Narrative Railroading

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Abstract

The narratives we have about ourselves are important for our sense of who we are. However, our narratives are influenced, even manipulated, by the people and environments we interact with, impacting our self-understanding. This can lead to narratives that are limited, even harmful. In this paper, I explore how our narrative agency is constrained, to greater and lesser degrees, through a process I call 'narrative railroading'. Bringing together work on narratives and 4E cognition, I specifically explore how using features of our socio-material environments to support and construct our narratives does not simply offer up possibilities for creating more reliable and accurate self-narratives (Heersmink 2020) but can lead to increasingly tight narrative railroading. To illustrate this idea, I analyse how digital technologies do not neutrally distribute our narratives but dynamically shape and mould narrative agency in ways that can restrict our self-understanding, with potentially harmful consequences. As such, I argue that we need to recognise that digital devices not only support narratives but work as powerful narrative devices, shaping and propagating the kinds of narratives that we self-ascribe and act in accordance with.

Keywords Narratives · Narrative agency · Narrative railroading · Digital technology · 4E cognition · Distributed cognition

1 Introduction

Being someone who was born in Greenwich, moved to Copenhagen, lives in Cardiff, who was an unhappy lawyer but is now a largely happy academic, has recently become a proud aunt, who (sometimes) loves to write, who hates being late, is a worrier, a recovering 'Good Girl', who is striving to be a better friend and a professor, these are all part of the story of who I am. Narratives help us think about our past and our future, about what we want, and how things could have gone differently. They help create a sense of us as a being who persists over time, help us understand ourselves, while also influencing our current and future plans and emotions, shaping our practical identity and agency (Atkins & MacKenzie 2013; Cheng 2024). As Peter Goldie (2012, 1) puts it: "narrative has a very important role in our lives".

Recent work has explored how our socio-material environments and our interactions with them shape and scaffold the narratives we have about ourselves (e.g., Bortolan 2024; Byrne 2024; Fabry 2023a, b; Gallagher 2006; Heersmink 2017, 2018, 2020; Hutto 2012; Gallagher and Hutto 2008; Menary 2008). Richard Heersmink (2017, 2018, 2020) has argued that our narratives about who we are, and, in particular, the memories that support these narratives, are distributed across other people and artefacts. In doing so, Heersmink (2020, 5) has claimed that distributing our autobiographical memories allows us "to remember our personal past in a more reliable and detailed manner" than without such aids.

My interest is in how using our socio-material environment to distribute our narratives makes us vulnerable to what I call 'narrative railroading'. The term 'railroading' might be familiar to gamers. When a gaming platform or a game master restricts the player's control over the narrative of the game and their character, the player is being railroaded. Railroading forces the player down a predetermined narrative pathway by constraining the choices and actions that the player can make. The player is put on a narrative train track that they must progress down and have little to no

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option to deviate from. Think, for instance, of your classic side-scrolling platform games such as Sonic the Hedgehog or Dead Cells, where you (predominantly) run from the left hand of the screen to the right, tackling obstacles and enemies on your way. We can contrast this to 'sandbox' games (e.g., Grand Theft Auto, Baldur's Gate 3), where players have significantly more agency in deciding where they want to go in the game, what actions they want to take, and even altering the story arc of the whole game. More colloquially, we talk about people railroading a conversation when they force the discussion down a particular avenue or someone being railroaded into undertaking a certain action.

On my account, narrative railroading involves a constraining of an individual's narrative agency, leading them down particular narrative pathways. Tight narrative railroading is characterised by an overdetermination of the way in which the narrative is constructed by limiting the available options for shaping one's (self-)narrative. Given that narratives do not just describe our pasts but shape our practical identity and agency, narrative railroading can significantly impact an agent's sense of self and way of being in the world. This can result in narratives that are epistemically impoverished, inaccurate, and even harmful to an individual's own self-perception and understanding.

