



HOW SOCIAL MEDIA IS SHAPING STORYTELLING

Kathryn Jezer-Morton

I love social media.

Not only is it a welcome distraction during life's many dull hours, but it's also a world-historically essential archive of our recent history. This is both a very obvious, uncontroversial position and an uncomfortable one. One of the first things I learned when I started researching social media use in 2016 was that talking about it made a lot of people uncomfortable. We use social media all the time, and we do it in public, but we'd rather not talk about what we've been doing. "Your research is so cringe," a dear friend once admitted to me. "No one wants to talk about what they do in their feeds." Which seems like a good reason to keep asking.

So I did. In 2022, I completed a doctorate in sociology, for which I researched momfluencers. Part of why I chose to do this research was that in momfluencers—women who turn their domestic lives into content, for which they are paid by corporate sponsors—I saw traces of what I had begun seeing among everyday people: a disciplinary sort of storytelling, freighted with meaning and intentionality, that was taking the place of other kinds of experiential accounting.

Steeped in momfluencer and influencer content, I found that the everyday people I followed were sounding more and more like people with brand partnerships. The lines between how brands were telling stories and how individuals were telling stories had been steadily blurring for a decade—to the point that they eventually fused entirely. Understanding how that happened, and how it might be making all of us feel, is what I set out to do in my new book, *The Story of Your Life*.

We've all heard that "social media is the highlight reel," and we all know it's true. But I've never been quite satisfied with that line. Just because it's a highlight reel doesn't mean it isn't full of meaningful information. What are the highlights trying to tell us? If we scratch at the enamel, what will we find beneath?

I have always been in awe of the power that storytelling has to shape the directions of our lives. I don't mean the gather-round-little-children kind of storytelling. I mean the everyday stories we tell about ourselves and our surroundings, the stories that accumulate and come to define our realities. These stories aren't always told deliberately. They accrete through gossip and observation and reputation, and in the last twenty years, they have coalesced in people's telling of their lives on social media, on their highlight reels.

People's ideas about themselves, and the way they express those ideas, have always seemed as significant as—if not more so than—their material circumstances. The power of storytelling is what ennobles gifters and the sad delusions of liars. It's what fuels motivation and romance and keeps grudges alive. It's how we are given identities by our parents and how, as we grow up, we negotiate new identities of our own.

The way we tell our stories is part of how culture manifests. In stories, the outlines of collective aspirations, fears, and fantasies emerge.

You probably understand my reverence for storytelling if you grew up in an intentional community, or perhaps a close-knit faith community. These are places where storytelling forms the scaffolding for reality. I was raised on a southern Vermont commune that was once called Total Loss Farm. The stories of the farm and its cast of characters were what held the place together through its fifty years (and counting) of existence. Here we had a canon of tales that were told time and again, reminding us who we were, how we were different from most other people in the community, and why we needed one another. Even after most of the communards had moved away, the stories lived on among those who remained. As a teenager, I became known around the farm's kitchen for a snide remark I made about the place's history being "the story that never dies." Even my critique was swallowed by the narrative river. Someone repeats it back to me every time I'm in that kitchen. There's no escape.

To grow up in a commune is to experience narration as an existential necessity. Without our stories, we were just a group of random people sharing a filthy living space. But thanks to the myths spun over decades, I was raised with the belief that I was born among visionaries who had the courage to approach life as an art project, while most other people settled for nine-to-five drudgery. In hindsight, and with the perspective of adulthood, I can see that there was more than a little bit about this narrative that was self-serving. But I don't begrudge the old commune its stories and delusions; when I grew up and moved away, I realized that all families, not just chosen communal ones, share this practice.

The way we tell our stories is part of how culture manifests. In stories, the outlines of collective aspirations, fears, and fantasies emerge. The commune taught me that how we tell the stories of our lives is a choice. There are infinite narrative frames to choose from.

Yet even as storytelling offers us myriad possible frames for thinking about ourselves, the stories we choose and the way we choose to tell them can also narrow the frame around what we consider desirable, acceptable, and even possible. Once a narrative takes hold, it can draw the very boundaries of your life—he’s the joker, she’s the good girl, all Johnstons play sports, “that’s not the way we do things around here.”

The first form of social media I ever used was a spiral-bound notebook kept on the big cluttered coffee table in the commune’s living room. It was a group journal, open to anyone who happened to be sitting idle on the couch. Starting in fifth grade, I became an enthusiastic contributor, complaining about school and crowing victoriously about snow days and birthday parties. I would test out new slang to see what people thought. I would also comment in the margins of other people’s notes, and they would comment in mine. Little threads sometimes went on for months like this. In a lot of ways, it was an analog Facebook, but with the bonus of revealing what everyone’s handwriting looked like.

