

THE TRANSFORMATION OF NARRATIVE IN THE AGE OF DATA REGIMES

Dr. FERHAT ATIK

Girne American University, Communication Faculty,
Communication and Media Management,
Kyrenia, CYPRUS
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ABSTRACT

With the centralization of digital platforms in everyday life, narrative has begun to lose its historically established functions as a meaning-making structure, a vehicle of identity formation, and a carrier of social memory. Rather than operating as a reflective practice through which individual and collective experience is interpreted within temporal continuity, narrative is increasingly reconfigured as a measurable, optimizable, and economically valorized content form. In particular, the dominance of data-driven algorithmic systems in the field of communication has fundamentally altered the epistemological status of narrative: what circulates as “story” is increasingly evaluated through metrics of attention, engagement, retention, and shareability. This study critically examines the transformation of contemporary narrative through the conceptual framework of data regimes. Data regimes refer not merely to technical infrastructures or digital tools but to integrated power formations in which economic interests, ideological orientations, and cultural norms converge. Under these regimes, narrative ceases to function as a structure that seeks truth through interpretation and instead becomes a mechanism of data generation shaped by the imperatives of platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017) and surveillance-based value extraction (Zuboff, 2019). Moreover, data regimes do not simply “use” narratives; they reorganize the very conditions under which narrative becomes intelligible, visible, and socially consequential—through algorithmic ranking, modulation, and predictive governance (Bucher, 2018; Pasquale, 2015). Drawing on theories of surveillance capitalism, network society, algorithmic power, performative identity, and digital publicness, the article offers a multi-layered analysis demonstrating how narrative’s historical attributes—depth, continuity, context, and silence—are systematically eroded. It argues that narrative in the age of data regimes is experiencing not only a formal transformation but a profound epistemological and ontological crisis, necessitating a rethinking of narrative’s capacity for knowledge production (van Dijck, 2014). In this respect, the article contributes a conceptual and critical intervention to communication studies by reframing narrative as a contested site where power reorganizes time, subjectivity, and truth in datafied publics.

Keywords: data regimes; digital narrative; algorithms; platform capitalism; communication; transformation

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Narrative is among the oldest and most resilient forms of meaning production in human history. Human beings do not merely experience the world; they comprehend it by transforming

experience into narrative. Through narrative, experience acquires temporal order, and events become intelligible within causal and meaningful frameworks. Myths, epics, sacred texts, historiography, and literature all emerge from humanity's effort to render existential fragmentation coherent. In this sense, narrative is not simply a mode of expression but a fundamental mode of being-in-the-world.

Paul Ricoeur's work on the relationship between time and narrative makes this constitutive role explicit. For Ricoeur, narrative does not merely represent time; it structures, organizes, and renders it livable (Ricoeur, 1984). Narrative thus operates as a primary epistemological bridge between individual memory and collective remembrance: it binds "what happened" to "what it means," and it does so through temporal continuity rather than mere succession. Walter Benjamin's insistence that storytelling conveys lived experience—rather than merely transmitting information—highlights the ethical and affective dimension of narrative: narrative is not reducible to content; it is a social form of meaning-bearing transmission (Benjamin, 2006).

Digitalization, however, has produced a communicative environment that radically destabilizes narrative's temporal and experiential thickness. In the digital attention economy, narrative increasingly becomes a unit of circulation whose primary value is not interpretive richness but measurable response (Davenport & Beck, 2001). This is not merely an aesthetic change. It signals a structural transformation in the conditions under which meaning is produced, recognized, and institutionalized. Put differently: narrative is being re-situated from the domain of interpretation to the domain of extraction and optimization.

1.1 Data Regimes and the Repositioning of Narrative

The concept of data regimes provides a productive framework for understanding new forms of power generated by digital capitalism within communication. Data regimes encompass not only data collection processes but also the ways in which data are interpreted, instrumentalized, and normalized, as well as the normative outcomes these processes produce. Under such regimes, human behavior, affect, and narrative expression are continuously monitored, measured, and categorized—not as incidental side effects but as core conditions of platform governance and profitability (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

Shoshana Zuboff's theorization of surveillance capitalism makes this transformation especially visible: human experience is converted into behavioral data to generate prediction, intervention, and control (Zuboff, 2019). In such a system, narrative becomes valuable not primarily as meaning but as signal—a structured trace of attention, emotion, preference, and identity. Complementarily, van Dijck (2014) argues that datafication rests on deeply consequential epistemic and ontological assumptions: a "dataist" faith that the world becomes knowable and governable through continuous conversion into data. Narrative in this framework is pressured to become legible in the grammar of metrics.

