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# Online retellings and the viral transformation of a Twitter breakup story

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The retelling and sharing of stories is not a new phenomenon. Many narrative analysts have devoted research to these processes. But the culture of participation (Jenkins 2006) in the digital world has brought sharing to a completely new level by allowing users not only to broadcast their opinions and evaluations of a story but also to reappropriate it and recontextualize it in infinite recursions. We focus on such process of transformation of a narrative in different media and social media outlets through the analysis of the viral spread of a story posted by an individual Twitter user in 2015. Specifically, we illustrate how participation frameworks change from one retelling to another and how the original story becomes “nested” into a new meta-story centered on the Twitter user as a character and on the viral spread of the story.

**Keywords:** digital media, stories, narrative, Twitter, social media, storytelling, audience, retelling, viral, participation

## Introduction

One of the most important characteristics of narratives in social media is their potential to become shared and to circulate beyond the site in which they were initially posted. This is particularly evident when stories go “viral” since the amount of sharing goes up exponentially multiplying not only the amount of readers of the original story, but also users’ ability to shape the telling. As we will discuss below, the sharing of the same story can be compared to retellings of narratives in more traditional formats, but it is also profoundly different and presents researchers with interesting questions related to their analysis. As Page correctly observes social media offer

significant and unprecedented opportunity for narrative researchers to observe patterns of storytelling production, and reception in a way that is less tractable for offline examples of face-to-face or written forms of narration. (2012, p. 9)

It is indeed our objective in this paper to investigate the process of circulation of one story that went viral in social media. The story, a chronicle of a couple's break up that happened on an airplane told by a Twitter user, was retweeted, reposted and retold an infinite number of times in different media and we study what this process of sharing entails. In particular, we seek an answer to the following questions: What kinds of changes does the original story undergo when reposted elsewhere? How are production and reception formats transformed through the process?

In order to answer these questions we analyze the main thematic foci of the retelling as reflected in the titles and framing of the events in different social media platforms, the semiotic resources that authors used to convey and comment on the story and to make their own voice heard through the retelling, the way they relate to audiences and how the latter respond, in brief, the entextualization of this narrative. We also analyze and discuss ways in which audiences responded to the postings through comments. We find that the process of sharing and circulating the story produces a "nesting" of the original events into a new meta-story, or "a story about the story" that involves focusing on the original teller, the credibility of the narrative and the legitimacy of tweeting it rather than on the events themselves. We also find that the authors of the postings and articles use many different strategies to frame the story and to express their own point of view. At the same time, we argue that each retelling is configured within a new participation framework that involves specific roles for tellers and audiences. Indeed, audiences are sometimes openly invited to comment and sometimes more indirectly addressed. In brief, we show that retelling a story on social media involves complex practices that can only become apparent through a bottom up analysis.

In the following sections we will present our theoretical-methodological framework and the constructs that are used in the analysis. Then we present our data, the analysis of thematic foci, participation formats and comments and offer some concluding remarks.

## **Theoretical-methodological framework**

Recent years have seen the solidification of a shift in narrative analysis from narratives as texts to narrative as practices (see De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008, 2012) that was initiated by a convergence of work in sociolinguistics (Schiffrin, 2006), linguistic anthropology (Ochs & Capps, 2001) and conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992 [1970]) all pointing to the interactional embedding of narrative and

to the significance of processes of appropriation and negotiation of stories in interaction. From a narrative as practice perspective (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008) storytelling is a complex process of reconstructing, reevaluating and making sense of events that takes place within specific media and is in turn embedded within different practices. Thus, not only what counts as a narrative, but also how stories get to be produced and shared is open to continuous redefinition as semiotic and social practices multiply and diversify every day. The ever increasing use of the internet and the growing literature on online narratives have also pushed towards a convergence of interests between practice oriented narrative analysts and analysts of narratives in online contexts. Indeed, the study of narrative within digital contexts requires a practice approach and such orientation is reflected in what Androutsopoulos (2006) has called “second wave” studies. According to this author, first wave studies focused on the formal and genre characteristics of internet “texts” and did not pay enough attention to “the socially situated discourses in which these features were embedded” (p. 420), a focus of second wave approaches. Recent research on storytelling in digital environments reflects this interest in the embedding of narratives within practices. Scholars who have investigated a variety of environments such as Twitter and Wikipedia (Page, 2012), YouTube videos (Georgakopoulou, 2014; Koven & Marques, 2015), Facebook posts (Lee, 2011; Page, 2012; West, 2013), and blogs (De Fina, 2016) have adopted approaches to their data that highlight participants’ practices, including ways in which narrators construct stories, ways in which such stories are shared and ways in which audiences react and shape the tellings, as well as affordances and semiotic resources, that is meaning-making tools, related to the use of different media.

Among the constructs that have often been invoked in these works is the conception of narrative in terms of different dimensions as proposed originally by Ochs and Capps (2001), Goffman’s (1981) ideas on authorship and participation and Iedema’s (2003) concept of “semiotization.” Below we discuss the application of these constructs in our paper.

