the audience (N3), 4) the writer as unique personality (N4). The first narrative refers to the Romantic, dominant notion of writerhood as a unique, isolated and genius act. The second narrative nuances this view through understanding writerhood as being part of a distinct social group in society, while not being completely detached from society, for the writer is considered to play a role both in the social field and in the literary field in specific. The fourth narrative too underlines the author's distinction, by having a unique view on life, but simultaneously connects the author with other human beings through mentioning the author's personal feelings, memories or relations. Finally, when the third narrative is used the blogging writer undermines the dominant notion of social distance in that the focus is on the social and collaborative relations of the individual writer with his readers and other people.

Despite the fact that the three case studies share this complex combination of narratives, an interesting difference between the writers can be discerned when comparing the degree to which the four narratives appear in the blog posts of the case studies (in the appendix we have integrated a quantification of the central narratives per case). In the context of the first case study (Moeyaert, 2008-01-01 to 2008-01-31), the first narrative (the writer as artist) and the fourth narrative (the writer as unique personality) dominate the blog posts. The dominance of both narratives is shown in the total number of references to these narratives in the blog posts. This means that this writer mainly subscribes to the idea of writerhood and individual writers in distinction to other members of society. It is, then, not surprising to see the third narrative (the writer and the audience) appear the least in this weblog.

Contrarily, in the context of the second case study (van Lieshout, 2010-01-01 to 2010-06-30) the second narrative (the writer and the system) is present the most in the blog posts. The first narrative (the writer as artist) also appears a lot, yet the difference with the second narrative's presence is remarkable. The third (the writer and the audience) and the fourth narrative (the writer as unique personality) are used less often. There is, thus, a significant difference in emphasis between both writers. Moeyaert subscribes to the idea of writerhood and of the writer as distinct from society, whereas van Lieshout rather defines writerhood mainly in terms of fulfilling a social role and position in society. Through highlighting the distinction between the artistic/literary field, on the one hand, and other social fields, on the other hand, we believe that Moeyaert intends to have his blog readers gain knowledge about why the artistic/literary field is distinct and, hence, why writers – himself included – should be acknowledged as distinct and unique personalities. In the case of van Lieshout, it could be assumed that his blog is aimed more exactly at enlarging the author's symbolic capital through underlining writers' important social role and position in relation to other members of society.

In the case study of Claire Polders (2010-01-01 to 2010-08-31) the focus in the blog posts is mainly on the writer as individual agent (narrative 4), while the third narrative (the writer and the audience) is used the least. Also, the disparity between the number of references to the fourth narrative and the extent to which the other three narratives are referred to is remarkable. This might be explained given Polders' specific situation, in contrast with the other two authors, as semi-novice within the literary field. Perhaps she doesn't feel confident enough at this stage of her career to picture herself as part of a group of socially distinct writers or to believe in the role she as a writer can take up in social life. The latter, for example, appears in

the fact that she refers more often to other writers' reflections on life than that she provides the reader with some worldly lessons of her own.

Although we realize that we touch upon the blogging writers' narrative constructions in a rather narrow way here, we will not elaborate further on these authors' narrative self-constructions. In this paper we are interested in comprehending how readers, through commenting, co-construct the notion of the writer and, in addition, how blog commentators as such position themselves in relation to these blogging authors' conceptualizations of literary authority and engagement. These observations are supported with a detailed quantification of the readers' narrative responses in each case, which can be found in the appendix.