While I outline a variety of ways that narrative railroading occurs, my main focus is on how distributing our narratives onto the external world – both people and artefacts – constrains our narrative agency.[1] Perhaps not surprisingly, when we distribute the process of constructing a narrative onto others they influence our narratives (whether intentionally or not). Perhaps less obviously, relying on artefacts to distribute our narratives also leads to our self-narratives being constrained. I explore how digital technologies, rather than being neutral repositories for our self-narratives, actively shape the narratives we form about ourselves. Recognising that digital devices can act as powerful narrative devices helps reveal some potential harms that follow from digitally-driven narrative railroading. My account, therefore, contributes to the growing literature exploring how we can be manipulated or harmed as cognitive and affective subjects via distributed and scaffolded cognition and affectivity (e.g., Andrada 2024; Coninx 2023; de Carvalho and Krueger 2023; Jefferson et al. 2024; Kukla 2021; Osler 2024; Osler et al. 2024; Slaby 2016; Spurrett 2024; Sutton 2024; Timms and Spurrett 2023; Tribble 2011).

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[1] This paper primarily engages with discussions of distributed narrative found in the work of Richard Heersmink and Regina Fabry. However, both these authors have also described narratives as being 'scaffolded'. For consistency I have framed my discussion of narrative railroading in the context of distributed cognition. However, I think that narrative railroading can also be understood through the lens of a scaffolding framework. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer who encouraged me to clarify this.

In Sect. 2, I introduce Peter Goldie's account of narratives and the process of creating self-narratives through the exercise of our narrative agency. In Sect. 3, I highlight how our narratives are situated in the world around us and introduce the idea that our narratives can be distributed across our socio-material environments. Here, I offer an enriched version of Richard Heersmink's work on distributed self-narratives. In Sect. 4, I introduce the concept of narrative railroading before turning, in Sect. 5, to the specific case of how increased reliance on digital technologies for storing, constructing, and supporting our self-narratives makes us vulnerable to narrative railroading. I will outline some harms that potentially flow from this digitally-driven narrative railroading in Sect. 6. In the conclusion, I emphasise that while my focus has been on how *self*-narratives are constrained and nudged down certain paths, I do not intend to suggest that these are the only narratives subject to railroading. Quite the contrary, our narratives about the world and others are also subject to being railroaded, and I close by pointing to some paths for further expanding and exploring the concept of narrative railroading.

2 Narratives

There are many accounts of narratives and much debate about the relationship between narrative and the self. Here, I lean upon Peter Goldie's work on narratives. I do so for three reasons. First, Goldie's account of narratives is one of the most well-known and detailed. Second, he outlines the narrative process of emplotment, which I find useful for thinking through how our narrative practices and agency can be dynamically distributed onto the socio-material world. And, third, because Goldie's account remains metaphysically neutral on whether there is any such *thing* as a narrative self, instead attending to what he describes as the narrative *sense* of self. In doing so, Goldie presents an account of narrative that is widely compatible with an array of theories of self and personal identity (Goldie 2012; Chap. 6). I take it, however, that while I am drawn to Goldie's account, you could adopt other accounts of narratives (e.g., Kind 2015; Mackenzie 2009) and still agree with the idea that our self-narratives can be distributed onto the world, as well as the concept of narrative railroading. So if you are not keen on Goldie's account, feel free to substitute it for your preferred account and see where it takes you.

Goldie (2012, 2) describes a narrative as follows:

> It is more than just a bare annal or chronicle or list of a sequence of events, but a representation of those events which is shaped, organized, and coloured, presenting those events, and the people involved in them,

from a certain perspective or perspectives, and thereby giving narrative structure—coherence, meaningfulness, and evaluative and emotional import—to what is related.

We narrate things that happen in the world (climate crisis is making the UK depressingly wet this summer) and other people (Kamala is fighting for a promotion). We also tell self-narratives, where the narrator and the narrated I are one and the same person (I enthusiastically started weightlifting after seeing Love Lies Bleeding). For the purposes of this paper, I am primarily concerned with self-narratives.