## Retellings and resemiotization

Although our paper focuses on the retelling of a story, the kind of retelling that goes on online is very different from what happens face-to-face mostly due to the high level of interaction among users fostered by the culture of participation (Jenkins, 2006). In that sense, previous studies of this phenomenon are only relatively relevant. Here we will leave aside the wide cognitively oriented literature on retelling as a way of assessing children’s development or students’ competence in narrative and will only discuss some antecedents in discourse analytic and sociolinguistic

research. From that perspective, retellings of stories received some attention in the 1980's, particularly within anthropological and cross-cultural studies of storytelling. For example, retold stories were the focus of research in linguistic anthropology, (see Bauman, 1986; Hymes, 1985; Sherzer, 1981) inas much as they were elicited repetitions of traditional narratives. In those investigations the focus was on the performative characteristics of narratives. Also, from an anthropological perspective, Scollon and Scollon (1984) studied oral retellings among Atabaskhan speakers focusing on children. From a cross-cultural perspective Chafe (1980) studied how retellings of the same film changed according to the nationality of speakers. Norrick (1998) was among the first to study retellings of conversational stories. He focused on performances of what could be regarded as the same story by narrators to different audiences and investigated the characteristics that allowed for the recognition of a kernel story. Further studies of stories told in interactional contexts also centered on the functions of stories told more than once (Norrick, 1997) or of different renderings of the same story to different audiences. Trester (2013) for example analyzed two versions of a story about the actions of a prankster looking at their differences in terms of evaluative devices. Cook-Gumperz (2011) investigated how the same event, the closing of an academic department, is reconstructed by two different people to show that retelling style can index different positionings. Schiffrin (2006), who investigated retelling of Holocaust stories by Jewish survivors, was the first scholar to attract attention to the idea that retelling involves reframing of events through the integration of different contextual elements. In particular, she looked at how an experience that has been told by different sources, through the narrator's incorporation of the voices of other family members, becomes a unitary story in retellings.

Another perspective on retelling which is relevant to the present paper is the investigation of how stories circulate among specific communities; and how the same story, or at least the same basic story elements, get repeated among members of that community in ways that contribute to the formation of a shared story. Just such a case was the focus of the Wortham et al.'s (2011) study of payday mugging narratives in a new Latino community in Pennsylvania. Wortham et al.'s work reflects a greater awareness among sociolinguists and anthropological linguists of the importance of analyzing discourse across speech events and across media (see Agha, 2007; Agha & Wortham, 2005). In the case of social media and digital environments in general, circulation involves sharing, which in turn allows for a much greater possibility of intervention on the original story by participants. That is why the concept of resemiotization has been frequently invoked by scholars working with discourse online (see for example Georgakopoulou, 2015; and Leppänen et al., 2013). According to Iedema "resemiotization is about how meaning making shifts from context to context, from practice to practice, or from one stage of a

practice to the next” (2003, p. 41). As we will argue below, resemiotization is a form of entextualization (Bauman & Briggs, 1990). Jedema views resemiotization as a particularly important process in power-laden practices that reconfigure the way subjects, identities and actions are given meaning. Thus, a teacher may record an interaction with a child as deviant and that recording will lead to a number of procedures that will end up with the appending of a deviancy label to the child. This way of approaching resemiotization underscores how the embedding of texts into different semiotic practices leads to changes not only in the way texts are read but also in the definition of relations between participants in those different practices.

In this paper we propose a particular form of resemiotization, “nesting”, as a specific construct to describe retellings in social media. As we will explain below, “nesting” involves the creation of a meta-story (a story about the story). In this process the original story does not disappear, but becomes nested in the meta-story. We examine a story tweeted by an individual Twitter user from her personal account. When the story becomes viral a new story emerges: the story of the Twitter user tweeting story1. We will show how story1 is still present in various forms within story 2. It is interesting to note that our own analysis of this narrative represents a form of “nesting” in that we are also telling a story about a story and in this way we are adding yet another level of resemiotization to the ones that are studied here. Worthy of mention is also the fact that, like the internet sources that we analyze, we are violating the character’s privacy by proposing yet again the story of her break up. This is an ethical dilemma that much of the work on digital discourse must face and that in our case has no solution given that although we have access to the teller of the breakup story, we have no way of contacting its main victim: the protagonist of the plane fight.

In order to understand the affordances of different sites and the processes of sharing, analysts need to look at forms of production and participation. Goffman (1981) has greatly contributed to such understanding with his theorizations about authorial roles and participant roles in interaction. In particular, we will discuss how Goffman’s proposal to decompose the notion of speaker into different roles allows us to see how tellership may be altered and reframed in a retelling by creating a new author of the story that can take different alignments to the original teller. In fact, retellings in social media also profoundly alter participation frameworks. First because original audiences of a story are now incorporated into the story and may become, to a certain extent, story characters; and secondly because audience participation reflects the affordances of different media and their aims in terms of imagined audiences. Thus, we will also discuss how audience participation may take different forms in the various internet sources that we analyzed. Thus, Goffman’s deconstruction of the notion of hearer also becomes relevant here as this author pointed to different participant roles for audiences, including the possibility of

being a principal addressee, a ratified or unratified participant or an over hearer. And even though most of the time the actual audience of an online act of communication is hard to pin down, when participants respond with comments they do select their addressees and also authors sometimes make it clear who their intended audiences are. Goffman's idea of deconstructing participants roles is therefore extremely useful for both offline and online contexts.

It has been noted in the literature (see Boyd, 2010; Marwick, 2010) that authors of social media content always have an imagined audience, even when they don't exactly know who will read their material. This is not only true of individuals such as Twitter users, but also of digital companies who tailor their content to specific imagined audiences. The different aims of these diversified media determine different choices in the way they organize audience participation and in the degree to which they allow it. In turn these choices have an impact on the kind of retelling that takes place on a particular site.