In the first case study (Bart Moeyaert), the total number of blog comments that readers published during the writer's blogger-in-residence time was 115, in response to the 42 blog posts that the writer posted. We did not come across any comments from Moeyaert (BM) in reaction to his readers' comments. This could be explained because of BM's main focus on 'the writer as artist' (N1) and on 'the writer as unique personality' (N4) narratives in his blog posts. The focus on the self and on writerhood as an isolated, distant occupation seems to indicate that he is not very keen to engage in a debate with his readers. However, in about 50 percent of the blog reader comments reference is made to the third narrative, alluding to the relation between the writer and the audience. This means that readers, who exert themselves in commenting very often respond to Moeyaert's narratives in an active and equal way. Hence, it seems that these readers understand writerhood to be a social instead of a solitary activity. They appear to consider their remarks and personal opinions valuable enough to share them with both the writer and other readers. Hence, it can be concluded that the identity of the writer as constructed in the blog comments (i.e. mainly through narrative 3) to a certain degree adjusts the narratives that dominate the writer's blog posts (i.e. narratives 1 and 4) by showing a broader picture and focus than mainly the writer's self, life and position within the literary and social field. Yet, when looking into the comments' narrative content more thoroughly, it appears that actually we can detect a remarkable resemblance between the blog posts and the blog comments. In the case of BM, the fourth narrative (the writer as unique personality) together with the first (the writer as artist) dominates the blog posts. When looking at the blog comments in detail, we observe that in these comments a lot of references are related to 1) accounts of readers' personal life and self that resemble the writer's experiences, e.g. one commentator reacts to a blog post as follows, "It reminds me of the final years of my grandfather's life" (BM, 2008/01/14); 2) a reinforcement of the mystique that surrounds the notion of the writer, e.g. some readers narrate about how the

writer's artistic work impresses them and mention the impact it has on them in terms of "magic" (BM, 2008/01/28), "a spell" (BM, 2008/01/28), "a gift" (BM, 2008/01/22) or even "a medicine" (BM, 2008/01/31, 2008/01/16); and 3) the use of the blog as a medium to receive personal insights from and about the writer, e.g. one particular reader states to have enjoyed the blog because: "it felt as if I was walking around in your head" (BM, 2008/01/31). It is interesting to observe that the readers' constructions of the writer via the comments not only show a resemblance to the way and the degree to which the four central narratives are used in Moeyaert's blog posts, but they also relate quite strong to the narrative components that dominate each of the four blog narratives as used by the writer himself (see the appendix for a detailed quantification). These dominant blog posts' components are, for each central narrative: admiring other artists (N1), underlining the writer's observatory role in society (N2), mentioning direct contact with the audience and appreciating the audience's appreciation for the writer (N3), looking back on one's life as a way of personal self-reflection (N4).

The number of blog comments in the second case study (Ted van Lieshout), which involved 154 blog posts, sums to 820. TVL, in contrast with BM, on occasions engaged in the online interactions by publishing comments in response to readers' comments or to elucidate certain topics or views that he uttered in his initial blog post. In total, TVL commented 205 times in between his blog readers. This means that the writer himself initiated one out of four comments. We believe that this observation can be understood in light of the narrative that dominated TVL's blog posts, namely 'the writer and the system' (N2). In other words, in the comment section as well we can get an indication of this writer's intent and view on the social engagement of the writer. For the plentiful use of this narrative shows the importance that TVL attaches to the idea of writers fulfilling a distinct social role or position in the literary field and in society at large. More specific, when considering the narrative components that dominated the narratives in van Lieshout's blog posts, it appears that the 'writer and the audience' (N3) narrative mostly takes shape in the form of the blog as a thematic discussion platform. This implies that TVL is convincingly using his blog as a way to instigate a lively debate with and among his blog followers through putting forward, on occasion, distinct topics or questions. Also, the first and the second narrative, when used by TVL, often refer to literary prize winning and to literary activities in general, once again stressing the position of the writer in the social and the literary field. Although the second narrative dominated TVL's posts in contrast to the dominance of the third narrative in the readers' comments, in the case of TVL too the readers seem to follow the writer's stance to a large extent. So, we observe that the reader comments

