Why are “we” called “them”?: Digital storytelling and the contested terrain of dialogue in post-conflict societies

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Abstract: Efforts to repair wounded social relations and rebuild political institutions often target young people, who are viewed with a mix of hope and anxiety as the future leaders of the country. Such efforts (often undertaken by civil society organizations and funded by international organizations) typically combine an emphasis on dialogue and tolerance with civic engagement and participation under the broader banner of citizenship. Dialogue, tolerance, and engagement aim at inclusive forms of community building and civic-ness, yet in such contexts notions of what constitutes the political community are inherently fractured, contested and constrained. As such, the mobilization of “community” may work against efforts to create new notions of “public,” “polity” and “civitas” that are offered as the normative rationale for such programs. Moreover, tolerance and engagement efforts targeting youth sometime combine face-to-face forms of dialogue with creative, mediated forms of engagement through the use of digital and social media, precisely because of the affective expressions they enable. Yet such expressions and dialogue can evoke and produce contestation and fraught forms of public-ness. Specifically, this paper discusses a collaborative digital-story mapping project conducted with two youth-led civil society organizations in Sarajevo/East Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although the youth organizations share an ethical commitment to dialogue promotion and engagement, the dialogue produced through this creative collaboration was often fraught with conflicting views of how to remember past violence and different definitions of what constitutes community.

Keywords: publics, storytelling, youth, civil society, peace, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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I. Introduction

“All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.” So says Karen Blixen in a quote popularized by Hannah Arendt (1958) in *The Human Condition*. The idea that narrating individual experiences of pain and suffering is part of the healing processes for survivors of violence or trauma, and is an important step in recovering the loss of individual agency such experiences often bring about, has become something of a truism in Western psychiatry (Grosz, 2014). Beyond individual recovery, however, stories, storytelling and other forms of expression and speech can play an important role in recovering and healing the damaged social body, and communal, public life more broadly, which political violence often deliberately targets (Sousa and Marshall, 2015). As Arendt recognized, stories are never told in isolation, but rather stories form out of an “already existing web of human relationships” (Arendt, 1958: 184). As anthropologist Michael Jackson (2002) observes, storytelling helps us mediate “our relation with worlds that extend beyond us” thereby negotiating an “existential balance between ourselves and […] otherness.” It is in this “contested space of intersubjectivity” that both violence and storytelling occur and where the ability to speak and listen to others is practiced (Jackson, 2002: 39). As such, storytelling is not only about the power to narrate (hooks, 1989), but also the “vital capacity of people to work together to create, share, affirm, and celebrate something that is held in common” (Jackson, 2002: 39).

It is perhaps for this reason, then, that post-conflict peace-building efforts have begun to turn toward storytelling both as an individual therapeutic practice and also as a mode of conflict transformation (Seneci, 2000; 2009). The emphasis on storytelling and memory has been particularly important in contexts where competing historical narratives and conflicting versions of past events continue to serve as stumbling blocks in the way of progress toward peace (Shea, 2010). Recently, the use of digital technology, in the form of digital storytelling, has informed these efforts (Yuksel et al, 2011). Digital storytelling is seen as a way of encouraging active listening, self-reflexivity, and deep dialogue among members of divided societies (Higgins, 2011), as a way of empowering youth in the context of disempowering conflict (Sawheny, 2009), and as a means of “building community” more generally (Thumin, 2009).

While positive in many respects, such efforts also raise a number of issues. For one, interpersonal storytelling (whether the traditional or digital variety) risks producing a myopic focus on individual experiences of suffering at the expense of a wider understanding of structural violence and inequality. Moreover, the focus on building community or finding common ground based on shared experiences of suffering in many ways presupposes the community that storytelling is supposed to build. This is problematic in cases where the existence of or desire for a shared political community is in doubt. Storytelling as a form of inclusive address seeks to
produce a public of shared experience and presumes a shared temporality of future healing, progress and “coming together”, and yet in many deeply divided societies such forms of public togetherness are highly fraught. These tensions are complicated further with the use of digital storytelling, where dialogical storytelling practices unfold not only within the intimate spaces of face-to-face communication, but also within the context of digital, mediated publics.