## Data and sources

Data for this article come from Twitter and therefore we will give some background information on the way this microblogging site works. Twitter was created in 2006 and was originally developed for use on mobile phones (Marwick, 2010, p. 117). The site continues to grow exponentially in popularity and influence on audiences in general, and on newsmaking media as well, to the point that in 2016 it involved around 317 million active users on average per month (STATISTA, 2016). By asking the question "what's happening", Twitter prompts participants to post short, 140 words maximum messages on any topic that can also include embedded photos or other multimedia materials as well as links to relevant sites, individual articles, blogs, and so forth. Tweets posted go from personal stories to political commentary and from moment to moment reflections to news. In terms of participant structure, users can choose other Twitter users or accounts to follow and can, in turn, have their own followers. However, as described by Marwick and Boyd (2010) "there is no technical requirement of reciprocity, and often, no social expectation of such. Tweets can be posted and read on the web, through SMS, or via third-party clients written for desktop computers, smartphones, and other devices. These different access methods allow for instant postings of photos, on-the-ground reports, and quick replies to other users" (p. 117).

Thus, users can respond individually to other users or just post updates for their followers. Twitter differs from other social media networks, like Facebook for example, in that users seem relatively unconcerned with privacy and the audience for updates tends to be relatively unknown to the individual posting. The fact

that most information posted is publically available also helps ensure a constant stream of information. Page (2012) describes Twitter as “an electronic ‘word of mouth’”. Indeed Twitter offers a perfect platform for users to share information, build awareness of relevant happenings or topics, and gain visibility. Such visibility has also increased through the growing use of hashtags that allow users to label content (for example specific phrases, names, etc.) or to easily find content they are interested in. We will go back to the question of audience below when we come to the analysis of our data.

Our analysis is based on the retellings of a story first posted on Twitter and then subsequently retold on a variety of internet sources. In this paper, we focus on a small random selection of sites and platforms taken from the results of a Google search for the hashtag #PlaneBreakup. Among the website surveyed, four (BuzzFeed, the Man Repeller, Mashable and Thrillist) characterize themselves as digital platforms seeking to create and cater to an online community with different interests, three are gossip websites (Guest of a Guest, the Mirror and Perez Hilton), two (Facebook and Storify) are social media platforms, while six (the ABC 7 Eyewitness News, Metro, New York Post, NY1.com, Fox 11, and the Examiner) are more traditional local and entertainment news sites. Further details on these sources will be given throughout the analysis.

The original story was created when a young woman named Kelly Keegan on August 23, 2015 used her personal Twitter feed (@Keegs141) to live tweet the break up of an anonymous couple sitting across the aisle from her on an airplane during a flight delay. Encouraged by her Twitter followers, over the course of the next two hours in approximately twenty tweets, Kelly broadcasted highlights from the couple’s conversation and actions, using the hashtag #PlaneBreakup (Keegan, 2015, August 23).

Kelly’s first tweet was relatively detached from the preceding posts on her Twitter feed, and it provided a kind of visual and thematic context for her narrative. Through the photo (see Figure 1), Kelly visually asserts her proximity to the actions taking place, which helps her to establish herself as a credible witness to the events.

But this snippet of a story could have ended there if she had not been initially encouraged by a request from another Twitter user, @BarstoolReags, who prompted her to continue by writing “you need to live tweet this”. Kelly obliged, and in the subsequent tweets she narrated the unfolding story of the couple’s breakup to her Twitter followers. The main narrative line is constructed through transcribed turns of dialogue alternatively attributed to “GIRL” or “BOY”, accompanied by her comments, reactions and some descriptions of what is happening moment to moment and photos (Keegan, 2015, August 23). Thus, tweets that individually present an “open-ended,” fragmented structure, when taken together construct a storyline that unfolds in time (Page, 2012). Tweets are intertwined with comments





(Keegan, 2015, August 23)

This guy on the plane just broke up w his girlfriend and she's SOBBING

Keegs141 7:57 PM - 23 Aug 2015

**Figure 1.** The First Tweet

by @BarstoolReags who continues to be an active audience member at times even encouraging the progression of the narrative, through comments and questions. Other examples of participants interacting with one another in various ways are also buried in the comments; these include requests for more information or clarification (like “Katey Pierini’s tweet: “STFU if you don’t live tweet this I’ll die”), throughout the narrative, illustrating the potentially collaborative nature of story-telling through social media.

Somewhat contrary to the normal preference for recency and new information on Twitter, Kelly’s first tweet garnered the most shares (9.2k) and likes (11k) on her feed (Keegan, 2015, August 24) (see Figure 1). Although not all websites make these metrics available, some do, for example Mashable’s page shows 8k shares (Koerber, 2015). These high numbers confirm the tellability of Kelly’s story. Indeed, over the next twenty-four hours her story went viral. It spread across the Internet, re-tweeted by thousands of other Twitter users, shared on Facebook and blog sites by individuals and media entities, and posted by news sites.

## Analysis

In this section we discuss how the retelling took different shapes for the various internet sources considered here. In particular, we are going to analyze the differences in thematic focus, in the use of semiotic resources and in the participation framework that characterizes each platform.

## Thematic focus

With respect to the themes that become the focus of the different social media sites, it is useful to start with the title references, that is the people, processes and events that make it into the titles. These will guide us to an analysis of the main trends in the focus of reporting.