show an abundant number of utterances in relation to the personal self and life of the reader, as if conversing among acquaintances, and can often be related to dialoguing. Also, when we take into account the number of times a certain narrative was touched upon in the readers' blog comments, in the case of TVL about 87% of the references point to the third narrative (the writer and the audience), whereas in BM's case this 'only' happens in approximately 50% of the references. On the contrary, in 30% of the references the focus in BM's blog readers' comments is on 'the writer as artist' (N1) compared to 9% in the case of TVL. In sum, TVL's followers seem to be keener on discussing and uttering their straight opinion than BM's readers who more often stress the social distance between writer and reader. This also shows through in the fact that TVL's commentators refer to the fourth narrative (the writer as unique personality) the least, while in the case of BM readers refer only to a minor degree to the second narrative (the writer and the system). Furthermore, when looking at the aspect of readers reacting against the author, hence disagreeing, this appears only in 2% of the references in BM's case compared to 11% in TVL's blog comments. To conclude, it can be argued that TVL's attitude as a writer, who strongly positions himself in relation to his distinct social role, stimulates his readers in responding and dialoguing. This takes the form of dialogues, answers, reactions against the writer and other readers, suggestions, questions and teasing the writer. Thus, the commenting readers reinforce and confirm TVL's self-constructed writerly identity.

In the case of Claire Polders (CP) we counted 21 comments to 104 blog posts, wherein the author was responsible for 6 comments. Comments, hence, were rather rare in the period under study, i.e. 0,2 % on average per post, and also rather short, i.e. 5 words per comment on average. These observations allow us to assume, firstly, that the number of readers following CP's blog is perhaps more modest in comparison with the blogs of BM and TVL and, secondly, that both CP and her readers are to a certain extent hesitant in proceeding their dialogue on the blog. The latter could be explained in relation to the first assumption, for it is possible that the limited number of readers who follow CP's blog perhaps more so than in the case of the more established writers, know the writer in person and, hence, prefer personal media or personal physical encounters to pursue their dialogue. Also, this can be coupled with the focus on 'the writer as unique personality' narrative (N4) that dominates CP's blog posts. Here, too, it can be argued that the writer, who is younger and less-established than the other two writers, presents herself in a distinct, but personal way rather than as representative of a distinct, social field, thus privileging the personal character of the blog medium over its public reach. This narrative direction also shows through the narrative components that dominated each single narrative that

CP used in her blog posts. On the one hand, in the case of the first and second narrative, Polders shows a strong admiration for other artists' work and she often elaborates on other artists' reflections on life and less on her own. On the other hand, in the case of narratives three and four, she mostly refers to her relationship with her friends and family and to her personal life with her husband. It is interesting, then, to observe that CP's readers too mainly respond to her individual self rather than to her social or artistic personality, even though most comments refer to the third narrative. For instance, through suggesting that the reader knows the writer in person by wishing her a happy birthday and by mentioning that her birthday gift is on the way (CP, 2010/05/17). Also, in the comments there is no reference what so ever to the 'writer and the system' (N2) or to the 'writer as unique personality' (N4) narrative. Finally, given the almost absolute dominance of the third narrative in the reader comments, which highlights the relation between the writer and other people, it could be supposed that most followers of this blog know the writer in person. However, taking into account the limited number of blog comments – which of course in itself also can tell us something about the writer's (blogging) (in-) visibility – these conclusions should be considered with caution.

### **Conclusion and outlook**

Since digital media facilitate the possibilities of narrative co-production and participation and since “to play with narrative is to play with identity” (Lundby, 2008, p.5), Knut Lundby underlines that forms of digital storytelling relate to questions of authorship and authority. Though digital stories are personal, small-scale stories about the self, their wider meaning should be sought after in the large-scale institutional contexts of their production and uses. The transforming logic that characterizes digital storytelling, notwithstanding that it is a limited media phenomenon, equals the transforming logic in the major processes of mediatization, Lundby states. This means that, for example considering art and literature as traditional storytelling institutions, digital media can generate transformations within these institutions on a semiotic, narrative and institutional level (Lundby, 2008, p.6-11).