In exploring these tensions, this paper examines a collaborative digital-storytelling project conducted with two youth-led civil society organizations in Sarajevo/ East Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of a larger study on youth citizenship in divided societies. Although the youth organizations that participated in this research have worked together on anti-hate speech campaigns and share an ethical commitment to human rights promotion, the creative collaboration that we worked to produce was often fraught with conflicting views of how to remember past violence and different definitions of what constitutes community. The young people were often caught between membership in multiple and competing publics: their participation in human rights promotion and youth activism on one hand, and their embeddedness within particular (national/ethnic) communities on the other. The digital field connecting these different spheres became a site of contestation and anxiety. In presenting this case, it is not the intention of the authors to definitively argue for or against the use of digital storytelling in post-conflict peace-building practices. Rather our interest is in examining the fraught process of public formation that digital storytelling practices present. Before turning to our empirical case study, we first preface this discussion with a brief examination of the role of storytelling in public formation generally, with particular attention given to digital storytelling in mediating (and mediatizing) contested and conflicted public memory.

II. (Digital) Storytelling and Public Formation

Storytelling, as a form of address, requires an audience, which is another way of saying it both engages with and works to shape a public of listeners. A public is both a space of discourse as well as a space of ongoing encounter (Warner, 2002). They are not only spaces where opinions are formed but also “arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities” (Fraser, 1990: 68). Publics are formed, as Staeheli (2010: 71) observes, when “address, subsequent dialogue, or interaction” evokes “some feeling of commonality or shared experience.” For Arendt (1958), stories play a role in producing publics by translating private experience into public meaning. As Jackson (2002) shows, the reverse is also true: individuals situate themselves in relation to the broader narrative of public discourse through personal stories, or what Bakhtin (1981) calls “internally persuasive discourse.” In other words storytelling serves the purpose of not only mediating between mutually constituted public and private realms, but also between the individual and a broader imagined collective, such as a political community or nation (Wolin, 1977; Anderson, 1983).
National stories are told through official channels of remembrance and institutions of cultural heritage that seek to regulate, represent, and “embody” the “story and spirit” of a polity (Simon and Ashley, 2010). However, as Rajagopal’s (2001) notion of “split publics” illustrates, people have different access to, experience with, and visions of such national narratives and what it means to belong. Public formation, Cody (2011: 38) notes, requires the “erasure of social structures, allowing universalizing claims to be articulated only by particular types of people.” As Warner (2002: 423) puts it, some publics are “more likely than others to stand in for the public, to frame their address as the universal discussion of the people.” As Nancy Fraser (1990) demonstrates, marginalized groups such as women and people of color have traditionally been excluded from hegemonic constructions of the public. Such marginalization occurs through a process of boundary setting, namely, defining what constitutes public versus “private” concerns, as well as what constitutes rational and appropriate discourse in ways that privilege the views and experiences of particular groups at the expense of others.

Contra Habermas’s ([1962] 1991) historical narrative of a late 18th/early 19th century bourgeois public sphere that later fractured, Fraser (1990) argues that a plurality of competing and conflict “counterpublics” arose alongside a hegemonic public. Fraser (1990: 67) refers to these (past and contemporary) alternative publics as “subaltern counterpublics,” which she defines as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and formulate counterdiscourses.” However, she hastens to add that such subaltern counter-publics are not necessarily “virtuous” but rather may be “explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian.” Virtuous or not, such counter-publics form out of shared experiences of alterity and are “constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public” (Warner, 2002: 423). In multicultural societies, however, Fraser (1990: 69) also theorizes the possibility of a “more comprehensive arena” where different publics could “talk across lines of cultural diversity.”

