Digital Life Stories: Auto/Biography in the Information Age

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This paper is about 'digital life stories' as a new form of autobiography in the 'information age'. One of its aims is to argue that we have been living in the information age long enough for digital life stories to become a significant new form of narrative that reflects the social realities of everyday life under conditions of global complexity. It is argued that digital life stories constitute a new genre that is characterized by four key dimensions. These dimensions are analysed and placed in the context of lives lived in the information age and auto/biographical writing. Issues related to the identification and analysis of digital life stories are then considered. The paper concludes by exploring the implications of digital life stories for auto/biographical work.

In his book *Documents of life-2*, Plummer (2000) notes that since the earlier edition, published in 1983, the development of digital information and communications technologies (ICTs) have opened up new possibilities for the construction and publication of autobiographies:

Search for 'autobiography' and you will come up with millions of entries of all kinds: from thousands of school children telling their lives in simple formats for a classroom project to CD-Roms that help you format your family tree; from the most personal sexual autobiography in a 'chat room' to the published life stories of Thomas Jefferson or Alex Haley's *Roots*.

(Plummer, 2000: 97)

The time between the two publications captures something of the pace of technological change that led to the often hyperbolized

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notion of the 'information revolution' and the advent of life with, if not in, the 'information age' (Castells, 1996: 328). For Castells, the digital integration of oral, print and visual modalities into one system has a social impact compatible with the advent of the alphabet, giving rise to new forms of identity, organization and decentred flows of power. He went on to argue that 'the internet is the fabric of our lives' (Castells, 2001: 1). While auto/biography is part of this fabric, the analysis of Internet-based narratives remains neglected. A recent text that provides a detailed review of auto/biographical research left it to the conclusion to note that we may be 'entering an interactive, "real"-cyber world of auto/biographies' (Roberts, 2002: 174). A purpose of this paper is to argue that we have been living in the information age long enough for digital life stories to become a significant new form of narrative that reflects the social realities of everyday life under conditions of global complexity (Urry, 2002).

The way that the hardware and software that give access to the Internet also provides users with the ability to 'talk back' through email, newsgroups and web pages is central to any conceptualization of an information age. Despite the diversity of formulations as to what constitutes this age, there is a general consensus that organizations and individuals are confronted by, and contribute to, a rapidly evolving amount of information of local, national and international origins (Webster, 1995). Figures for 2003 from the Office for National Statistics reveal that for the first time over half the UK population were Internet users.[1] North America reached this level of connectivity some time ago and most European countries are at least equal if not ahead of the UK in citizens access to ICTs. This use of ICTs is reflected in contemporary theories that place an emphasis on the role of 'networks', 'mobilities,' 'scapes', 'liquidity' and 'flows' of various sorts (e.g., Castells, 1996; Graham and Marvin, 2001; Lash, 2002; Bauman, 2000; Urry, 2000; 2002). Scapes reflect a new geographical fluidity and the flow and exchange of extraordinary amounts of information. Space–time compression and the pluralization of information are forces of globalization that enable many people to be more physically, economically and socially mobile and consequently more embedded within networked technologies of various sorts (Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002). Email, for example, enables families to remain in touch with each other on a daily basis wherever individual members are geographically located. Indeed, contemporary notions of identity and family are less embedded in the proximate, everyday life of neighbourhoods and communities and increasingly lived out through connections mediated by the Internet (Putnam, 2000). ITCs have therefore taken a central place

in how people live out their lives, find and maintain connections and seek to represent themselves to others.

One of my concerns, therefore, is about 'digital life stories' that reflect the new ability, open to anyone with access to a computer linked to the Internet, to create and publish their auto/biography and interact with a global audience. They constitute a new form of self-expression that is constructed through text, images and hyper-links (Selvin, 2000). The accounts considered here are 'digital', as they are created and consumed within a media framed by digital data. This enables material that in other media is distinct, for example, photo-graphs and text, to flow together in complex relationships. Digital media occupies a disembodied space where the boundaries between author and reader and other dualities of the modern off-line world are challenged or recast (see Featherstone and Burrows, 1995; Haraway, 1991). 'Life stories', rather than more familiar labels such as 'autobiography' and 'life history', help mark out a distinctive genre. The term has also been used elsewhere in the context of the lives of women, colonial subjects and others who are under-represented in other narrative forms. Chanfrault-Duchet (2000), for example, notes the complexity of meanings weaved by 'ordinary people' (2000: 74) in their accounts of their lives. The use of the label 'digital life story' is also congruent with the emphasis placed by many authors of Internet narratives, who explain that they want to 'tell my story' (Hardey, 2002a), and the emergent nature of identity and biography in our contemporary era (Giddens, 1991).