Our observations of digital storytelling in literary writers' blogs seem to strengthen Viviane Serfaty's (2004, p.62) aforementioned remark that “the voice of the diarist essentially controls the dialogical space”. The way the author constructs his personal image and public position, on the one hand, and addresses his readers in his blog posts, on the other hand, seems to be determining for the way readers respond in the comments. It could, as a result, be argued that in responding in the way as the writer puts forth, readers strengthen the writer's authority as

the initiator of their relationships, whether conscious or not. These results also resemble the conclusions as stated in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1994) on the social need for and maintenance of the mythical capabilities of artists. However, the comments equally suggest that readers intend to overcome the traditional distinction between themselves and the author through the interactive opportunities offered by the blog medium. We argue that our narrative analysis of blog comments, in relation to the author's blog post narratives, shows that blogs can motivate readers to construct a more personal story in their relation with the writer, yet at the same time the narratives as used in the writers' blog posts to a large extent frame the readers' narratives. It seems that readers mostly are not very keen on taking the first step, but do engage in a convinced and individual way once the writer has paved the way. As such, the weblog can change the relation between writer and reader by boosting the reader's voice in the construction of writerhood, of authors' relation to society and of authors' self-understanding. Put differently, the blog readers seem to position the author and themselves in a relationship of what we suggest to call *controlled interactivity*. This means that readers do take advantage of the interactive opportunities to utter their voice and opinion, but in doing so they primarily co-construct instead of de-construct the image as conceptualized in and controlled through the writer's blog posts.

In analyzing the blog comments of the three cases, we found that the main underlying narrative is the third narrative. However, we believe that it is important to understand the dominance of the third narrative (the writer and the audience) in the blog comments' *form* in light of the emphasis that the readers put on the distinctiveness of the writer and of writerhood, as regards the blog comments' *content*. It could, then, be argued that the comments' content is to a large extent in agreement with and follows the path as initiated by the writer, even when their form suggests otherwise in terms of a more open, equal and two-way dialogue. Our analysis, also, revealed a distinction between the blog of Bart Moeyaert, on the one side, and the blogs of Ted van Lieshout and Claire Polders, on the other side. In the case of the former, it appears that the blog readers to a much lesser extent than in the latter cases make use of the comments section to relate to the writer on a familiar and interactive base. Moeyaert's readers, as aforementioned, refer to the third narrative in about 50% of the comments, whereas in more than 80% of the comments in the blogs of both van Lieshout and Polders reference is made to this particular narrative that underlines an interactive relation between the writer and other people, among which the author's readers. This conclusion implies that Moeyaert's followers show a larger degree of self-control concerning their interactivity with the writer. They maintain and strengthen the notion of a greater distance vis-à-vis the writer. We argue that this difference

can be explained through the fact that, for instance, the second narrative (the writer and the system) is used less and the first narrative (the writer as artist) is used more in Moeyaert's blog narratives, whereas a reverse situation can be observed in the other two cases, which suggests that BM understands writerhood as a differentiated and mainly writer-controlled activity. Put differently, it seems that the more the notions of control, distance and authority are present in the writer's blog narratives, the higher the level of self-control that resides in the readers' blog comments and the lower the level of interactivity in the comments that puts writer and reader on the same footing. And vice versa, the more the writer stimulates debate or opens up very personal aspects of his life, the more the readers will be eager to participate on an equal foot. Yet, in both instances the writer decides about the intensity and the direction of this relation on his weblog, and the readers seem to follow this line to a considerable extent.

It is our intention to elaborate this study through an integration of more case studies, taking into account diverse combinations of literary writers' characteristics, such as literary position (established and well-established), gender (men and women), nationality (Belgian and Dutch) and whether one is emigrated or not, to select the case studies. We believe that considering these personal contexts of the blogging writers can help us understand mediatization, in the sense of the digital telling of the literary self, as a complex of agentive and interactive performances that balance both distance and involvement.

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## Appendix

Table 1: Case study Bart Moeyaert: literary context (retrieved from [www.bartmoeyaert.com](http://www.bartmoeyaert.com) on 2011-04-21)

Nationality	Belgian
Year of birth	1964
Gender	Man
Education	Dutch language, German language and History
Literary position	Well-established
First publication	1983 (professional writer since 1995)
Type of literary work	Fiction (32), poetry (3 compilations, 1 anthology, 21 publicly disseminated poems), theatre (16 plays), articles (17), short stories (27), scenarios (2), translations (20), audio books (16)
Audience	Children, youth and adults
Literary prizes or nominations	In Belgium, Netherlands, France, Germany, Norway, International
Recognition	City poet of Antwerp, honorary doctor University of Antwerp, lecturer in Writing at the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp (drama department)