With the existence of competing publics there arises the possibility of overlapping membership in multiple publics, an empirical issue that research in public relations and communication theory recognized early on (Warner, 2002: 415). What we have then is a notion of a public sphere consisting of “multiple publics and counter-publics oriented toward a polity” (Cody, 2011: 54). Indeed, Fraser (1990) shares with Habermas ([1962] 1991) the assumption that multiple counter-publics nevertheless belong to a single “structured setting.” But what happens in situations where the polity itself is split or fractured, or when its very existence is politically contested, as is arguably the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other deeply divided societies? If sovereignty is the “capacity to regulate the limits of public display” (Cody, 2011: 45), then fractured sovereignty leads to fractured or dual displays of public-ness. So what do we make of efforts to harness the power of stories, including digital storytelling, to produce counter-publics of shared suffering and healing even in the context of fractured publics and contested polities?
Digital storytelling refers to the practice of producing short, 3-5 minute montages of digital photographs and archival images accompanied by voice-over narrative, music and sound. Often conducted in small, intimate group settings as part of informal arts and education projects, the method has its roots in community theater and public radio (Lambert, 2013). As Burgess et al (2010: 154) observe, digital storytelling, “is increasingly emerging not only as a tool in mediatizing individual memories; it is equally a facilitator of public histories.” Digital storytelling differs from archival practices such as oral history in that it aims to produce rather than merely capture “vernacular cultural expression” at a particular moment in time. Such “vernacular memories” often challenge the “triumphal narrative” of history produced in official expressions of public memory and heritage (Burgess et al, 2010).

Like other forms of visual art and verbal performance, digital stories “do not simply reflect social life, but have the capacity to comment critically on it as well” (Hull and Katz, 2006: 69). However, digital storytelling is unique in the way it uncouples and recombines sight and sound. As such, this medium is situated in the productive interplay between seeing and hearing, distant and intimate, external and internal, representational and affective, and indeed between public and private. The juxtaposition of voice and image often produces ruptures, gaps, and contradictions that serve to simultaneously enhance and disrupt individual narratives. This combination of visual and narrative expression in digital stories offers “something in excess of the original script they are based on” and produces meanings that “seem to exceed the storyteller’s conscious intention” (Rose, 2009: 212). This space of excess is potentially a space for inter-subjective exchange, or as Rose (2009: 218) puts it: “a space for representing to the Other the ambivalence and contradiction that can characterize the interminable process of relating our inner reality and the external world.” The spaces that digital storytelling creates are, as Hull and Katz (2006: 71) argue, “learning spaces where individuals and groups can define and redefine themselves” in relation to the world and each other. In other words digital storytelling is “a method for observing how we experience ourselves in the world” and for sharing that process of self-observation with others (Pitt, 2003: 89).

If public formation entails the creation of new social forms (Blaustein, 2004), and if publics are pedagogical in the sense they are sites of learning about the experiences of others, then digital storytelling is a potentially a practice of poetic public formation, a creative doing or world making in which new forms of sociability emerge and in which existing tropes of identities and belonging are both reproduced and transformed. However, as we will see in the next section, and as Staeheli (2010: 71) cautions us about public formation in general, this process is in no way inevitable or uncontroversial. In our experience in Sarajevo and East Sarajevo, we observed that the process of narrating their place in the world brought into stark relief the multiple and conflicting publics that young people belong to and must negotiate, as well as young people’s
conflicted relationship with the past. The digital stories they produced at times challenged and blurred rigid ethno-national boundary lines of identity, and at times reinforced them. Likewise, while the storytelling process revealed shared experiences that could form the basis of cross-community understanding and empathy, the process of sharing stories just as often raised points of contention – jarring moments when the stories of others did not conform to someone else’s own experiences and expectations. Before turning to a discussion of these digital stories and the multiple publics they circulate within, we first offer a brief explanation about our use of digital storytelling as research practice.

III. Study Site and Methods

Over the course of two-months in the summer of 2015, our research team worked with 6 young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina: 2 young men and 4 young women. The young people were recruited based on equal representation from two youth organizations, one representing the predominantly Muslim-Bosniak area of Sarajevo in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), and the other based in the predominantly Serbian Orthodox Christian area of Istočno (East) Sarajevo in the Republika Srpska (RS). Once consisting of a few suburbs at the eastern edge of Sarajevo, since the end of the Bosnian War in 1995, the area has been newly developed and populated by Bosnian Serbs who were displaced during the fighting. Although “Federal” Sarajevo and East Sarajevo have separate municipal administrations and are located in two separate political entities (FBiH and RS), together they form part of a single continuous conurbation, the Sarajevo Metropolitan Area. Indeed, when driving from Sarajevo to East Sarajevo, there is little if any indication that one has crossed any of these administrative boundaries. Nevertheless, demographics and ethnic divisions make it so that daily life in the eastern enclave remains largely separate from life in Sarajevo.