The aim of this paper is to encourage recognition of the signifi-cance of digital life stories to the study of auto/biographical material and move towards a definition of them as a genre. It opens with an outline description and analysis of the key features of this new genre and proceeds to examine the format, narrative pattern, tensions between the author and the audience, and the content of digital life stories. This is followed by an examination of the methodological approaches needed to identify and understand digital life stories. The conclusion reflects on the role of digital life stories in the infor-mation age.

DIGITAL LIFE STORIES AS A GENRE

The notion of 'genre' has various usages, but it is used here to dis-tinguish digital life stories from other material on the Internet and other forms of auto/biography. This is also helps to locate digital life stories within the tradition of recounting lives in other forms such as auto/biography and oral histories. Therefore, while digital life stories

represent 'a major change' (Plummer, 2000: 99) in life story telling there are continuities with past forms. Key characteristics of the genre are outlined below:

Format and medium	Web pages and weblogs that are inherently digital, dynamic, inclusive of text, pictures and other media.
Narrative pattern	Interweaving narratives that are loosely ordered by hyperlinks that are attached to an archive of material and other places on the Internet.
Author and audience	Constructed and reconstructed for a global audience that reads 'unique' narratives by making hyperlink choices.
Content	An individual life that is grounded in other people, localities and events.

These features shape the expectations and experiences of digital life stories for both author and reader. They also point to a tension between the construction of the stories and their 'reading'. This arises because digital life stories are more or less reconstructed by the act of consumption. However, a digital life story has, as in other media, a broad structure that commonly opens with significant life event such as a marriage, separation or illness. It then proceeds through various events that are more or less loosely attached to a chronology. This self-referential narrative enables people to tell the story of who they are, where they are and what makes their experiences distinctive. However, the audience may consume a narrative that transcends an individual web page or weblog by following hypertext links to other places on the Internet.

FORMAT AND MEDIUM

There are a vast number of personal home pages that, as Chandler (1999) has observed, reflect the 'construction of their makers identities'. In the early 1990s when the World Wide Web was novel, the construction of Internet web pages demanded a knowledge of Hypertext Mark-up Language (HTML) as well as relatively rare access to suitable networked computer equipment. Since then access to the Internet has grown exponentially and new, 'click and drag' tools have simplified the construction of web pages. In 1995 there were an estimated 20,000 web sites which had grown to over 10 million by 2000 with some 2 million pages being added every day (Netcraft, 2000). Estimates of the number of web pages need to be treated with caution, but whatever the actual number there is a general agreement about their continued and rapid growth. The weblog (aka blog) in the past two years emerged as a new space relatively free of commer-

cial interests that are increasingly represented on web pages. For example, advertising may be more or less overtly associated with personal home pages as part of users agreement with their Internet Service Provider (ISP). Blogs have their origins in software developed to make updating web pages simple. They are therefore similar to personal home pages but make even less demands on technical skills and do not require users to have an account with an ISP in order to publish material on the Internet. Indeed, the earlier label of 'me-zines' indicates the essential subjective nature of the blog. Marked by rapid growth it has been estimated that there are 701,150 blogs.[2] With about half this number being written in languages other than English. This is significant in that a far greater proportion of general Internet resources are written in English and may reflect the relative accessibility of the blog format to those unable or unwilling to subscribe to a ISP. This suggests that the blog format may be particularly useful to those whose only access to ICTs is via cyber cafes, centres set up to address the digital divide and libraries.