Table 2: Case study Bart Moeyaert: blogging context

Case	Bart Moeyaert
URL blog	<a href="http://www.villakakelbont.be/blog/?cat=56">http://www.villakakelbont.be/blog/?cat=56</a>
Start blog	2008/01/01
Blogging frequency	Daily for one month
Context blog	Organisational blog
Focus blog	Life and work
Reader comments	Yes, often
Visuals	Drawings, photos
Blogging language	Dutch

Table 3: Case study Bart Moeyaert: unit of analysis

Case	Bart Moeyaert
Period of analysis	2008/01/01-2008/01/31
Number of blog posts	42
Total number of blog comments	115
Number of blog comments by the writer	0
Average number of comments per post	3
Average number of words per post	633
Average number of words in comments per post	220
Total number of words in posts	26.594
Total number of words in comments	9.241

Table 4: Quantification of blog writers' self-conceptualization in the case of Bart Moeyaert

The writer as artist	The writer and the system	The writer and the audience	The writer as unique personality
114 (34,1%)	75 (22,5%)	30 (9 %)	115 (34,4%)

N references = 334

Table 5: Quantification of blog readers' construction of writerhood per narrative and per component in the case of Bart Moeyaert

NARRATIVE/COMPONENTS (Bart Moeyaert)	The writer as artist	The writer and the system	The writer and the audience	The writer as unique personality
Reinforcing mystique	31			
Thanking the artist	22			
Assenting to the writer's seclusion	8			
Appreciating plainness	2			
Readers learn		5		
Personal life and self			37	
Recognition			19	
Readers look back			12	
Readers suggest			9	
Readers agree			15	
Readers know artist as a person			9	
Readers react against the artist			2 (2%)	
Blog as news medium about the writer				31
Readers know artist as artist				2
SUM (N references = 204)	63 (30,9%)	5 (2,5%)	103 (50,5%)	33 (16,2%)

Table 6: Case study Ted van Lieshout: literary context (retrieved from www.tedvanlieshout.com on 2011-04-21)

Nationality	Dutch
Year of birth	1955
Gender	Man
Education	Illustration and Graphic Design
Literary position	Well-established
First publication	1986
Type of literary work	Fiction-poetry-picture books (50 publications in total), theatre (2), scenarios and songs for television shows, games and films (8)
Audience	Children, youth and adults
Literary prizes or nominations	In Belgium, Netherlands, Great-Britain, Germany, Norway, International
Recognition	Visiting professor University of Tilburg, member of literary jury, member of the board of several literary organisations, initiator of events for the promotion of reading, guest curator of an art exhibition for children, lecturer in Drawing & Illustration at the Royal Academy of Art in the Hague until mid 1990s

Table 7: Case study Ted van Lieshout: blogging context

Case	Ted van Lieshout
URL blog	<a href="http://tedvanlieshout.web-log.nl/">http://tedvanlieshout.web-log.nl/</a>
Start blog	2005/12/03
Blogging frequency	Almost daily (until present)
Context blog	Personal blog
Focus blog	Life and work
Reader comments	Yes, often
Visuals	Drawings, photos, videos
Blogging language	Dutch

Table 8: Case study Ted van Lieshout: unit of analysis

Case	Ted van Lieshout
Period of analysis	2010/01/01-2010/06/30
Number of blog posts	154
Total number of blog comments	820
Number of blog comments by the writer	205
Average number of comments per post	5
Average number of words per post	258
Average number of words in comments per post	272
Total number of words in posts	39.698
Total number of words in comments	42.131

Table 9: Quantification of blog writers' self-conceptualization in the case of Ted van Lieshout

The writer as artist	The writer and the system	The writer and the audience	The writer as unique personality
139 (26,7%)	278 (53,5%)	51 (9,8%)	52 (10%)

N references = 520

Table 10: Quantification of blog readers' construction of writerhood per narrative and per component in the case of Ted van Lieshout