Goldie (2012, 3) states that we create narratives (whether or not for the first time) through the process of *emplotment*. Emplotment involves taking 'raw material', e.g., events, actions, thoughts, feelings, people, and objects, and: (i) selecting the material, (ii) organising and connecting the material (often in temporal order), and (iii) colouring the material with emotional and evaluative import. Emplotment, then, is something that we *do* through the exercise of our narrative agency: "it is not like the process of the ripening of a tomato in the sun—something that cannot happen without human involvement" (Goldie 2012, p. 10). Emplotment is part of our sense-making abilities and is shaped by the narrator's own character, interests, values, and habits. Hence two people can come up with different narratives about the same event. I might tell you that I worked from home this morning because it was raining outside and my skylark coffee and cosy loungewear called to me. My mum might tell a different story: Lucy worked from home today because she was anxious about getting started with overdue work and used the rain as an excuse to not get dressed and procrastinate by drinking copious amounts of caffeine. Through emplotment we create a narrative that is (to greater or lesser degrees) coherent, meaningful, and has emotional and evaluative import.

A key way that we use self-narratives is to represent past events or experiences. Narratives about our pasts might involve drawing on our experiential, episodic memories (i.e., memories that we have experientially lived through), as well as upon semantic memories (i.e., facts about ourselves). We can have self-narratives that are about specific events or experiences. We also tell broader narratives that represent and integrate important life-events into an overarching and unfolding narrative structure about who we are. Note, though, that this does not mean we necessarily have one unified self-narrative, rather we often have overlapping narratives about different aspects of ourselves (Velleman 2005; Cheng 2024).

Self-narratives play an important role in our self-conceptions and self-characterisations (Dennett 1993; Goldie 2012; Menary 2008; Mackenzie 2009; Schechtman 2007).

Narrating my work habits can give rise to my conception of myself as someone who works in intense bursts; underlying my conception of myself as a worrier is a host of narratives about times I have been unduly anxious and stories about coming from a family of worriers. As we often act in line with our conceptions of who we are, narratives are important for shaping our on-going actions, projects, and commitments. Conceiving of myself as a worrier might lead to me avoiding certain kinds of situations or, conversely, committing myself to taking on things I find daunting because I want to be braver. Our narratives, therefore, arise out of our lived experiences but they also shape the kinds of experiences we pursue and what we find meaningful. And how we narrate ourselves matters both in terms of how we understand our past and in how it impacts our agency and actions in the present and future.

3 Situated and Distributed Narratives

3.1 Situated Narratives

Our narratives do not arise in a vacuum, they are socio-culturally situated. We inherit frameworks for understanding what is relevant for a narrative, what makes certain facts salient, what arcs narratives have, what gives them explanatory force, etc. As Regina Fabry (2023a, 1267) has emphasised: "self-narrative structures often depend on narrative templates and normatively constrained narrative practices that are prevalent in a certain socio-cultural community". In a similar vein, Tad Zawidzki highlights that our self-conceptions are picked from a "palette of narratives" (Zawidzki 2013, p. 60) available to us. Characterising oneself as, e.g., an academic, a goth, a maximalist, a minimalist, a Good Girl, depends on broader social conceptions of these characters with particular properties and dispositions attached to them. This palette shapes how we interpret and narrate our past actions, as well as how we act in accordance with those narratives. As Michelle Maiese and Robert Hanna (2019, 60) note: "To be a "good student", a "successful account executive", or a "responsible citizen", there are a range of attitudes and behaviours that one is expected to display" and those living in accordance with those narratives tend to acquire "a particular style of engaging" with the world.

The enculturation of our narrative practices and narrative products are, in part, taught through language, cultural artefacts, social imitation, and interaction. Seeing and hearing certain narratives in books, movies, and the media, labelling particular social roles, character traits, and identities, hearing others narrate, all help us learn the narrative patterns of

our own cultures.[2] Proponents of narrative practice theories (e.g., Hutto 2008; Gallagher and Hutto 2008) and mind-shaping theories (e.g., Zawidzki 2013), have emphasised the payoff of these socially situated narratives. For they help us identify patterns of behaviour through the lens of these narratives, helping us to make sense of ourselves and others and to produce comprehensible and communicable narratives.