This article therefore treats the transformation of narrative under data regimes not as a stylistic shift but as an epistemological and ontological rupture: narrative's capacity to sustain temporal continuity, context, and silence is being reconfigured by systems that reward speed, visibility, and quantifiable engagement (Bucher, 2018; Davenport & Beck, 2001). What is at stake is not

only “how we tell stories” But how experience is socially recognized as meaningful in a platform-governed world.

2.0 DATA REGIMES AND ALGORITHMIC POWER: THE NEW ORDER OF COMMUNICATION

In the digital age, data regimes shape not only the technical infrastructure of communication but also its normative and ideological contours. Communication increasingly shifts from a reciprocal process of meaning-making to a governance mechanism in which behaviors are measured, classified, and converted into predictive models. The decisive point is that algorithmic systems do not simply distribute narratives; they operationalize norms about relevance, visibility, credibility, and desirability—often without transparency or accountability (Pasquale, 2015).

Algorithmic ranking functions as an infrastructural form of power: it determines which narratives become socially present, which remain peripheral, and which disappear from the horizon of attention. This power is often experienced as neutral “personalization,” yet personalization is itself a political technology—an arrangement that modulates publics, reorganizes informational environments, and shapes what counts as reality within platform-mediated life (Bucher, 2018; van Dijck, 2013). In such environments, narrative is evaluated less by truth-claims or interpretive depth than by performance indicators: click-through, watch time, reaction velocity, and repetition capacity.

2.1 The Normative Power of Algorithms: The Invisible Editorial Regime

Algorithms function as invisible editors regulating contemporary public discourse. While editorial power historically involved identifiable institutions, declared criteria, and at least minimal accountability, algorithmic editorship is typically opaque, proprietary, and dynamically shifting (Pasquale, 2015). This produces what can be described as an invisible editorial regime: content is organized through continuous calculation, while the grounds of that calculation remain largely inaccessible to those governed by it.

In this context, narrative undergoes a functional mutation. Narrative value becomes correlated with platform readability: the more a story triggers measurable engagement, the more it is amplified; the more it requires time, ambiguity, and interpretive labor, the more it is penalized by the logics of frictionless circulation. The result is not simply that “short content wins,” but that the conditions of legibility increasingly favor narratives that are emotionally polarizing, highly replicable, and easily reducible to signals (Davenport & Beck, 2001).

2.2 Platform Capitalism and the Economic Repositioning of Narrative

Platform capitalism repositions narrative from a domain of cultural production to a central component of economic circulation. Platforms operate as intermediaries that extract value from user activity, turning interaction into data and data into prediction products, advertising markets, and behavioral interventions (Srnicsek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Narrative here is not merely “content”; it is a mechanism through which attention is captured and rendered profitable.

This economic repositioning standardizes both form and affect. Platform logic rewards narratives that maintain continuous engagement: cliffhangers, micro-conflicts, performative confession, and fast moral coding. In contrast, narratives that depend on delayed meaning, historical context, or sustained ambiguity become structurally disadvantaged. The platform thus becomes not only a carrier of stories but a machine that reshapes storytelling into a market-compatible format.

2.3 Data Colonialism and the Appropriation of Meaning

If surveillance capitalism clarifies the logic of extraction, data colonialism clarifies its historical-political ambition: the systematic appropriation of human life through data relations. Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue that contemporary data extraction is not merely a business model but a structural reconfiguration of social reality—where connection is priced through data capture and where everyday meaning becomes a resource to be seized and operationalized. Within this frame, narrative is colonized not only in distribution but in formation: the very act of narrating becomes part of the infrastructure of appropriation.