The organizations with which we partnered for this project were chosen, in part, because of existing connections between the two groups and because of their ongoing efforts to work across these ethnic and political divisions. The organizations are both youth-led organizations that work to promote human rights and counter intolerance. The organizations have collaborated together on anti-hate speech campaigns and the directors describe themselves as friends (field notes 3/6/2015). Our research team approached them with the idea of producing an interactive digital story-map of Sarajevo and East Sarajevo that would feature the voices of city-dwellers (young and old) telling stories about their everyday experiences and memories of their city, their views about how the city has changed and their hopes for the future, as well as their daily

1 Bosnia and Herzegovina comprises two separate political entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the Republika Srpska (RS). Bosniaks and Croats constitute the demographic majority in the FBiH, while the RS is majority Serbian. These entities were created as part of the Dayton Agreement, which brought the fighting to an end but also solidified the ethnic/territorial divisions that the war brought about.
routines and life-long journeys in and through the city. In addition to receiving training on digital media production, volunteers from the organizations who participated in this project would also be paid, in order to compensate them for their time, effort, and travel.

Given our selection of these two organizations, and our compensation for the participants, the project could be described as an example of “institutionally invited and facilitated” digital storytelling (Thumin, 2009: 619). Beyond the guidelines given to focus on place-based stories, however, the organizations and the participating young people were given broad scope and flexibility in telling the stories they wanted to tell. Likewise, although the two partner organizations are not “storytelling” organizations, per se, both are engaged in various forms of practice and address that intend to produce publics based on human rights and tolerance. Their participation in and organization of various human rights promotion events and anti-hate speech campaigns, as well as their use of various forms of public address from posters to trainings, murals, and videos, all suggest a desire to produce publics based on human rights, tolerance and inclusivity (or at least, “non-hateful” forms of speech and encounter). This collaborative, place-based storytelling project became one way of exploring the contested process of human rights-based public formation in the context of ongoing political divisions and ethnic tensions.

The six young people who participated in this project attended a two-day digital storytelling training workshop lead by the research team. During this workshop the researchers provided an introduction to interviewing techniques, effective storytelling, digital audio recording, digital photography, digital video editing, and research ethics. In addition the youth participants began brainstorming ideas for stories, people to interview, and places of importance or significance to them that might serve as the basis for a digital story. By the end of the workshop, the newly minted “youth researchers” had familiarized themselves with the cameras, audio recorders, and digital video editing software, and had begun to write and record their own autobiographical narratives.

After producing one autobiographical digital story to begin with, the youth researchers were then tasked with interviewing friends, family members, neighbors, and other community members, whom we refer to as “storytellers.” The youth researchers began by conducting an initial interview with a selected storyteller. During the interview the youth researchers would ask questions about places of importance to the storyteller, memories and feelings connected to particular places, or places that feature in their daily lives. Out of the interview a particular

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2 Participants were given free reign to choose the subjects for their stories and all involved were committed to telling stories that reflected people’s actual experiences and that were told in their authentic voice, even if this created some discomfort. That being said, the participating organizations and the research team were also committed to ensuring that these stories not enflame tensions between communities. The research team and leadership from the two organizations agreed to discuss any story that seemed to explicitly engage in or overtly endorse any form of hate speech and to prevent its public circulation if necessary.
memory or experience would emerge and a story would form. The youth researcher would then work with the storyteller to write and record a voice-over narrative version of the story told during the interview, striving to capture the storyteller’s “voice”. The youth researcher would also record atmospheric sounds from the setting of the story and would collect images to help illustrate the story, whether digital photographs, archival images, personal snapshots or documents. Finally, the youth researcher would use the recorded narrative, sound, and images to produce a digital story, which the storyteller would review. This iterative process emphasizes the collective and inter-subjective nature of storytelling. However, while the process emphasized the collective nature of storytelling, the youth researchers who participated in this project were not able to collectively regroup after their initial training. Despite initial intentions, the social and physical distance between these two groups meant there was only limited interaction between them throughout this process. The interaction that did occur was largely mediated, as the young people viewed and commented on the stories produced in each group.