3.2 Distributed Narratives

In 4E approaches to cognition and affectivity, there has been growing interest in the ways that cognition and affectivity does not simply take place 'in the head' of an agent but is supported, scaffolded, distributed across, or even extended by an agent's environment (e.g., Clark & Chalmers 1998; Colombetti and Roberts 2015; Colombetti & Krueger 2015; Heersmink 2015; Piredda 2020; Menary 2008; Tribble 2011; Sterelny 2010). For example, organisms adapt their environment to support not just physical needs but also cognitive abilities, like ants using scent trails or humans using notepads. Here aspects of the environment are used to complement our own biological abilities, overcoming potential limitations we have for information storage and processing capabilities. Whether our cognition or affectivity is distributed onto the environment is typically conceived as something that occurs in degree. There are a variety of components that affect how integrated an individual is with the environmental resource, including accessibility, reliability, trust, individuation, and entrenchment (Heersmink 2015).

Heersmink (2017, 2018, 2020) has proposed that an individual's self-narratives can be distributed across their socio-material environment. He argues that autobiographical memories are key "building blocks" for our self-narratives and that many of our autobiographical memories, both episodic and semantic, are distributed across our environments. Heersmink describes how, in cases of transactive memories, two or more agents remember a past event together, adding and refining the details of the memory in a way that enriches what is remembered beyond what any one individual could recall alone. Here, the memory is distributed across the agents, not just held in the head of one of them. He also points to the way that we use artefacts, especially what he describes as evocative objects, to scaffold our autobiographical memories. Think, for instance, of how we use photographs to capture and store memories, how we buy souvenirs to help prompt memories of a past holiday. Interacting with these objects, prompts us to remember these past events, preserving these memories as part of our self-narratives. In such cases, "information in the brain and in the

object is integrated as to construct a personal memory, suggesting that both the vehicles and processes of remembering our personal past are distributed, in that way constituting a new systemic whole" (Heersmink 2020, p. 4). Sometimes our reliance on other people or evocative objects is so significant that without them we might fail to remember those events at all.

Heersmink (2020, 5) draws attention to the way that new technologies, such as self-tracking or lifelogging applications, are "particularly powerful autobiographical memory technologies". Such technologies allow us to create detailed repositories of our bodily functions, habits, and activities, and such information is easily available on our digital devices. Notably, he suggests that "distributing our autobiographical memories allows us to remember our personal past in a way that is quite different from remembering our past without the aid of objects, allowing us to remember our personal past in a more reliable and detailed manner" (Heersmink 2020, p. 4). Thus, using the environment to distribute our self-narratives not only helps us retain access to important features of our autobiographical past but also may help us ground our self-narratives in memories that are more trustworthy.

We can expand upon Heersmink's account by pointing to the way that we not only use the environment to represent the *memories* that our self-narratives are composed of, but can more actively distribute the *emplotment* of our self-narratives. Fabry (2023a) points to the way that in everyday conversational exchanges, our self-narratives are often co-constructed by others. Others do not just help us remember what has happened in our pasts, when we are sharing our narratives with others this can influence the shape our narratives come to take: "The emerging self-narrative is causally influenced by the communicative actions of the interlocutor(s), who make(s) linguistic contributions (e.g., questions, requests for elaboration, cues) and paralinguistic contributions (e.g., gestures, gaze, posture)" (Fabry 2023a, 1267; also see Gyollai 2024). Expressions of (dis)approval and (dis)interest shape how the narrative unfolds. This can happen even more robustly when our co-interlocutor actively contributes to the emplotment itself, for example, by suggesting ways of connecting meaningful events across the course of one's life together. Think of the way a therapist helps us draw new connections and meaningful associations across our past experiences, impacting what events we take to be salient and the emotional or evaluative import we attach to them.