3.0 THE STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF NARRATIVE: THE COLLAPSE OF CONTINUITY AND MODULAR FRAGMENTATION

Digital communication environments transform not only the circulation of narrative but its structural and ontological characteristics. Classical narrative forms organize experience through temporal continuity, causality, and contextual coherence. Under data regimes, narrative is increasingly reduced to fragmented, interrupted, and modular units. This signals not merely an aesthetic loss but a degradation of narrative's capacity to produce memory, interpret experience, and sustain subjective continuity (Ricoeur, 1984).

For Ricoeur (1984), narrative is the primary epistemological mechanism through which time becomes meaningful. Yet digital temporality increasingly privileges immediacy and updateability over continuity and retrospection. The narrative "arc" is replaced by perpetual presentness, and the interpretive labor of linking events into a coherent life-world becomes structurally difficult.

3.1 Algorithmic Time and the Disintegration of Linear Narrative

Digital platforms treat time not as continuity but as an optimizable resource. Content flows are organized not chronologically but according to engagement potential. In this condition, narrative loses its internal temporality and becomes confined to an endlessly updated "now." What matters is not the narrative's coherence but its capacity to remain in circulation.

Castells' account of network society clarifies this temporal rupture: digital temporality operates through a logic of "timeless time," detaching events from historical context and inserting them into perpetual simultaneity (Castells, 2010). As a consequence, narrative becomes less a structure of remembrance than a structure of recurrence. The past becomes not a space for interpretation but an archive for reactivation whenever it yields engagement.

3.2 The Attention Economy and the Systematic Flattening of Meaning

The attention economy constitutes the primary structural condition shaping digital narrative. As Davenport and Beck (2001) argue, attention becomes the scarcest and most valuable resource in the digital economy, and platforms compete to capture and hold it. This incentive structure systematically erodes narrative depth. Complexity, ambivalence, and extended reflection become liabilities.

Benjamin's distinction between storytelling and information becomes newly salient here: information is instantaneous, substitutable, and rapidly obsolete, whereas narrative transmits experience with durability (Benjamin, 2006). Digital narrative, however, often becomes neither durable experience nor stable knowledge; it becomes a stream of measurable affective triggers. Meaning is detached from context and reduced to immediate emotional reaction.

3.3 Modularity, Recombinability, and the Loss of Narrative Authority

A further structural shift concerns narrative's recombability: stories are disassembled into clips, screenshots, quotes, and viral fragments that circulate independently of original context. In datafied circulation, narrative authority weakens because the unit of meaning is no longer the whole story but the extractable segment. This is closely aligned with datafication's broader epistemic bias: what matters is what can be isolated, counted, and recombined (van Dijck, 2014; Kitchin, 2014).

4.0 NARRATIVE, IDENTITY, AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF SUBJECTIVITY UNDER DATA REGIMES

In the age of data regimes, narrative becomes central to the construction, maintenance, and visibility of subjectivity. Yet identity is no longer formed primarily through continuity and depth but through measurability, performance, and circulation success. Narrative transforms from a practice of becoming into an interface of self-display optimized for platform logic.

Giddens (1991) argues that modern identity is constituted through narrative continuity: individuals achieve selfhood by maintaining a coherent life story. Under data regimes, this continuity collapses into iterated performances. Identity becomes a series of updates calibrated to feedback loops. The subject is encouraged to treat the self as a project of constant optimization—an ongoing revision based on visible metrics.

4.1 From Performativity to Algorithmic Subjectivity

Goffman's theory of self-presentation remains instructive: identity is produced through performance before an audience (Goffman, 1959). But in platform environments, the audience is no longer solely social. The decisive evaluators are algorithmic systems that translate performance into metrics and metrics into visibility. The subject becomes legible insofar as they can be measured.

Cheney-Lippold (2017) sharpens this dynamic by showing how algorithmic classification produces categories that people then inhabit, resist, or internalize. Subjectivity becomes a negotiation with computational interpretations of the self. Identity is no longer simply "performed"; it is computed—rendered through predictive inferences that feed back into what the subject can become within a platform environment.