Selvin (2000) notes that home pages are presented to visitors and the links made to other parts of the Internet constitute a means of self-expression. The personal home page and blog is, therefore, a distinctive space within the Internet with some of the attributes commonly associated with broadcast media. In effect, users can design, create and broadcast material about issues that concern them. Digital life stories involve the construction of individual narratives that may include pictures, scanned documents and sound bites linked together through hypertext. These narratives are scattered across the Internet and can be found through search engines or any of the many indexes of web pages and blogs (for example, Yahoo.com, Lycos.com, Blogger.com, Gblogs.com). They may also be found embedded in web pages that are constructed around particular themes or issues such as a chronic illness or a social problem (Kennedy, 1999). The stories within these pages tend to be used to offer people a grounded experiential account of, for example depression or divorce. Indeed, some of these narratives may also exist independently as blogs or home pages that the author continues to construct.

NARRATIVE PATTERN

Web pages and blogs have a discernible pattern that is shaped by the technology that is used to construct them. Blogs encourage authors to adopt a 'diary' approach so that as they add new material it is displayed consecutively. Chronology is therefore an important dimension of digital life stories as in more familiar print based

auto/biographical forms (Erben, 1998). Roberts's (1999) observation in relation to print narratives that the analysis of 'time perspectives' may reveal significant assumptions about how individuals view their lives is also true of digital life stories. However, the dynamic nature of the media means that such perspectives may be continually subject to revision as the author makes changes to the narrative.

Whether a web page or blog format is used, authors of digital life stories in effect 'store' material that may be linked into their narrative by hypertext links. Behind the main narrative, an archival collection of fragments is stored and can be called up to add more to a particular thread of the story, should a reader follow the related hyperlink. These links take two forms. First, those links that are attached to, for example, a picture or scanned document that may contain some text and links back to main narrative. Secondly, links that 'jump' the reader to other parts of the narrative or to Internet resources elsewhere such as newsgroups. Here the reader moves away from the original locality as they are in effect constructing a narrative that, as a whole, will contain material gleaned from across the Internet. While the author of a digital life story may construct the narrative within a temporal ordering of experiences this may be more or less subverted by readers making choices of hyperlinks to follow.

WRITER AND AUDIENCE

McLuhan (1964) argued that what he referred to as 'hypermedia' would revolutionize writing by overturning author-centred text and its attendant apparatus of publishers and distribution systems. As a publishing and distribution system, the Internet enables individuals to circumvent the print media with its attendant production and marketing structures. For some, this is seen as liberating users from the inequalities between producers and consumers that exist in other media and suggests that the Internet is inherently democratic (Poster, 1995). For others, such developments reflect the 'scapes' within which people may make new connections and seek new ways of anchoring their identity (Urry, 2000). In any event as Featherstone and Lash (1999: 5) argue, 'in cyberspace we move beyond the old realist divisions of space/time, sender/receiver, medium/message'. The interactivity celebrated by theorists has been understood to give readers the power over content previously enjoyed by the author (Landow, 1992). There are strong associations here with poststructuralist literary theory, which celebrated amongst other things the 'death of the author' (Culler, 1983). However, in digital life stories the authority of the author is destabilized rather than ended or transformed

because he or she decides how to use the hypertext medium and, for example, when and to what links may be offered to readers. Indeed in terms of control over the appearance and 'rhythm' of a digital life story, the author has more control than is the case in print media (Levine, 1995). Therefore, while every reading is potentially unique (Snyder, 1996), it is underpinned by a form and structure that is constructed by the author.

Digital life stories lack a defined audience. Anyone can visit them from anywhere and at anytime. Boller (1992: 20) goes so far as to suggest that 'an electronic text only exists in the act of reading − in the interaction between the reader and textual structure'. As Skinner (2002: 28) concludes, such 'narratives can truly be without end'. If writers of biographies have in mind a reader (Elbaz, 1987), the authors of digital life stories construct them with visitors in mind. However, this audience is global, lacks the proximity of off-line communities and, unless contact is made through email, is unknown. The mediated nature of the Internet has led some to argue that the consequent social distance may decrease inhibitions about describing intimate personal information (Turkle, 1995). This may be a contributing factor in authors' apparent lack of concern about some of the information they open up to readers. Indeed, the ways individuals utilize the Internet to facilitate their own agendas is associated with broader social and cultural inequalities. Bourdieu's (1984) assertion that the ability to play a musical instrument and that a knowledge of 'classical' music is one of important signs of cultural capital may be reframed in terms of digital technologies. The increasing popularity of digital life stories suggests that the ability to create and maintain a presence on the Internet may be a sign of cultural capital appropriate to our contemporary era. Inscribed with links and other cultural and social preferences digital life stories may become both a repository for and display of cultural adroitness and social distinction. Within the rapidly expanding blog community, there is competition amongst some authors to have their blog achieve the status of a 'featured' blog. Such blogs are given particular prominence on web resources from which searches can be conducted to identify blogs with specific content. The unseen Internet audience may become more or less visible when individuals enter into email exchanges with the author. The widespread recognition of the quality of information or advice offered on some web pages or blogs can promote the author to the status of an 'expert' in a particular field. Indeed, the contents of a blog that was authored in Baghdad during the recent war was reproduced in the *Guardian* newspaper. However, as in other media there may be for some a desire for Warhol's