Artefacts can also be used in the process of emploting narratives. Taking a photograph already works as a selection process of what is meaningful, capturing the moment from the perspective of the photographer. The arrangement of artefacts can also work to link events and experiences in a

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[2] For further discussion of enculturation see Fabry 2018 and Menary and Gillett 2022.

narrative structure. A photo wall can depict our life-journey, showcasing key moments and relationships, and spinning a tale of where we've come from, what our interests are, and where we are going. In displaying certain objects over others, we do not just distribute the memory they relate to but its *meaning* in our self-narratives, imbuing the memory with a certain emotional and evaluative import. Prominently displaying a PhD certificate does not merely help you remember that you have a PhD, it scaffolds its significance in our self-narrative, solidifying our identity as an accomplished scholar. As we change, we may rearrange or remove objects to align our surroundings with our current self-understanding. I might, for instance, put objects that remind me of a past relationship in a shoebox under the bed as a way of making these personal memories less salient in my self-narrative about who I am. This dynamic interplay between our spaces and self-narratives highlights how we actively use artefacts to construct and maintain our ongoing life stories. Indeed, we might think of this as a literal interpretation of what people mean when they say they want a room that 'reflects who they are' – it's not just about aesthetics, but about constructing a narrative environment that dynamically supports their self-perception.

We also use objects to support our current and aspirational self-narratives. Putting on a power suit not only regulates my mood, making me feel more confident and authoritative, it distributes my narrative about who I am and who I want to be. When I go to South California, donning my sweats and a surf-shop sleeveless tee enables me to settle into a narrative about belonging. We frequently use the world around us to help bring our narratives together, to make certain facets of ourselves more salient, to allow us to live out of narratives. And when we want to affect changes in our narratives, we often buy into the narrative. If I've decided I want to be a gym-bro, I might first buy new trainers, Nike socks, a fancy sports bra, the vegan protein-powder. Even before I've gone to the gym, I have the paraphernalia of the kind of person who is a gym-bro and having the items helps scaffold me going to the gym and, thus, engaging in the kind of activity that brings this self-narrative to fruition.

4 Narrative Railroading

There has been a tendency in distributed accounts of cognition and affectivity to think of the environment as something that can be manipulated by a user for their own benefit, contributing to a prevailing "harmony bias" (Aagard 2021, also see: Slaby 2016; Maiese and Hanna 2019). However, there is a burgeoning interest in the way that our environments can undermine our flourishing or well-being. For instance, the construction of environments for managing chronic pain

that in the long-term might be damaging (Coninx 2023), educational environments that do not support autistic children or those with Down's Syndrome (de Carvalho and Krueger 2023), spaces that scaffold substance addiction (Glackin et al. 2021; Lavallee & Osler 2024), the use of architecture to discourage the presence of certain groups in public space (Krueger 2023; Osler et al. 2024), and how social media platforms negatively shape our affective evaluation of ourselves and others (Tanesini 2022; Osler 2023, 2024). Sometimes harm arises without explicit intention, as an accidental side effect or through a lack of attention towards certain peoples and their needs. However, sometimes environments are deliberately designed to manipulate agents in favour of the person in control of those niches, such as when casinos create spaces that promote and sustain addictive activities (Timms and Spurrett 2023). Such research has emphasised the politics of our scaffolds and space, including how they might be more than just individually harmful but can be part of wider systemic injustice and oppression. Slaby (2016) describes this as a form of 'mind invasion'. Elsewhere, this has been described as mind-shaping (e.g., Maiese and Hanna 2019; Osler forthcoming; Walter and Stephan 2023; Valentini 2022).