As part of this project, the youth researchers aimed to interview and produce digital stories with at least two friends or peers, as well as two “elders,” that is, relatives or community members from their parents’ or grandparents’ generations. In all, however, the six youth researchers produced a total of 42 digital stories from Sarajevo and East Sarajevo. Following some technical editing for quality, as well as translation and subtitling, the stories were uploaded to an online video sharing service and embedded into an online interactive map of Sarajevo/East Sarajevo, accentuating the place-based nature of these stories and making them accessible to audiences within and outwith Bosnia and Herzegovina. The stories were also screened at an installation as part of an annual film festival in Sarajevo. The circulation and sharing of these stories both among the participants and their friends and families, as well as with wider audiences, both mediated and immediate, speaks to the potential for these stories to address and work to form multiple and potentially conflicting publics. Although the final product of this project is significant, namely the digital story-map itself and the 42 digital stories embedded therein, the process of producing these stories was equally revelatory and yielded significant insights into the fraught process of public formation in divided societies. Working closely with young people allowed us to talk with them about their experiences listening to the stories of their peers and elders. We were also able to talk with them about the words and images they used to construct their digital narratives. This enabled us to gain a sense of how young people understand and relate to these stories and what it says about their sense of belonging in the context of

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3 A look at the “hits” these videos received suggests they were shared widely, receiving thousands of views in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the US and the UK, as well as hundreds of views in dozens of other countries, including neighboring Serbia and Croatia.
division. The research team took copious participant-observer notes throughout the course of the project. These notes, as well as the stories themselves, form the basis of our analysis.

IVA Digital Storytelling and Fractured Publics:
As described above, the digital storytelling project began with a joint training of the young people from both organizations. The organization located in East Sarajevo hosted the training, as they had more space for the workshop. The location of the training immediately brought to the fore some of the fractures in this storytelling public that we were helping to form. In conversation, some of the young people who came from Sarajevo observed how they did not consider East Sarajevo to be a separate city. They were taken aback by the way that some of the participants from East Sarajevo spoke of Sarajevo as a distant, foreign place (field notes 3/6/2015). One young man from Sarajevo remarked about the lack of borders and the fluidity of movement between the two areas and how increasing numbers of young people were going to East Sarajevo on the weekend for the night clubs (field notes 3/6/2015). One of the young women from East Sarajevo, however, questioned just how frequently this cross-entity travel occurs when most people’s everyday routines are confined to their own areas.

While there is no physical barrier dividing Sarajevo from East Sarajevo, as this young woman was suggesting, and as is true of many cities, most people would not leave the comfort of their own communities unless they had a specific reason to do so. Indeed, members of both groups expressed some trepidation about traveling to the “other” (part of the) city. Even the young man who enthusiastically touted East Sarajevo’s nightlife said he would not go there without someone from the area. Although he is a non-practicing Muslim who prefers to think of himself as Bosnia-and-Herzegovinan (or even a citizen of the world) rather than a Bosniak, he feels that his Muslim name and outsider status might make him seem suspicious in the close-knit community of East Sarajevo. As such, he does not feel comfortable going there without someone from the area (field notes 3-4/6/2015). In contrast with her peers, one participant, a young woman from East Sarajevo, does regularly travel to Sarajevo for school, work and to spend time with friends she’s met there. However, this has exposed her to harassment on Facebook from some people in her community who are troubled by her spending so much time with “the enemy” (field notes 22/6/2015). The experience of this young woman brought to the surface the conflicting publics to which these young people belong and the fraught nature of digitally mediated publics that cut across national and ethnic divisions.

During the training, the research team shared examples of digital stories that young people produced as part of a similar project we conducted in Beirut, Lebanon. The stories featuring themes of co-existence, tolerance, and solidarity appealed to the group, but they found stories focusing on memories of the war to be too “depressing” (field notes 3/6/2015). On repeated occasions young people from both organizations expressed a desire to avoid talking about the
war because everyone was “sick” of talking about it (field notes 3/6/2015; 26/6/2015; 14/12/2015). However, avoiding talking about the war proved difficult in practice. In the end, almost all 42 of the stories produced in this project mention the war in some way or make reference to it as a temporal marker or turning point. Many of the stories focus specifically on events during the war and its aftermath. The question of how to narrate the war and what language to use became a major issue and a point of contention for the participating young people.