**Table 1.** Summary of story titles categorized by themes

	Kelly as Twitter user	The tweet and its content	The tweet going viral	The tweeting	The #	The original protagonists
Guest of Guests			X			
NY1.com			X			
ABC 7 Eyewitness News			X			
Thrillist	X					
Storify		X				
PerezHilton	X					
New York Post	X					
Mirror	X					
Metro		X				
Mashable					X	
Man Repeller				X		
Fox11 News	X					
Facebook					X	
Examiner	X					
BuzzFeed						X

As we see from Table 1, six titles refer to Kelly as Twitter user, two refer to the tweet and its content, three refer to the tweet going viral, one refers to the tweeting (as a process, for example “What’s public, what’s private and the plane breakup”), two report the title of the hashtag (#PlaneBreakup), and one refers to the protagonists of the original story. Looking at how these titles were related to subtitles and to the rest of the articles, we find different thematic foci that can be summarized as follows:

1. The original story and its protagonists
2. Kelly as Twitter user
3. The tweet and tweeting process itself

Before analyzing the way the story is retold, however, we need to discuss how tellership is modified in online contexts. Let us remember that Goffman distinguished between author (the party responsible for the utterance), principal (the person or group on whose behalf the utterance is communicated) and animator (the speaker physically producing the sound or, in this case, the writing). In storytelling contexts we can often identify the author with the teller. Retellings in social media always involve a change in the original tellership arrangement. Indeed, when Kelly tweeted the story on August 23, she was the teller and her addressees were people who have access to her tweets. Among them there was, however, at least one principal addressee, that is @BarstoolReags, the user who had prompted her originally to tweet the whole story. Retellings in all cases involve a complication of the tellership format in that the teller is now the author of the new story. The audience changes as well as it shifts to the people who access the particular site. In that sense, the new teller becomes a sort of co-teller, whose interaction with Kelly (the original teller) is subject to a variety of manipulations.

Let us now return to the issue of topics managed in each case. It can be said that the story and story protagonists as a thematic focus received the least attention in comparison with the other two themes. Indeed, BuzzFeed was the only site that put the emphasis on the protagonists of the story rather than on Kelly and on her tweet, by proposing the following title: “A Guy Allegedly Broke Up with His Girlfriend On A Plane Before It Even Took Off” (Smith, 2015, August 24). Although the author, Kevin Smith, keeps some distance from the absolute veracity of the facts reported through the use of the adverb “allegedly” in his title, the piece revolves around the bad behavior of the boy and the strangeness of the couple’s actions through a process of alignment of the co-teller (the author of the article) with Kelly’s perspective, as expressed in her tweets, which are reproduced under lines of text that summarize and introduce her reactions to the situation. See the following example in which the comment precedes a series of original tweets reproduced in their entirety:

She told Barstool Sports the woman was “crying loud enough to capture the attention of everyone in the front of the plane”. (Smith, 2015)

The new teller however does not disappear behind Kelly, as Kevin Smith proposes his own interpretations of the event as a premise to some of Kelly’s tweets. This is the case in the following example. The text “Maybe they were just trying to forget about the whole spat?” precedes Kelly’s tweet describing the couple ordering six vodkas and bloody mary mix, which clearly instantiates Smith’s role as co-teller and interpreter of the events in the story.

The focus on the original story is confirmed in the preface of one of Kelly’s tweets provided by Kevin Smith, whose comment here refers to the “plot” as the focus itself (see Figure 2).

## Plot twist: Who's Charlotte?



(Smith, 2015)

Figure 2. Smith's comment on Kelly's Tweet

It is interesting to note, however, that this focus on the original story does not prevent the author from keeping Kelly and her tweeting under his radar as well. Indeed, as it was shown, she is the one presented as the teller of the story throughout the article through the reproduction of her tweets and the summary of her reactions. However, once the tweets have been reproduced and the original event has been told, the author shifts his attention to the fact that Kelly's story has become a trending sensation. In this part of the retelling another tweeter's comment on the fortune of Kelly's tweets is reproduced while the author's conclusion binds Kelly's tweeting of the story with the taleworld protagonists by foreseeing a desirable end to the events witnessed by Kelly and by indirectly conveying that her own tweeting may contribute to such ending: "It didn't take long for Keegan's coverage of the breakup to trend on Twitter. Fingers crossed the poor girl ditched that guy as soon as they landed" (Smith, 2015).

BuzzFeed's treatment of the retelling provides a glimpse into an important phenomenon that characterizes retellings not only in the examples that we are discussing but in social media more in general. We will call the process "nesting" as a form of entextualization and resemiotization. As noted by Leppänen et al. (2013) the concept of entextualization was proposed by Bauman and Briggs (1990, p. 73) in order to describe the processes through which texts are lifted from their original contexts of appearance and are inserted within new contexts and thus reused and reinterpreted in particular ways. Leppänen et al. noted that entextualization could be complemented with the construct of resemiotization as proposed by Iedema (2003) to describe social media phenomena. In the authors' own words:

Entextualization highlights how such recycling involves two related processes: de-contextualization – taking discourse material out of its context – and recontextualization – integrating and modifying this material so that it fits in a new context. With entextualization in our analytical toolkit, it becomes possible to investigate how social media participants, through extracting 'instances of culture' (language

forms, textual or other semiotic material) and relocating these in their discourses and repertoires, perform identity at the grassroots level of social media activities. (Leppänen et al., 2013, p. 7)

We propose “nesting” as a specific construct to describe retelling processes in social media. The process involves the transformation of a story into a new story about the story (a kind of meta-story). This second story can focus on story1 (or parts of it) and/or on aspects of the production format of story1. In any case, story1 in its original form never completely disappears but it is always nested into the new context.

In the case being discussed here, the great majority of the websites that we analyze reproduce the tweets originally posted by Kelly, while a few summarize them and they all provide specific framings for interpreting the tweets. But the original story is to some extent still part of the new context. The difference that we see between “nesting” and constructs such as “resemiotization” or “rescripting” (Georgakopoulou, 2015) that have been used in the literature is that both terms refer to more general processes in which texts are embedded within new semiotic practices (that may involve their transformation into stories as in ‘rescripting’) but do not capture the specificity of narrative retellings as the parallel telling and evaluation of two stories: an original one and a new one, which is a kind of meta-story.