Fabry's recent paper 'Narrative Gaslighting' has pointed to the harmony bias in distributed accounts of memory and narrative practices. Pulling together insights from distributed narratives and gaslighting, she presents an excellent account of how an individual's self-narratives can be vulnerable to manipulation when they are distributed across a conversational exchange with another. Expounding on the case of co-constituted narratives, Fabry describes how an interlocutor can undermine an agent's confidence in their ability to produce reliable self-narratives. This can happen in a variety of ways, including where the interlocutor questions the narrator's recollection of events, challenges a narrator's interpretation of events, or their ability to use an concept appropriately in relation to their experience. Fabry (2024a) depicts narrative gaslighting as a form of malicious interference in an agent's self-narrativizing that leads to the agent doubting their self-narratives. What Fabry's account importantly captures is not only how gaslighting can lead one to question one's own epistemic abilities, but can destabilise an agent's confidence in being able to make sense of their own actions and who they are.[3]

I want to expand our understanding of how narrative agency is influenced by external factors by introducing the notion of 'narrative railroading'. Narrative railroading occurs when an individual's narrative agency is constrained, leading them down particular narrative pathways.

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[3] See Eleanor Byrne's recent paper on "narrative deference" for an analysis of individuals being significantly narratively dependent on another (Byrne 2024).

It is characterised by a narrowing of options for constructing one's self-narrative, making certain narrative constructions more likely than others. When narrative railroading is particularly tight, it is marked by an overdetermination of the way in which the narrative is constructed by limiting the available options for shaping one's (self-)narrative or making certain narrative options overly salient. Given the importance of self-narratives for our self-perception, identity, and agency, narrative railroading can have a significant impact on a narrator's sense of self and their future actions.[4]

Narrative railroading can result from deliberate action and intention – a narrative agent might be railroaded into forming a self-narrative by a railroader. This manipulation might be undertaken to promote the formation of a narrative that benefits the railroader in some way. However, as I explore below, it does not have to arise out of intentional manipulation, nor involve a clear beneficiary. Narrative railroading can also occur through systemic means.

Narrative railroading is something that happens by degree. Our narrative agency can be impeded in ways that nudge us towards certain narratives or more forcefully restrict our ability to construct alternative narratives. The more tightly a narrator's agency is constrained, the higher the degree of narrative railroading they are subject to. Narrative railroading should not be contrasted with absolute narrative freedom, per se. As discussed above, our narratives are always situated in the culture in which we reside, and thus our narrative agency is always subject to and shaped by external influences. In a thin sense, then, all narratives are subject to some degree of narrative railroading. Given that few would disagree that our narratives are situated, what, then, is the pay-off of the concept? What I take the framework of narrative railroading to bring into view are the ways in which overbearing constraints can be placed on our narrative abilities that limit the construction of our self-narratives and self-understanding, as well as helping identify potential harms that follow from these constraints. My interest, then, is in exploring how individuals might become subject to increasingly tight forms of narrative railroading.

The enculturation of narrative opens up avenues for exploring certain kinds of narrative railroading. Inherited narrative templates, for example, can perpetuate stereotypes that significantly limit our understanding and interpretation of our own experiences. For instance, the 'madonna/whore' dichotomy constrains women's narratives about their sexual activity by limiting the palette of narratives from which

to choose to two mutually exclusive options (Frye 1998). Hermeneutical injustices likewise hinder a person's narration of their experiences. The lack of conceptual resources can make certain events difficult to structure into a coherent and meaningful way, even working to potentially obscure the significance of particular events. For example, societal myths about what constitutes rapes can shape how a victim narrates what happens to them, even influencing whether someone labels sexual abuse they have suffered as rape or not (Jenkins 2017; Yap 2017). And testimonial injustices can work to suppress marginalised narratives, preventing them from being taken up as narrative templates and norms that circulate in (various parts of) society (Collins 2022; Fricker 2007). These examples illustrate how societal forces can constrain certain individuals' narrative agency in disproportionately restrictive ways. Note that in these instances there is not necessarily a person intentionally railroading the narrative of another, rather the narrative norms themselves significantly constrain an agent's self-narration and contribute to overarching structural oppression. Indeed, often this railroading becomes internalised by individuals as they self-narrate in line with these normative stereotypes and templates.