promise of 15 minutes of fame by establishing an evolving presence on the Internet (Stenger, 1991).

CONTENT

The anonymity made possible within Internet domains has been drawn on by Turkle (1996) and others as one of the most fruitful ways of investigating the possibilities of identity. Influenced by a postmodern agenda some argued that online identities become detached from the embodied self as users experimented with their dis-embodied identity in cyberspace (Haraway, 1991). More broadly ICTs, and especially increased public use of the Internet, has been seen as an important, if not key, driver of what Hall (1992), in a different context, described as disembedding processes that are closely linked to the rise of individual reflexivity:

> The more social life becomes mediated by the global marketing of styles, places and images, by international travel, and by globally networked media images and communications systems, the more identities become detached − disembedded − from specific times, places, histories and traditions, and appear 'free-floating'.
>
> (Hall, 1992: 303)

However, digital life stories represent one way people are using ICTs to embed their identities and maintain if not create links within their communities in all senses of the word. Miller and Slater's (2000) ethnography of Internet users in Trinidad pointed to these embedding possibilities. Trinidadian users promoted 'Trinidadianness' and their own sense of identity through the Internet. In effect, Trinidadians who frequently had globally dispersed families could be in everyday contact and establish a sense of 'household' not previously possible. Complete with photographs and sometimes video and sound recordings, evolving digital life stories may become highly effective mechanisms for promoting a sense of belonging and solidarity.

One of the challenges for individuals in this information age of 'scapes' and 'flows' is, therefore, to construct and anchor their identity and relationships. As Giddens (1991: 53) argues in the contemporary era, the self is 'reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography'. This is inscribed with experiences that include relationships and places that can enhance the narrative, which is a mode of cognition rather than a literary construction. Such 'autobiographical thinking' in a 'broad sense of an interpretative self-history produced by the individual concerned ... whether written down or not ... is actually the core of self-identity' (1991: 53). This 'core' may be less amenable to displacement by some cyber identity. As

Wynn and Katz's (1998) study of home pages found, authors 'pull together a cohesive presentation of self across eclectic social contexts in which individuals participate in' (1998: 324). There is an affinity here with Giddens's (1991) reflexive narratives of the self that are always 'under construction' and those accounts mapped out in digital life stories. The subject of digital life stories may therefore be simply stated to be 'the self'. In this, digital life stories follow the traditional auto/biographical path of representing a life and the interconnectedness of that life with other people and places. In effect, authors are 'telling their story' in a way that anchors their identity on the Internet and at the same time represents an ongoing reflexive process. The diary-like format of many blogs facilitates a flow of narrative writing that may involve the author in daily accounts of events and their reflections on them. In addition to this basic auto/biographical form, it is possible to identity three broad types of narrative.[3]

First, as noted previously, there are what might be referred to as 'family' auto/biographies. Here, individual digital life stories may be interlinked through hypertext to create a 'family web'. A family or community history may also be constructed as people seek to generate a sense of 'family' despite the geographical dispersal of individual members. The extract below is taken from the opening of a digital life story that runs to many thousands of words as well as photographs and hyperlinks.

> My name is George Davies and this web page is about my life (up to now) [hyperlink to a baby picture] and the town [hyperlink to map and part of the narrative about the place] I have lived in for forty years. I'm interested in family history and so I also keep this page so that we can stay in touch and maybe find lost people that are our relatives [hyperlink to family tree]. Things have changed so fast that Hull is not the place that most of us once called home.