This co-presence is evident in all the retellings, no matter their focus. Indeed, as we mentioned before, titles and articles may stress Kelly’s role in producing the tweets, or the progress of these tweets from an exchange among Twitter users into a viral story reproduced across the social media sphere, but they also necessarily summarize the original story for their audiences.

Another aspect of these processes of sharing that already emerged in our analysis of the BuzzFeed post is that the meta-story (i.e. the story of tweeting the events and/or of the tweets going viral) takes up the qualities of an emerging drama. Indeed, some of the media sites which recount the #PlaneBreakup story also start incorporating a kind of “morning after” component, that is a narrative about what Kelly did or said after becoming famous and how her new audiences reacted to those different actions. Thus the writer in Fox 11 adds information on what Kelly said to her new followers and how they responded to her new tweets as can be seen in the following quote (Figure 3):

Keegs warns her new followers they won't be seeing live tweeting of reality dating on a regular basis.



(Neugebauer, 2015)

Figure 3. Fox 11's Neugebauer embeds Kelly's tweet in her own narrative

In other cases, new inedited tweets are added. For example, Mashable reports one such tweet prefacing it with the following introduction, "Keegan followed up with an "exclusive" email to Bar Stool Sports, a website associated with the Twitter account that begged her to live tweet the incident" (Korber, 2015).

Events that took place after the story was tweeted sometimes make it into the title, particularly when the focus is on the legitimacy of tweeting the story, as we will see below in the case of Mirror. When the focus is on Kelly or her tweeting as is the case in most social media platforms analyzed, in general there is a shift from the evaluation of the events to an evaluation of Kelly's actions or of the process of tweeting someone's private life in light of different criteria. Some media present her as the protagonist, give some information on her and recount how she gained a vast audience with her tweets. Such is the case with Maida (2015) on the digital media company Guest of a Guest site. By reproducing an interview format with Kelly (defined as an "ex alumna"), the author focuses on her transformation into a Twitter celebrity, highlighting the story of her tweeting and the consequences in terms of the backlash that the tweets caused. The interview focuses on the way she became an internet sensation and closes with photos of Kelly "Before she was famous". But it is important to note that in this case as well the Twitter story is reproduced both in the title through a photo of the initial tweet and by printing two parallel columns of text: one with the questions and answers in Maida's interview with Kelly and the other one with the sequence of tweets in which Kelly tells the original story (Figure 4).



(Maida, 2015)

Figure 4. Guest of a Guest page 1 of story

In other cases, the stress is not so much on Kelly but on the process of tweeting, yet in other instances it is on both. For example, the author of the Fox 11 piece, presents the story as produced by an “airline passenger” and introduces the story abstract (i.e. a summary of what the story was about) by referring to the act of tweeting as something that can happen to anybody who is having a fight on an airplane. The writer concludes with a warning that if you pick an airplane flight as a venue to break up, not only will it be the most awkward flight, but it will likely get shared with the world on social media (Neugebauer, 2015). What happens however, in this social media outlet and in others, is that the narrative starts incorporating audience reactions to the story as part of the new story.

Many of the sites evaluate Kelly on the tellability of her story in the sense of judging her ability to make it interesting and to create a good performance. The author in Examiner (2015) highlights Kelly’s qualities by noting that she “thoughtfully illustrated the show” (meaning the loud fight between the members of the couple) and that her rendition was “better than a soap opera or the Kardashians”. S/he concludes that Kelly “found a way to make unbearable awkwardness tolerable and funny”. However, most of the other sites evaluated either the original storyteller credibility or her right to divulge the story (Examiner, 2015).

Credibility appears to be a big issue in the evaluation of Kelly’s tweets in various sources. For example Lee (2015) on the Metro website sets the stage for the non credibility of the story in the article’s title, which reads “#PlaneBreakup: Why I refuse to believe it’s real”. In this case as well the report starts with the viral spread of the tweet and then embeds Kelly’s tweets with the premise “in case you need a

recap” (Lee, 2015). What follows is a list of reasons why the tweets cannot be real: among them the fact that there are photos and no videos on the tweet feed, the fact that faces cannot be distinguished in the photos and the absence of light in a photo that was supposed to be taken a few minutes after another one in which the sun was visible. Interestingly, this article also relates Kelly’s story to another story that is presented as a hoax though a hyperlink. Thus, intertextual connections between different narratives are embedded directly in the retelling.

Credibility is sometimes incorporated as a central concern even in the title of articles. Storify’s (2015) title reads “#Planebreakup: Inflight Entertainment or Elaborate Hoax?”. The author goes on to reproduce the tweets (as usually preceded by framing comments) however, credibility is taken up at the end and it is related to Kelly in that the reporter highlights the fact that she is “a High Point Graduate with a degree in Marketing and Communications, highly endorsed for her social media skills”. Such observation implicitly conveys the high possibility that Kelly tweeted the story to heighten her social media visibility (SmarterTravel, 2015).

Legitimacy, more specifically telling rights, constitutes the other big topic on which some of the media articles focus. Indeed, after Kelly tweeted the story old and new followers were divided over the moral right of making a very private moment public and on whether Kelly had crossed a line. In some cases, this debate is reported directly through the tweets that followed the posting of the story. For example, McCrum’s story on the Mirror (2015) incorporates the consequences of Kelly’s tweeting in the title “Woman Live Tweets Couple Break Up and is Accused of Humiliating Them”. The format here is that of a chronological reporting of the “tweeting event” and its development online, including audience reactions in the form of tweets during and after. The report is prefaced by a kind of abstract in which the center of interest of the title is maintained: The break up is presented as global news after it was tweeted and the consequence was a global backlash. As the whole tweeting event is presented through the original tweets (which include positive and negative comments) the author of the piece does not take a position, but invites users to react.