So it was with great pleasure—*glee* might be the truer word—that I greeted social media in 2003, when I first encountered it in college, in the form of Friendster. This was stuff I’d already been doing for years: creating a persona in writing for my friends to enjoy. Early social media was gamified “personal branding,” a term that had been coined only about five years before. These new tools taught people how to begin telling their own stories publicly.

Friendster’s basic self-branding features were training wheels for what would come to replace it for the general public in 2006: Facebook. What was fun about Friendster, MySpace, and early Facebook was the emphasis on tending the garden of one’s profile. It was here that many millennials learned to start mediating the stories of their lives.

With the early Facebook newsfeed, you'd receive notifications if your friends had updated their profiles: "Kathryn has added a new hobby." Personal branding was the entire activity.

When Facebook launched its algorithmic newsfeed, the rules of our personal-branding storytelling game changed, and there was no turning back. The stories of our lives were being sorted based on criteria that had nothing to do with us. But we persevered with the telling, adapting to the arrival of likes and the emerging rules for maintaining visibility. Our stories adapted to new tools as they were rolled out.

Whether we prefer to admit it or not, social media is where our history lives now, and the platforms have shaped how that history is told. Of course, the impact of storytelling on us humans and our identities pre-dates the age of Facebook and Instagram. Thousands of years ago, we told our stories through epic poems, which were memorized. Today, our attention spans are short, and our stories reflect that, as do the types of events that we consider worth sharing and the aspects of our lives that we think hold lesser importance. As we've racked up our years on social media, we've started, without necessarily realizing it, to allow these online forums to shape the ways we talk about ourselves, our relationships, and our communities.

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I began to really notice the change around 2013, when people I knew increasingly referred to themselves as though they, their partners, and their kids were public figures or perhaps the owners of small companies. There were ups and downs in the stories I saw people telling, but the trajectory I observed most frequently was an upward one. Growth, expansion, improvement, overcoming. Vacations as burnishments to the image. Illnesses as stress tests, ways of ultimately proving fitness.

The profile-building games of the early years had given way to an era in which the logic of personal branding was simply how we talked about ourselves publicly. Progress, stability, the lure of the new and shiny—these are the narrative tropes of consumer capitalism, the way brands seek to inspire confidence and loyalty among their shareholders. I began to wonder if sharing our stories on social media was becoming a bit like communicating to our shareholders. “You can believe in us.”

To test my theory and learn more, I spoke with people about their relationships to digital storytelling. I sat at kitchen islands, in strip-mall Starbucks stores, in the passenger seats of minivans, and on the sidelines of kids’ soccer games, and I listened as my interview subjects sorted out their feelings about how social sharing has shaped their ideas about joy, belonging, and identity.

I should explain how I went about gathering data. On the internet, we are all, to a certain degree, amateur anthropologists; we’re observing one another’s behavior over sometimes long periods of time and developing theories based on the content we see posted. But I knew that to break out of my own preconceptions and biases, I needed to talk with strangers, face-to-face, about their posting habits and their intimate relationships to social media. I wanted to know what went through their heads as they scrolled.

When I first began my research, I connected with people through my existing networks—people who were familiar with the writing I had done on momfluencers while earning my doctorate. These early exploratory conversations were fun, but I suspected that the people who already read my writing shared a lot of cultural common ground with me. They were people who thought critically about social media in much the same way I did, so their observations were very similar to mine. It quickly became clear that I had to step outside my social media silos and find some bona fide strangers to talk to.

Leaving my bubble was going to be crucial. I booked flights to cities where I had acquaintances or family members whom I hadn't seen in years, and whose lives I knew very little about. These people—bless them—helped me get started by introducing me to their communities. Once my flights were booked, I joined local Meetup and Facebook groups made up of young professionals and moms to see if anyone would let me buy them a coffee in exchange for an intimate conversation about their relationship to social media. After an awkward start, I got the hang of it. With only one exception, the people I ended up speaking to were ordinary social media users who each had maybe a few hundred followers. I wound up talking to many strangers in all kinds of contexts. I met people in person wherever they were, so as not to disrupt their days. Usually, we'd talk for about an hour, but our conversations often ran longer. Many times, my interviewees wrote to me after we met, having thought of more things they wanted to share. These tended to be conversations that stuck in people's heads. More than once, subjects remarked that they had never discussed their social media habits before, and that the act of talking it out had given them an opportunity to reflect on habits and reactions they'd never really considered.

It's strange to think that something we spend so much time with, and that has such a powerful effect on our impressions of others, is also something we do largely without thinking. **The way we tell the stories of our lives has been completely transformed by our use of social media over the past two decades. How, exactly, have our stories changed? And how might we remake them yet again into something new and different?** 📖

Adapted from *The Story of Your Life: How Social Media Shapes the Way We Experience Everything* by Kathryn Jezer-Morton, published by [Viking](#). Copyright © 2026 by Kathryn Jezer-Morton. All rights reserved.



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