NARRATIVE/COMPONENTS (Ted van Lieshout)	The writer as artist	The writer and the system	The writer and the audience	The writer as unique personality
Reinforcing mystique	75			
Thanking the artist		16		
Blog as news medium about the social and literary system		10		
Readers agree			34	
Personal life and self			<b>253</b>	
Recognition			36	
Self-promotion			10	
Readers answer			36	
Readers engage in dialogue			<b>138</b>	
Readers suggest			50	
Readers tease			29	
Readers ask			37	
Readers react against the artist			79 (11%)	
Readers undermine mystique			7	
Admiring artistic personality				5
SUM (N references = 816)	75 (9,2%)	26 (3,2%)	709 (86,9%)	5 (0,6%)

Table 11: Case study Claire Polders: literary context (retrieved from [www.clairepolders.com](http://www.clairepolders.com) on 2011-05-04)

Nationality	Dutch
Year of birth	1976 <sup>1</sup>
Gender	Woman
Education	Literature and Philosophy
Literary position	Established
First publication	2005
Type of literary work	Novels (3), short stories (5), articles (5 + texts for philosophy calendar)
Audience	Adults
Literary prizes or nominations	None
Recognition	Inclusion in a collection of short stories of young, promising Dutch and Flemish writers in 2006

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <http://auteurs.degeus.nl/polders/index.html> on 2011-05-04

Table 12: Case study Claire Polders: blogging context

Case	Claire Polders
URL blog	<a href="http://www.clairepolders.com/">http://www.clairepolders.com/</a>
Start blog	2003/02/01
Blogging frequency	5-10/month on average
Context blog	Personal blog
Focus blog	Life and work
Reader comments	Yes, few
Visuals	Photos, videos
Blogging language	Dutch and English

Table 13: Case study Claire Polders: unit of analysis

Case	Claire Polders
Period of analysis	2010/01/01-2010/08/31
Number of blog posts	104
Total number of blog comments	21
Number of blog comments by the writer	6
Average number of comments per post	0,2
Average number of words per post	234
Average number of words in comments per post	5
Total number of words in posts	24.363
Total number of words in comments	543

Table 14: Quantification of blog writers' self-conceptualization in the case of Claire Polders

The writer as artist	The writer and the system	The writer and the audience	The writer as unique personality
66 (24,1%)	78 (28,5%)	18 (6,6%)	112 (41%)

N references = 274

Table 15: Quantification of blog readers' construction of writerhood per narrative and per component in the case of Claire Polders

NARRATIVE/COMPONENTS (Claire Polders)	The writer as artist	The writer and the system	The writer and the audience	The writer as unique personality
Reinforcing mystique	4			
Readers agree with the writer			2	
Readers judge other artists			3	
Readers suggests			1	
Readers identify with the writer			1	
Readers tease			1	
Readers react against the artist			1	
Readers ask			1	
Readers wish luck			2	
Recognition			1	
Personal life and self			1	
Personal characteristics			2	
Readers know the artist as a person			1	
SUM (N references = 21)	4 (19%)	0 (0%)	17 (81%)	0 (0%)

Table 16: Quantification of dominant narrative components in the blog posts per narrative and per case

	<b>The writer as artist</b>	<b>The writer and the system</b>	<b>The writer and the audience</b>	<b>The writer as unique personality</b>
<b>Bart Moeyaert</b>	Admiring other artists (20% - 23/114 references)	Social role: observe (19% - 14/75)	Artist-audience: direct contact (27% - 8/30) + appreciating audience's appreciation (23% - 7/30)	Self-reflection: looking back (17% - 20/115)
<b>Ted van Lieshout</b>	Literary prize winning (24% - 33/139)	Literary activities in general (11% - 30/278)	Blog as thematic discussion platform (33% - 17/52)	Personal characteristics (45% - 23/51)
<b>Claire Polders</b>	Admiring the work of other artists (30% - 20/66)	Elaborating on other artists' reflections on life (28% - 22/78)	Relation writer- family and friends (61% - 11/18)	Personal life (34% - 38/112)