Finally, the story of Kelly’s tweets is in some cases taken as a starting point to reflect on issues related to the internet and privacy (see Gal, 2002, on the topic of the separation between private and public space). This is the case for example with Medine (2015) on the Manrepeller site. The title of this piece clearly foreshadows the dilemma “What’s Private, What’s Public and the Plane Break up” and the body of the article presents a kind of dialogue in the form of instant messages between the author and another collaborator to the site. The text messages revolve around the fact that nothing is really private any longer and what that implies for the way people act in public. It is interesting to notice that this is the only website that does not reproduce any aspect of the original Kelly story: not the tweets or the photos,



but only a summarized and schematic version of what happened in terms of a kind of “archetypal story”.

### Use of semiotic resources

Our Internet sources differ in many ways in the manner they insert the narrative within their own page and in the use of semiotic resources. Table 2 shows the extent to which the original material in the story is re-used and the extent to which new semiotic resources (such as drawings or new photos) are introduced.

**Table 2.** Semiotic resources by website

Inserts	Original tweets+photo	Original photo	New photos or drawing	Tweets reframed
Guest of a Guest	X			
NY1	NA		NA	NA
ABC 7 Eyewitness News	X			
Thrillist	X			
Storify	X			
*PerezHilton	X			
New York Post		X		X
*Mirror	X			
*Metro	X			
*Mashable				
Man Repeller			X	
Fox 11	X			
Facebook		X		
Examiner		X		
BuzzFeed	X			

We need to clarify that many of these characteristics do not apply to NY1 because the site in question embedded a video containing the news of the tweet going viral together with other news. The category of “Tweet reframed” refers to the reproduction of the written part of the tweet but without the Twitter original framing. It is notable, for example how 9 out of the 15 sources surveyed use both one or more of the original photos uploaded by Kelly and her tweets and three of them which did not include the tweets, did include the photo. In four of the cases, however,

the photos were manipulated to include the co-tellers' own framing (for example the inclusion of a question mark or other comment on the image). Other kinds of semiotic resources used refer to buttons and links to other online sources and we discuss those below. From this brief survey it can be noted that the physical reproduction of the story in its original form was a very common strategy among the different media and that the reproduction of a story into a retelling in most cases takes the shape of physical embedding of parts of it.

### Participation frameworks

Different constructs have been proposed to capture the complexities of production and reception in storytelling from an interactional perspective. Ochs and Capps (2001) have talked about 'tellership' basically to refer to "the extent and kind of involvement of conversational parties in the actual recounting of a narrative" so as to include the possibility of interactive co-construction (2001, p. 24). They classify tellership on a scale including one active teller and passive listeners to many tellers and listeners. On the other hand both Goffman's (1981) constructs about participation frameworks and formats and Goodwin's (1986) theorizations on audience participation have been very important to understand storytelling as a dialogical and interactive process. Indeed, Goffman decomposed both the figure of the speaker and that of the hearer in order to capture the different authorial roles and the degrees of ratification that audiences to an interaction may receive. He distinguished between the animator (the "sounding box", i.e. someone who does not cover an authorial role), the author (someone taking responsibility for the talk) and the principal (someone "whose position is established by the words that are spoken, or someone speaking "as a member of a group, office or category") (Goffman, 1981, p. 144–145). Goodwin (1986) underlined how narrators design their talk in view of their recipients and how the latter may profoundly alter the emergence of a story in a variety of ways, for example by positively collaborating in its telling and leading to additions and explanations or by contesting aspects of tellers' messages or of tellers' rights or even by completely ignoring the story.

These constructs are particularly important for understanding storytelling in online environments since, as we have seen, those environments offer unprecedented occasions for collaborative production of narratives and sharing and negotiation of their content. In the specific case that occupies us now, we have, as was argued, in all cases under analysis some form of co-tellership, as Kelly, the original teller, is now the protagonist of a meta-story which is recounted by one or more new tellers. At the same time, social media, online news sites, blogs and the like, produce content that is always "audience designed" since they tailor their messages to specific recipients be they in good part known as in Facebook sites be they imagined as in

most of the other cases. What differs in these contexts is the degree of alignment between the original teller and the teller of the meta-story and the degree of encouraged and instantiated participation.

### Authorial roles

These elements (production formats, audience design and audience participation), which have been often ignored in studies of face-to-face storytelling, are very hard to ignore in the case of online environments as their importance is evident in the analysis of texts produced in those contexts.

We have alluded in our previous analysis to some of the differences in the production format. In the various internet sources that we studied different authors take diverging alignments to Kelly's narrative. Some act almost as animators, or in Goffman's terms, "sounding boxes" (Goffman, 1981, p. 145). For example, we saw this case with BuzzFeed's and Eyewitness News' reports where authors appear mostly in the title (calling the break up "alleged" and presenting the story as going viral in the second) and in some clarifying lines of text before the tweets. But for the most part the articles involve a reproduction of Kelly's tweets.

In other cases, we have a much stronger presence of the co-teller, who actually acts as an alternative teller and provides a specific frame for the story. This is the case with Guest of a Guest, which frames Kelly as a new star and therefore presents the author as an interviewer of Kelly while at the same time reproducing her tweets in a two page column format that sees Kelly's tweets on one side and the interview on the other (Maida, 2015). Something similar happens with Storify's report, in which the co-teller includes his/her own voice, for example by noting at a certain point "clearly we are missing some details" or including new material that covers reactions to the story. For example in Storify the authors preface a new tweet with the following lines: "Can't help include this excellent Samuel L. Jackson reference by a tuned in tweeter" (SmarterTravel, 2015).