There is much to be said about how enculturation, oppression, and narratives intersect and I recommend turning again to Fabry's work for her recent analysis of this (Fabry 2024b). Here, however, I want to turn our focus to the way in which distributing our narratives onto other people and artefacts can result in narrative railroading by influencing how we emplot our narratives. Let us start by looking at how distributing our narrative across other people in everyday conversation can lead to increasingly restrictive forms of narrative railroading.

First, interacting with another person influences what autobiographical material is remembered and selected as narratively salient. This can occur either by highlighting certain events or by obscuring others. For instance, when reminiscing about family history, repeatedly relating examples of a sibling's temper tantrums, rather than mentioning instances of their kindness. Second, the organisation of the events can be influenced, for instance by suggesting a particular temporal or causal relationship. For example, if one links a sibling's temper tantrums with a parent being anxious and stressed, an emotional and causal connection between the events is implied. Indeed, think of how the narrative arc shifts if the connection were made in the other direction (anxiety then temper tantrums), changing the sibling's likely interpretation of themselves. Finally, making a sibling feel ashamed about their outbursts as a child can colour how that sibling evaluates and characterises themselves. Each one of these constraints can incline the narrator towards a narrative about them being a 'problem child', with the more

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[4] For a related concept that highlights ways that others can constrain an individual's sense of self, see Edlich & Archer's fantastic work on 'tightlacing' (Edlich and Archer 2023). Their concept picks out a form of psychological oppression where the tightlacer induces a mistaken self-conception in another with the aim of suppressing a particular behaviour. I take it that tightlacing could be a form of narrative railroading. Also see Edlich and Archer (2024) on rejecting identities.

interference at each of these stages more strongly steering the narrator in that narrative direction. This illustrates how co-constituting a self-narrative with another can lead to a narrator's agency being constrained across multiple dimensions, narrowing the narrative landscape, so to speak, and leading the narrator to more likely form certain self-narratives over others.

Narrative railroading can occur in more or less subtle ways. It may involve eliminating various narrative options. Fabry's (2024a) description of narrative gaslighting is such a case. Undermining a narrator's confidence in their recollection and/or interpretation of events, can lead them to omit the contested material from their self-narrative. However, as seen in the above example, narrative railroading can occur when the railroader actively introduces alternative recollections or interpretations of what has happened, more forcibly guiding the agent down a particular narrative path. Note that someone who has experienced narrative gaslighting might be more susceptible to active railroading; having already lost trust in their own narrating abilities, they might be more likely to put trust in and incorporate the narrative prompts of the other. However, a narrator can be pushed towards a certain narrative without losing trust in their own narrative competency. In the sibling case above, there is no need for the railroaded sibling to feel that their sibling's contributions are undermining their own; they might not have a clear memory, be uncertain about what happened, or experience this as confirming what they already feared. Indeed, as we explore below, certain forms of narrative railroading are very seductive and in fact bolster certain self-narratives and self-conceptions leading to a trust and confidence in the narratives an individual is encouraged to adopt and identify with. Relatedly, the railroading sibling might not have malicious intent to undermine their sibling's narrative confidence or agency – they might think these stories funny. So, while narrative gaslighting involves narrative railroading, narrative railroading need not involve narrative gaslighting.

It is important to note that narrative railroading does not have to lead to the agent taking up, adopting, or identifying with the narrative. There are a number of factors that might make someone more likely to resist narrative railroading. For instance, if the narrator does not trust the person or where the narrative is in tension with other self-narratives and conceptions that the person has. Contextual factors, then, will play an important role in the efficacy of the narrative railroading and the extent to which a narrator's agency is actually constrained.[5]

In some ways, it seems obvious that when we distribute our narratives onto other people, we hand them some control over the narrative process in ways that constrain our own narrative agency. But what about when our narratives are distributed across artefacts? How might these limit and shape the emplotment process? In the following section, I explore how distributing one's narratives across digital technologies can constrain a user's narrative agency in ways that lead to increasingly tight narrative railroading.