There is an echo here of a sense of the 'loss' or transformation of community depicted by Willmot and Young (1960) and others. Within some digital life stories, there is an attempt to use them as a platform not only for family life but as an evolving family history, so that past members are represented in something like memorial tones. For example, one author whose son died of an AIDS-related illness maintained his digital life story, which is hyperlinked to others in the family, as a 'living remembrance' so that future generations will recognize the son's place in the family. It should be noted that while such digital life stories may be a conduit for the remembrance of family experiences and interaction they are one of many ways the same people may interact (cf. Wellman and Gulia, 1999).

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The second category reflects a desire to share difficult life transitions and offer others advice and support. The narratives commonly challenge expert knowledge domains such as medicine and the law. There is a resemblance here with what Frank (1995) has identified as a 'quest narrative', whereby illness may reveal new aspects of the self following a metaphorical journey, involving various difficulties and interactions, from which the protagonist returns with a 'boon' to share with others. This may be, for example, expressed in terms of 'how I got back my life from doctors' or 'my story of divorce and the loss of my children'. Such digital life stories can contain what in other media would be contentious material. For example, one author in the process of explaining the process of his divorce included a severe criticism of the social workers who were involved in his case along with their photographs, email addresses and other material that he has found on the Internet:

> I'm a local lad. Always lived around the same streets. Known people since I was at school.... Only time I have really left it was when I was in the navy. Got to see bit of the world and gave me a trade but I never belonged out there.... I work with an old mate in his garage [hyperlink to several pictures and an advertisement for the garage]....
>
> When I first saw Mrs Smith [hyperlinks to a social service web site and details of the social worker's background taken from a social services web site, including an email address] she said to me she didn't want any trouble, like she was already expecting it. This is about class. She had an education and thought she was better than me. She knew this because of my accent which as you might expect is not like that of a country lady....
>
> Fathers must fight prejudice [hyperlinks to campaigning organizations]. My life may share things with yours which shows that my experiences are not unusual.

Foucault (1991: 189) reminds us that organized expert knowledge involves the archiving of information and places the individual 'in a network of writing' and that 'engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them'. Such classificatory processes have become 'designed in to the flows of everyday life' (Rose, 1999: 234) as digital technology opens up new possibilities for surveillance. The proliferation of such documentation is a feature of the information age that also provides individuals with the ability to reproduce and publish such material. Medical, social work, educational and other documents may be scanned and depicted within digital life stories to verify some aspects of the author's narrative. In effect, authors attempt to construct a counter narrative to the expert

discourses they have been the subject of and seek a degree of confirmation through interaction with readers.

The third category may be thought of as 'conversion' narratives. The auto/biography is used partly to tell a story of conversion which concludes with a plea to readers to 'take a similar path'. Religion represents a common theme that partly reflects the way faith communities in the United States encourage individual members to use the Internet. The proliferation of new religious movements, especially in the United States, has led to fierce competition for members. These movements have been quick to adopt new technology such as television and the Internet to 'spread their message' (Hadden, 1988). However, conversion is not necessarily associated with religion. Digital life stories that emphasize 'downsizing' or one of the alternative approaches to health and lifestyle may be constructed in the hope that readers will 'follow my example and change your life':

> Welcome to my cyber home. I started two years ago as I traced my family history [hyperlink to a detailed family tree complete with many photographs, and links to other sites about black history]. It has grown into the story of my troubles and how I got back my life from the social workers and psychiatrist by finding Jesus [hyperlinks to a community church web site]. It might help you not to fall under their power and find ways of dealing with issue that life throws at you. I don't pretend to have the answer but you won't hear my story from the professionals.

Within these digital life stories, links are provided to congruent web sites and similar digital life stories. Readers are also encouraged to email the author so that specific advice or support can be provided. Moreover, some digital life stories may have developed into what amounts to an active promotion and selling of an illness remedy that has helped 'transform' the author's life. For example, Hardey (2000b) describes how web pages may move from an individual account of an illness to a resource through which drugs or remedies of various kinds may be purchased.

TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY

Digital life stories represent a challenge to traditional approaches to collecting and analysing auto/biographical material. The first problem is how to identify digital life stories which also raises the issue of how any one or number of accounts may be considered to be 'representative'. Like other auto/biographical material, it may not be possible or desirable to make claims about the representativeness of individual lives (Plummer, 2000). Digital life stories offer a

subjective account by the author on the author. Unlike many narratives used in research, such accounts are not constructed in collaboration with an interviewer who has a particular research agenda (Erben, 1993). Moreover, given the rapidly expanding nature of web pages and blogs there is no easily identifiable 'population' of digital life stories from which such a sample could be drawn. However, one purpose of this paper is to at least move towards a basis for identifying what constitutes a digital life story. The identification and selection of digital life stories may, as in other areas of qualitative research, be driven by theoretical concerns (Erben, 1998). For example, the desire to understand how people with a chronic illness are sharing their experiences with others through the Internet leads to the identification of narratives written round particular conditions (Hardey, 2002b).

Search engines provide an obvious starting place to identify material on the Internet. Terms such as 'my story', 'me and my family' and so forth will reveal a mass of links, some of which will lead to digital life stories. However, search engines identify material on the Internet in many different ways and these tend to neglect personal web pages in favour of more visible commercial and organizational led material. Those who want to transmit a 'message', whether as a challenge to authority or as a call to conversion, are more likely to 'post' an indication of their Internet resources directly to search engines than those concerned for example to construct a resource for their family. The mutual cross linking of sites whereby one web page makes a hypertext link to another can also do much to increase its visibility to search engines. This again suggests that the more 'private' self constructed in family and self-narratives may require a greater degree of effort to identify. Newsgroups can provide another source of links to digital life stories. However, these are more likely to reveal links to resources constructed by those active in groups devoted to, for example, alternative health or faith communities. Blogs have their own and rapidly evolving mechanisms for identification. Again mutual hypertext links are important but search engines such as Yahoo.com, Lycos.com, Blogger.com and Gblogs. com enable specific word searches. Indeed, given the relatively greater emphasis on personal narratives within this domain of the Internet, it may be more easy to identify relevant digital life stories here than within the vast pool of web pages.

Ethics are uncertain in Internet-based research (Hakken, 1999) and it is too easy for researchers to view the contents and activities in digital space as a vast collection of data just waiting for analysis. Digital life stories, like an autobiography or work of art displayed in a gallery, are in the public domain. Indeed, authors may be keen

for their site or blog to be visited and requests for visitors to email questions and comments are common. It is therefore possible to follow 'informed consent' guidelines and ask the author for permission to use his or her Internet resource for research purposes. Unlike research conducted within newsgroups or chat rooms, the researcher need not cast into the role of a covert participant (Mann and Stewart, 2000). However, should an email link not be provided, requests be ignored or permission refused it remains in the hands of the researcher to decide whether to include such material. Moreover, whether permission is given for one 'reading' of the author's Internet material or a succession over a period of time may not be clear. A further consideration in some instances relates to the content of some digital life stories. As we have noted documents of various kinds may be scanned and published together with personal details of others. It may not be clear whether individuals or organizations are aware of such material that they may well not want to be publicly available. However, the inclusion of others within auto/biographical work has been discussed in relation to more established forms of auto/biography so that similar strategies could be followed here (Roberts, 2002). There is a caveat here in that given some basic information it may be possible to identify a digital life story through the use of powerful search facilities so it is more difficult to insulate research material than in other settings.

Questions related to authenticity and detachment from off-line identities are one of the major themes running through both utopian and dystopian accounts of the Internet. Disembodiment and anonymity allow users to take on many new identities that may have little connection to their off-line selves. Indeed there are now many well-known examples of people who have deceived the Internet audience into believing that their 'true' off-line lives and identities are congruent with their online persona. Some researchers have addressed this problem by meeting respondents off-line 'in person as well as persona' (Turkle, 1995: 324) while others argue that online environments and identities are valid in themselves and need not be verified by off-line presence (Hine, 2000). Jones (1999) reminds us that it is the embodied user who interacts online and that we can never fully 'escape' from lived experiences. Many studies of online communities point to the flow between on and off-line lives. Rheingold (1994), for example, describes how his observation of the WELL community was 'grounded in my everyday physical world' as he attended marriages and other events in the off-line lives of members. In a similar way, it has been claimed that personal home pages tend to be situated with and often seen as part of the author's off-line life (Wynn and