In some cases, the intervention of the co-teller involves a negative framing that, as we have seen, calls into question the veracity or legitimacy of the account. In these cases, the author appears more forcefully, through the inclusion of further comments, new tweets and longer conclusions. Such was the case with the Metro article, in which the author signaled his incredulity in the title, in a photograph reproducing one of the original images in Kelly's tweet with a question mark and in the conclusion in which the arguments against Kelly's veracity are summarized (Lee, 2015).

## Audience participation

In this section, we discuss comments posted on the social media sites. Below we present a table that classifies all comments into categories. Different websites, social media and platforms deeply differ also in terms of the degree of participation that they prefigure and encourage on the part of audiences. These choices reflect the focus of the media and their expectations in terms of roles for imagined audiences.

For example, in terms of content sharing, all the sources that we studied allow for sharing content on Twitter and Facebook, but some are more interactive and include a much wider range of possibilities (up to 150 embedded symbols for links).

As we will discuss below, five among the sources we studied encourage and have comments, others do not allow for comments but allow for reactions. For example, Perez Hilton allows for reactions for each and every one of the author's summary of parts of the story so that users can express comments such as "LOL" or "Amazing!". It also allows users to start following Kelly or retweet and like her story by clicking on her own tweets reproduced in the feed.

Some sites include both comments and reactions. For example, BuzzFeed provides a reaction button including things LOL, heart, fail, cute or the possibility of including a GIF. In some cases, audience presence is prefigured through direct appeals indexed by the use of certain linguistic strategies such as requests for comments and submissions or direct appeals through the use pronouns like "you", "your", etc. For example, the author in Perez Hilton (2015) tells users "Check out Kelly's Tweet, part invasion of privacy and part HIGHlarious". The Facebook site Passenger Shaming encourages submissions on this topic. Yet, others state "I want to read the comments" (Medine, 2015).

## Analysis of comments

In this section we analyze more in detail the comments posted on the social media site that allowed for that form of participation. Combining the five sources we studied generated nearly 350 comments. The comments were classified based on their content or main theme. The themes can be subdivided in thematic foci following De Fina (2016). The following categories were used:

1. Characters refers to the taleworld figures;
2. Additional story components refers to the addition of some element to the original story;
3. 2nd story refers to the invention of a new related story;
4. Credibility refers to whether the story is true;

5. Tellability refers to whether the story is worthwhile telling;
6. Legitimacy refers to the right to tell the story to the public;
7. Narrator 1 refers to Kelly as the author;
8. Narrator 2 refers to the author of the article retelling the story;
9. Other participant refers to comments directed to other users in the thread;
10. Photos refers to comments to the original photos posted by Kelly;
11. New Photos refers to new photos posted by users;
12. Unrelated comments refers to comments that have nothing to do with the story or the retelling.

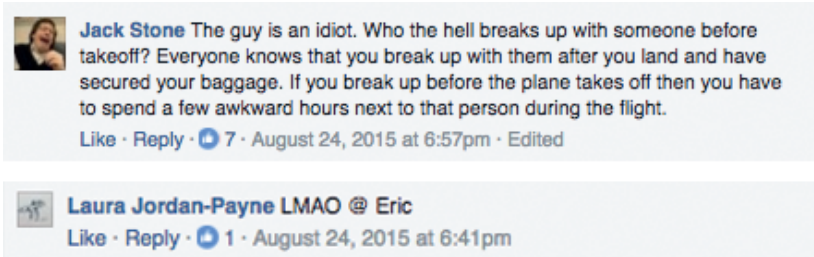
If we group comments by thematic foci we can distinguish three basic categories in comments 1 to 9 (we are excluding 10 to 12 since those may have different foci). Comments in categories 1 and 2 can be further classified as pertaining to the teleworld, comments in category 3 can be subsumed as pertaining to a second story and comments in 4 to 9 can be further classified as pertaining to the storyrealm.

As seen in Table 3 the Passenger Shaming Facebook group received the most comments (151) followed by the BuzzFeed (140), Manrepeller (32), ABC7 (15) and Mirror (only 4). In general, the comments followed the way the prompt was formulated. Thus the Facebook page is dedicated to exposing bad passenger behavior and has over 460,000 likes. The site used one of Kelly’s original photographs with the caption “The great #PlaneBreakUp of 2015” and links to the story on the Mashable’s site with the same title along with subtitle “A woman live-tweeted a couple allegedly breaking up while her flight was delayed ...” (Koerber, 2015). For this reason the

Table 3. Analysis of thematic foci in the comments

	Total N of comments	Teleworld		2nd story	Stroyrealm								
		Characters	Add'l story components	2nd story	Credibility	Tellability	Legitimacy	Narrator 1	Narrator 2	Other commenters	Photos	New photos	Unrelated comments
ABC 7	15			1	2	1	3	8					
Buzzfeed	140	21	1	6	25	18	25	20	4	3	5	1	11
Facebook	151	44		8	14	6	18	11		22	12	6	10
Man Repeller	32	3		4			14	3	1		3		4
Metro													
Mirror	5					1	3		1				
TOTALS	343	68	1	19	41	26	63	42	6	25	20	7	25
PERCENTAGE		20	0	6	12	8	18	12	2	7	6	2	7

majority of comments, nearly one third, are concerned with the characters and their behavior, for example see the following (Figure 5):



(Passenger Shaming, 2015)

Figure 5. Comments posted to the wall of the Passenger Shaming Facebook group

Other comments focused on Kelly and whether or not her tweets represented an invasion of privacy, whether or not the story is true, other photos, and one another. Over twenty comments also appear to be interactions with other group members.