For example, one young woman from Sarajevo produced a story about a young woman’s close relationship with her uncle. During the war, the girl and her family tried to move from Grbavica, an area of Sarajevo that was occupied by Serb forces, to her uncle’s apartment in the Alipašino Polje area of Sarajevo. At one point the original story referred to population exchanges that occurred in which Serb and Bosniak residents were transferred to and from different parts of the city in order to consolidate ethnic control of particular areas. The reference to these exchanges in the video was vague and potentially confusing to people not familiar with the history, so we advised adding some historical context to the narration. Instead, the young woman decided to omit that part of the story altogether. She said that she chose to avoid these details because she wanted the focus of the story to be on the girl’s relationship with her uncle, who later passed away, rather than on the war (field notes 26/6/2015). In other words the burden of narrating the war got in the way of telling a more intimate and personal story about family.

Figure 1: A screenshot from the story about the occupation of Grbavica by the “enemy army”
This young woman and another young woman from Sarajevo also struggled with how to refer to the Serb army when talking about the war. In two of their stories, the storytellers they spoke with referred to the Serb army as “the aggressors.” Although a commonly used expression, these two law students were concerned that the Serbian authorities could actually bring charges against them, as the International Court had ruled that Serbia did not technically commit aggression. They wanted to be true to the positionality of the storyteller in co-constructing the narrative with them without upsetting the authorities, their colleagues in East Sarajevo, or a broader public of viewers. The final version used phrases like the “enemy army” or “occupation forces,” terms they considered to be more neutral and yet still representing the point of view of people from Sarajevo at the time. However, even this choice of “neutral language,” and indeed the story itself, reflects an orientation toward, or a desire to produce, a kind of inclusive “Bosnia-and-Herzegovinian” narrative of the war. One digital story in particular complicates straightforward ethno-nationally inflected narratives of Serb aggression and Bosniak victimization by telling the story of a Serb woman who lived in Sarajevo during the siege by Serbian occupation forces and lost her brother to Serbian sniper fire. Her brother, she tells us in the video, became a *shehid* (martyr) defending the nation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This story of this young man’s sacrifice for his nation becomes a way of narrating that nation into existence. Nevertheless, although the story blurs the lines between ethnic divisions by telling the story of a Serb who became a martyr for Bosnia and Herzegovina, the story also reinforces the battle lines between the nation and the enemy.

If the members of the organization in Sarajevo were especially cautious about using inclusive language appropriate for a Bosnia-and-Herzegovinian public, they took also issue with the themes, tone, and language used in stories by the participants from East Sarajevo, stories that seemed to them to be oriented more toward Serbian narratives of victimization. The participants from Sarajevo felt that, while they had avoided talking about the war and tried to use neutral language when referring to it, a majority of stories from East Sarajevo focused on the difficult experience of being uprooted during the war and having to create a new home in an unfamiliar place (field notes 14/12/2015). One young woman from Sarajevo got angry, saying that she knows Serbs also suffered and that all those who committed crimes should be brought to justice.

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4 The war in Bosnia (1992-95) was marked by widespread forced migration and deliberate strategies of ethnic cleansing, that is, the consolidation of ethnic demographic superiority and control of particular territories. During the war, some 2 million Bosnian Muslims, Croats and Serbs were displaced by the fighting, including large numbers of Muslims and Croats who were subject to forced removals and massacres by Serb forces. Following the Dayton Accords of 1996, which in some ways institutionalized the effects of ethnic cleansing by recognizing Republika Srpska as a separate entity within Bosnia, many Serbs, including some displaced by the war, chose either to leave or not return to Sarajevo and other parts of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and instead resettle in areas under Serb control within the RS, including East Sarajevo. See Committee on Foreign Relations (1992) and Dahlman and O’Tuathail (2005).
but she disagreed with the way the stories made it look as though the “main victims” of the war were Serbs. Here the focus on individual experiences to the detriment of broader context became a source of contention. Her friend agreed saying she was not sure what bothered her more, the fact that Serbs only see the war in terms of Serb suffering, or the fact that these stories could be seen by people “outside” who were unfamiliar with the situation and who might get the impression that the Serbs were victims (field notes 14/12/2015). Again, although she was willing to accept the truth of these individual stories of suffering, she was bothered that these stories of Serb victimization would be seen as the defining truth of the war.