Katz, 1998). As Denzin (1999: 108) concluded, 'cybernarratives are grounded in the everyday lives and biographies of the women and men who write them'. The apparent tension between off-line and online identities and environments reflects broader and long-established debates about authenticity and 'truth' within ethnographic research (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Plummer, 1999) as well as more recent theoretical strands within writing about the Internet (Wellman 1997). However, there are established domains within the Internet where people can 'play' with identity (Haraway, 1991) or write imaginative fictional stories. The inclusion of email addresses and the desire to make connections, whether with family members or the Internet community further mitigate against users constructing fictional narratives that resemble digital life stories and interact with others on the same basis.

The loss of the authoritative place of the interviewer and the fixed form of the written account challenges the conventions of narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993; Becker, 1999). The dynamic nature of the material means that it has to be captured and 'frozen' to become what is conventionally thought of as 'data'. In the case of the material alluded to in this paper, it was captured as complete HTLM documents together with all internal links, which included pictures and scanned documents, and stored on a CD ROM. This allows the researcher to gain a familiar sense of control over data and subject it to various forms of analysis. New approaches may be needed if the dynamic nature of digital life stories is to be understood so that, for example, a series of captures of the same story over time would allow changes to be mapped and comparisons across the time as the author alters and adds to the story. Once captured, it is tempting to simply transfer the text into a qualitative analysis package such as Ethnograph or NUDIST. However, the danger here is that text is given a priority that it may not deserve so that visual and other material is ignored or marginalized. Moreover, as Chandler's (1999) work on personal home pages shows, the design and layout of the material viewed through a web browser may be significant. The inclusion of material other than text in auto/biographies is not new (Plummer, 2000) and as Knowles's (2000) work suggests, images may provide important insights into individual narratives.

CONCLUSION

Computer technology and access to the Internet are pervasive aspects of contemporary life in the information age. In a world of

'mobilities', 'scapes' and 'flows' where people may be confronted with new forms of risks (Beck, 1992) and uncertainties (Giddens, 1991), the making and maintenance connections and the anchoring of identity takes on a new significance. It is not therefore surprising that ICTs are used by people to situate themselves in the relational, familial, social and organizational structures they occupy. While digital life stories are relatively new to the long established traditions of auto/biographical writing, a number of conclusions about their nature and trajectory can be made. First, digital life stories are cased in the off-line self rather than representing an escape from it. They are not purely performances or narratives of imagined selves that have been associated with other Internet environments such as MUDS (multi-user dungeons) where disembodiment may encourage such experimentation. Like more established auto/biographies, they are about and reflect the life lived by an individual author. Secondly, digital life stories reflect and are immersed in a self that is struggling to make choices and establish relationships in a world characterized by fluidity, uncertainty, change and ever greater levels of classification and surveillance. This may involve working through a sense of being perceived as an 'other' that politicizes identity and is played out among several discourses, be they in the form of a challenge to expertise or a 'conversion' narrative. Thirdly, and relatedly, digital life stories form part of what in another context has been called 'backyard ethnography' (Smith and Watson, 1996), which indicates how these are narratives of everyday lives that would not otherwise find a global audience unknown to the author. Plummer (2000) partly bases his assertion that what he labels 'cyber life stories' represent a major change in life-story telling on this ability to publish to a mass audience. Digital life stories, therefore, appear likely to be a significant way people 'tell their story', maintain a presence and make connections in the information age. Fourthly, and finally, digital life stories represent both a challenge to and opportunity for academic research into auto/biography. There are methodological and ethical issues to be worked through and we need to find new ways of understanding dynamic digital material that may include visual and other components. Digital life stories provide an ever-expanding resource so that never before have so many auto/biographies been available to us. As material on the Internet is subject to rapid change we need to consider, with some urgency, how to capture and archive the digital life stories that exist today before they are transformed as the authors make changes to them or simply deleted from the Internet.

NOTES

1 See http://www.statistics.gov.uk. Last accessed 23 October 2003.

2 See http://www.Blogcensus.org. Last accessed 23 October 2003.

3 These extracts are taken from an analysis of 132 web pages, 37 blogs and the 89 subsequent responses to an emailed questionnaire (see Hardey, 2002a).

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