While the title of the post on the Passenger Shaming site has a fairly neutral tone, the Mashable post addresses several themes. It begins with a photo from Kelly's original feed with a superimposed caption of one of Kelly's tweets, "This guy just broke up with his girlfriend and she's SOBBING" (Koerber, 2015). Mashable's author Brian Koerber then opens his article with a few sentences of commentary about the characters and their behavior, then adds, "though we aren't convinced the following events are genuine." While this story also addresses the legitimacy of Kelly's decision to publically live-tweet the story, the main theme of the retelling seems to be whether or not Kelly's story is true (Koerber, 2015).

The Mirror, a U.K. based online tabloid, received the fewest number of comments. In the months after Kelly's Twitter story went viral, only five people posted comments on the webpage in response to the prompt, "Have your say in the comments below". Interestingly, in the poll just below the comment prompt, which asks "Was Kelly wrong to live-tweet the couple's break-up?", over 1000 people answered. The title of the article is also somewhat provocative, "WOMAN Live-Tweets Couple's break-up on plane – and is accused of humiliating them", as it leads the reader to express an emotional reaction to Kelly's tweets. Indeed, here the majority of the comments also seem to respond to the prompt. Three out of the five comments pertain to whether or not Kelly had the right to publically tweet the narrative of their argument. We see a correspondence between a prompt on the website and the comment themes on other sites too.

In the case of ABC7 Eyewitness News, a local news website for the Los Angeles area, while still relatively few people commented, over half of people wrote to share

their opinion on Kelly as a person. There is no prompt on the page and the title seems to be rather neutral, compared to the Mirror's. One possible explanation for the higher number of comments is the proximity, in that this is a US based news site as opposed to the Mirror which caters to an international audience that understandably would be less interested in local gossip on non-celebrities. There is also more diversity among the comment themes for this article. Primarily though, as is the case across all five sites that allow comments, people were concerned with the legitimacy and credibility of the story.

As mentioned previously the Man Repeller post is the only one from our sample that does not include any of Kelly's Tweets, and the article is clearly focused on the topic of privacy. Just above the comment section, the site offers an open ended prompt, "thoughts?" which generated 34 comments; some readers posted more than once. Not surprisingly, over half of the comments are aligned with the legitimacy of Kelly's tweets, did she have the right to tweet about the couple? It's interesting to note that the next most common type of comment was a second story idea that looked at the personal experiences real or hypothetical of the commenters.

Finally, just as the BuzzFeed posting incorporated more themes than others, the 140 comments also address a wide variety of themes. The characters of Kelly's story remain a central theme, but the comments demonstrate a fairly equal level of interest in the legitimacy or credibility of the story and in Kelly. It's interesting to note that commenters on this article also address legitimacy of BuzzFeed and the author of the post, reinforcing the idea that the presence of a new teller is noted.

Looking at the general results represented in Table 3, it can be said that given the amount of comments on Facebook and Buzzfeed, these two sites drive the trends in comments and as we noted, their own framing influenced the thematic focus of the comments. This explains why Facebook participants made so many comments on the characters and BuzzFeed participants made so many comments on credibility. All in all, the highest number of comments was on the characters. On the other hand, looking at the average percentage for each of the foci also provides interesting insights into audience participation in social media. While comments on the story characters are the highest in percentage, if we group comments into the categories proposed above, we find that 20% of the comments relate to the taleworld, almost 62% pertain to the storyrealm and just 6% relate to a second story. This confirms results already found in De Fina's (2016) study of audience participation in online storytelling according to which participants in social media are more focused on reflexivity regarding the context of the telling than on the story. On the other hand, these results are also consistent with the fact that the 2nd story, i.e. the narrative about Kelly tweeting the original story, is itself a meta-story in that it focuses on the action of telling a certain story and its consequences: both positive (popularity) and negative (breach of privacy).

## Conclusions

In this paper we analyzed a Twitter story that went viral and its retellings in digital media contexts. We found that in such an environment retellings in most cases involve a reflexive process through which the original story becomes embedded or “nested” in a meta-story in which the original teller is now a character to be judged and evaluated and whose act of telling also becomes evaluated in light of how tellable, credible and legitimate it was. We saw that the story that originated from the tweets does not disappear although it becomes the object of a series of transformations. It does get reframed through the co-teller’s eyes but it is also largely reproduced by means of the embedding of the tweets and photos through which it was told. This is probably due to the performance value that derives from the high tellability demonstrated by its having gone viral. We discuss the different ways in which the authors of the retelling present their role as new tellers showing the existence of a continuum from more evident to less explicit presence of an authorial voice accomplished through the use of different linguistic and semiotic resources. The latter include the reproduction of tweets and photos, the insertion of new photos or drawings, the graphic framing of original photos, and the addition of comments to the photos or tweets. We found differences in audience involvement and reactions among the different sites. Sites differentially appealed to their audiences and audiences participated in sharing and commenting on the story and the meta-story in part following lead questions and cues found in the social media and in part with a focus of their choice. Comments, again, took aim at the teller of the story and the process of telling more often than at the characters and events in the original breakup taleworld.

All in all, our analysis shows that the practice of sharing stories in digital media is characterized by different choices of strategies for framing and different participations frameworks. However, we also demonstrated that there is a common trend towards a shift in focus from the taleworld of a story to the storyrealm, that is to the storytellers, the audiences themselves and in particular the process of telling.

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