Tension about how to narrate the war was exacerbated not only by the fact that these stories would circulate amongst an external, global public of viewers who might form opinions on the war based on these stories, but also by ongoing tensions surrounding the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre. The stories from East Sarajevo were seen as problematic not just because they presented conflicting memories of the war and incommensurable views of history, but also because, in the eyes of the participants from Sarajevo, the stories failed to conform with a particular post-war narrative. Ultimately the participants from Sarajevo felt that they were willing to put aside their own sense of victimization (to which they felt they had a greater claim) for the sake of perceived greater inclusivity, while their counterparts in East Sarajevo were unwilling to do so. This tension points to how even publics that are defined in some way by inclusivity still have rules of address that exclude particular experiences, points of views, and ways of speaking.

This issue of language not only became a problem when narrating memories of the war, but also in talking about the ethnic tensions that continue to divide Bosnia and Herzegovina in the present. Again, participants in Sarajevo were bothered by language that seemed to reify or even acknowledge the existence of ethno-nationalist divisions. The autobiographical story by the young women from East Sarajevo who spends much of her time travelling to and from Sarajevo is emblematic of the contentiousness of language in these stories and the multiple, conflicting publics to which they are addressed. In her story, the young woman refers to Sarajevo as majority Bosniak, a characterization that met with non-verbal disapproval on the faces of some of the participants from Sarajevo (field notes 23/7/2015). When viewing the story they also expressed confusion about what was so remarkable about crossing a meaningless border between entities (field notes 9/7/2015). Most of all they were offended by the constant reference to “us and them” and “here and there” in her digital story (field notes 23/7/2015). In describing the geography of her everyday routines and experiences this young woman was addressing a Serbian viewing public in order to critique dominant discourse that circulates in East Sarajevo about “the other.” And yet, much to the consternation of her colleagues in Sarajevo, in addressing this
public, the story casts doubt on the existence of a shared Bosnia-and-Herzegovinian public where there is, or should be, only one “us.”

With discussion, the participants from Sarajevo came to appreciate how their colleague from East Sarajevo used the terms “us” and “them” to characterize and critique the way that many of her friends and family view Sarajevo and the people who live there. They eventually realized that these were not her views and by challenging them through her daily travels and interactions she was potentially putting herself at risk. However there remained a general sense that the participants in Sarajevo were perhaps more judicious in their use of terminology than their colleagues from the East Sarajevo (field notes 14/12/2015). Put another way, the participants in Sarajevo saw themselves as striving for more inclusive forms of address that presupposes the presence of a multi-ethnic public, even though doing so necessarily excludes forms of public-ness that are seen as being ethno-national in nature, including Serbian views and experiences of the war.

These tensions not only highlight the ways in which forms of inclusive address necessarily draw lines of exclusion, but also how such forms of address can never be narrowly targeted and instead engage with multiple potential publics that form around particular positionalities and sensibilities. For example, although the youth organization in East Sarajevo operates in a larger field of youth organizations working on human rights promotion in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the members of the organization who participated in this project are also all close friends and
relatives who live in a tightly-knit community. In one instance, a young man participating in the project wanted to produce a story with a Catholic friend of his from a mixed Serb/Croatian ethnic background who moved to East Sarajevo following his parents’ divorce. After the move, he faced discrimination at school, where he was regularly taunted with the term *ustasha*, a derogatory reference to the Croatian fascist party that allied with Nazi Germany during World War II. However, another member of the youth organization in East Sarajevo, though not directly involved in the digital storytelling project, discouraged the pair from sharing this story, fearing it could upset local residents and expose the young man, his friend, his family, and the organization to negative backlash. She encouraged them instead to do a story about twin brothers from East Sarajevo who had become famous athletes in Serbia (field notes 19/6/2015).

The organization in East Sarajevo is not stranger to controversial issues like hate speech and nationalism, yet the personal, familial nature of these stories, and the public nature of their display, increased the sense of risk and vulnerability. Beyond the need to balance activist ideals and beliefs with the safety and security of one’s family, this situation could also be viewed as a problem of “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 1997), that is, anxiety about how a collective defines itself internally versus how it is portrayed externally to others. What is interesting here, however, is the difficulty in defining the collectivity and its outside as well as the different rules of address that seem to operate at different scales. In this project, concerns of privacy and security were paramount when considering how these stories could be viewed by proximate audiences, whereas concerns about inclusive language were apparent when considering how the stories might be viewed by an imaged national audience. The potential for external international viewing audiences placed an additional burden on the stories produced in this project, demanding an authoritative and disinterested truthfulness that seemed to conflict with the personal and quotidian nature of the stories.

