

MORAL MACHINES?

ETHICS AND POLITICS OF THE DIGITAL WORLD

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KEYNOTE ABSTRACT

Social Media as Moralistic Storytelling Machine: Emergent Authority and the Viral Exemplum

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The talk is based on the analysis of a corpus of approximately 600 “dubious narratives” crowd-sourced on social media in the project Dangers of Narrative (Kone Foundation 2017-2020). The corpus and our exchange with the informants sending us “dubious narratives” confirms that the most pertinent risk in the contemporary proliferation of instrumentalized storytelling across various spheres of life is consensual reliance on individual, unverifiable experience. In my talk I will analyze the seeds of this consensual reliance which is essentially a moral concern. This investigation will lead to a narratological theory of viral storytelling which moreover draws from the literary tradition of establishing narrative truths. Social media as narrative environments are crowded with tellers that have no a priori authority. Instead, the story logic of social media generates emergent authority by way of a viral chain reaction from experientiality through representativeness to normativity. I will coin the term “viral exemplum” to describe a memetically spreading narrative prototype: a personal “true story” with a “lesson” which is given exceptional and often undue representative and normative weight via online sharing.

Maria Mäkelä is Senior Lecturer in Comparative Literature and Director of Narrare: Centre for Interdisciplinary Narrative Studies at Tampere University, Finland. In 2018, she was Visiting Professor at the Centre for Fictionality Studies, Aarhus University. In 2019, she is President of the International Society for the Study of Narrative. She is co-editor of *Narrative, Interrupted* (De Gruyter, 2012) and *Narrative Theory, Literature, and New Media* (Routledge, 2015). She has published on consciousness, voice, and realism across media, the literary tradition of adultery, authorial ethos, and critical applications of postclassical narratologies. She is heading three research projects that deal with the contemporary instrumentalization of narratives.