4.2 Transparency, Confession, and the Loss of Narrative Silence

Byung-Chul Han argues that transparency becomes a coercive norm in digital life, pushing individuals toward constant exposure (Han, 2015). Narrative's traditional power, however, often depends on silence: the unsaid, the delayed, the withheld. Under data regimes, silence is penalized because it does not generate measurable engagement. The result is an "always-on" confessional culture, where experience circulates before it matures into meaning.

This is not merely psychological; it is political. Silence can function as refusal, distance, or critique. When platforms structurally punish silence through visibility deprivation, they erode a key resource of autonomy and resistance.

4.3 Control Societies and Continuous Modulation of the Self

Deleuze's "societies of control" thesis helps name the broader environment in which algorithmic subjectivity becomes plausible: control is exercised through continuous modulation rather than enclosure (Deleuze, 1992). Under such conditions, narrative identity is not stabilized by institutions (as in classical modernity) but modulated through real-time feedback mechanisms. The self becomes a site of ongoing adjustment: a profile to be refined, a persona to be optimized, a life to be rendered legible as data.

5.0 DATAFICATION OF NARRATIVE AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL DISINTEGRATION

The transformation of narrative under data regimes signals a profound epistemological rupture. Narrative is reduced from a truth-seeking, interpretive, and meaning-producing structure to a measurable and classifiable data output. This shift requires reconsidering what knowledge is, how it is produced, and how it circulates.

Habermas' model of the public sphere presupposes that communicative rationality can be sustained through critical discourse where claims are evaluated, contested, and justified (Habermas, 1989). Algorithmically curated publics complicate this premise. Visibility is increasingly decoupled from argumentative quality and tied to engagement probability. Thus, public reason becomes structurally vulnerable to metrics that privilege attention capture over deliberative depth.

5.1 From Truth to Prediction: The Ascendancy of Anticipatory Knowledge

Surveillance capitalism's core move is the conversion of experience into behavioral data that can be used for prediction and influence (Zuboff, 2019). This displaces truth with prediction: what matters is not what is true, but what is likely to keep users engaged, persuadable, and behaviorally steerable. Narrative becomes a predictive instrument rather than an interpretive horizon. The epistemic question shifts from "What does this mean?" to "What will this do?"

5.2 Opacity, Accountability, and the Crisis of Public Explanation

Pasquale (2015) emphasizes that key algorithmic systems operate as "black boxes," shaping money, information, and reputation while resisting scrutiny. When algorithmic editoria-

becomes dominant, the grounds on which narratives become visible or invisible are no longer publicly explainable. This undermines a central condition of democratic communication: the capacity to give reasons for why certain claims or stories attain authority.

5.3 Bias, Hierarchies, and the Reproduction of Inequality Through Narrative Systems

Narrative circulation is never politically innocent. When algorithmic infrastructures shape narrative visibility, they can reproduce and intensify existing hierarchies. Noble's analysis of search engines shows how algorithmic systems can embed and amplify discriminatory logics in the organization of information (Noble, 2018). In such a context, narrative is not only commodified; it is stratified. Some narratives become systematically more searchable, more circulable, and more credible—while others are structurally marginalized.

6.0 CONCLUSION: NEW ETHICAL AND THEORETICAL HORIZONS FOR NARRATIVE AGAINST DATA REGIMES

This study has critically examined the transformation of narrative in the age of data regimes. The analysis suggests that under algorithmic power, platform capitalism, and surveillance-based data economies, narrative loses its foundational attributes of depth, continuity, and context. Narrative becomes less a structure of meaning than a mechanism of measurable performance and data production.

Yet this transformation does not imply the total exhaustion of narrative. On the contrary, narrative's future lies in alternative practices developed outside or against data regimes: slow narrative forms, practices centered on silence and delay, context-restoring critical narratives, and modes of expression resistant to algorithmic visibility. Such practices attempt to recover narrative as interpretation rather than signal, as memory rather than mere archive, and as ethical relation rather than engagement stimulus.

For communication studies, the central question is how narrative's epistemological and ethical value can be reconstructed under datafied conditions. This is not merely an academic problem but a responsibility tied to the future of public reason, democratic communication, and social memory.

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