V. Discussion

Digital stories vacillate between personal memory and public history. Part of their power derives from blending intimate voiceover narrative and family snapshots with archival photos and other recognizable images that belong to the public domain. They tell the story of how individual lives unfold within the broader narrative of history. In the 42 stories produced by young people in Sarajevo and East Sarajevo, many of the stories reference the same war; indeed they use the same familiar and iconic archival images to represent the war. Yet, the way the war is narrated and presented, and the “us” presumed to be remembering the war, is different.

Public discourse, Warner (2002: 422) writes, “must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate, and it must attempt to realize that world through address.” The stories by members of the Sarajevo-based youth organization presume and seek to realize a public sphere based on the language of tolerance and human rights and in which, as per Habermas ([1962]
ethnic identities are bracketed. Narrating the war in such a public context requires precise language that at once draws boundaries identifying the enemy occupier, and yet is also careful about demonizing or excluding a particular ethnic group. In order to circulate, such narratives crucially require silence, deleted images, and erased words. In producing tolerant narratives of the war that are acceptable to “everyone,” however, these stories, can also be seen as operating within and working to produce a “universal” Bosnia-and-Herzegovinian remembering public. But as the stories from East Sarajevo show, ethnic tensions and distrust place the existence of such a public in doubt. Stories from the East Sarajevo youth group, although in conversation with this tolerance-promotion public, hinted at the existence of alternate publics oriented toward particular Serbian memories and experiences and productive of Serbian social identities. The mere presence of these discourses were seen as upsetting the fragile construction of an potential, inclusive Bosnia-and-Herzegovinian public.

In a public, Warner (2002: 418) again writes, “our subjectivity is understood as having resonance with others.” Digital storytelling, as a form of public address and as a mode of public formation, involves recounting subjective experiences that might resonate with others, but that might also produce a dissonance with stories that hold true with others. The dissonance caused by counter-discourses, however, can be productive, in that they highlight the various ruptures, gaps, and contradictions within dominant discourses and thus might be the initiators of critical conversations. If a public is an “entity that embraces all the users of [a particular] text” (Warner, 2002: 414), then the digital story-map produced in this project is evidence of the multiple and conflicting texts that these stories engage and extend, and suggests the lack of any strong, unifying text. The question is whether creative digital projects like the one described in this paper could contribute in some modest way toward the construction of “more comprehensive arena[s]” enabling public discourse “across lines of cultural diversity” (Fraser, 1990: 69). This depends, in part, Fraser (1990: 69) argues, on whether the participants “share enough in the way of values, expressive norms, and therefore, protocols of persuasion.” The project presented here, admittedly very limited in scope, does suggest some degree of shared values and expressive norms, although this is complicated by membership in multiple publics that are constituted by quite different values and norms. Moreover, the ability for technological communication to overcome physical and social divisions remains doubtful. Even in the micro-public of storytelling this research briefly produced, face-to-face interactions between the two communities of participants were virtually non-existent following the initial training.

Nevertheless, digital technology has made possible new, more intimate publics and more immediate ways of making our lives and stories visible to strangers. These digital forms of address, including digital storytelling, slip easily between private and public modes of interaction, and allow for publics to form and dissolve around issues and events quickly (Sheller 2004). This
uneasy duality between publicity and privacy in the intersubjective realm has the power to bring people together but also, potentially, drive them further apart. The vulnerability that public displays of memory can produce can draw people closer, allowing them to form new ways of relating to each other, or it can send them into defensive positions and the comfort of existing modes of affiliation and identification. While there is cautious optimism about the power of digital communication, including digital stories and video sharing, to create a “shift in civics” away from traditional centers of power (Zuckerman 2013), there is equal evidence to suggest that digitally mediated publics continue to be local or national in character (Farrell 2014). Where national loyalties are divided, publics are likely to form along national lines of division. Yet there remains the possibility that creative communities of practice can produce new, shared publics in which the hard work of negotiating irreconcilable narratives is performed, however difficult and long this process might be.

References