5 Narrative Devices

Nowadays most of us carry around digital devices that record, measure, and remind us of the minutiae of our lives. Our phones store our photos, social media profiles, and calendars; self-tracking apps and devices create a dashboard of information about our bodies, our habits, and ourselves. We use digital technology, particularly apps and social media platforms, as places where our self-narratives unfold; using them to construct, record, and share memories and narratives about ourselves (Bortolan 2024; Heersmink 2017, 2018, 2020).

With digital technology, we seemingly have access to an increasingly personalised and specific log of who we are, one that is safeguarded from the ravages of old age and protected from damage. However, digital technologies are more than neutral repositories of our self-narratives. They create, shape, even alter our self-narratives. Below, I explore how digital technologies can function as narrative devices, constructing and shaping our self-understanding in ways that constrain our narrative agency.

5.1 Self-Tracking Devices

We can use self-tracking devices to monitor our step count, our weight, our calorie in-take, our moods, our concentration, our work outputs, how much water we have drunk, the number of minutes we have spent on our phones, our views and likes, our citation rates, what we have read, watched, and listened to, and more. Examples of wearable devices include: Fitbits, the Apple Watch, and the Oura Ring. Examples of self-tracking apps include: Apple Fitness, Google Scholar, Clockify, Clue, Goodreads, and MyFitnessPal. Some self-tracking applications work automatically. Think of how an iPhone tracks and stores one's step count, filling up your rings throughout the day. Others require direct input from the user. Using a period tracker involves the user recording what days their period occurs, as well as inputting whether one's flow is light, medium, or heavy. Such

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[5] For discussions of relational remembering and explorations of how some memories are taken up by individuals as part of their narrative, see Campbell 2003, 2008. Thank you to John Sutton for pointing out this interesting link. Koggel (2014) also extends Campbell's work on relational remembering, showing how this links to oppressive

practices, which I think could be useful for further developing an account of oppressive narrative railroading.

trackers might also offer the option for a user to record their mood, their mucus consistency, pain levels, and other bodily symptoms throughout one's cycle. It has become common for certain self-tracking applications (e.g., fitness trackers and phone usage trackers) to come preloaded onto our electronic devices. Many of these devices and applications send us notifications throughout the day either letting us know where we are, e.g., 200 more steps to go, or prompting us to log our activities and feelings.

Self-tracking devices are not simply repositories for autobiographical memory. Often these applications create new data about ourselves that previously we did not have. My sleep cycle was not something I had access to before I used a Fitbit, and although I could in theory count my steps without it, it would be an extremely onerous task. Such apps seem to be particularly good at helping us identify patterns of behaviour and action that can be difficult to get a handle on without the use of these tools.[6] As Smart et al. (2017, 268) put it:

> One of the implications of the quantified self is that it provides a greater degree of awareness regarding one's bodily states and processes. Self-tracking technologies are thus sometimes seen as a means of creating a digital dashboard for the biological body, enabling individuals to tap into a wealth of previously inaccessible data.

By generating and storing new information about ourselves these devices provide new building blocks from which we can create our self-narratives. For example, a heart rate monitor might lead us to conceive of ourselves as an anxious person, a mood tracker might lead us to think of ourselves as someone prone to mood swings, our google citation rate may lead us to think of ourselves as a (un)productive person, our 'X (formerly Twitter)' likes may lead us to think of ourselves as (un)popular.

These data-driven narratives can be empowering. They can give us a sense of insight and clarity about our habits. Nguyen (2021a, b) has argued that they are seductive precisely because they offer us such a clear picture of ourselves. Using them can bolster epistemic confidence, secure in the knowledge that our narratives are supported by a bedrock of scientific data. Indeed, the Quantified Self movement specifically advocates for the use of self-tracking applications in order to generate more accurate and reliable self-knowledge, their mantra being: "self-knowledge through numbers".[7] By broadening the amount of information we have about ourselves from which we can construct our self-narratives, we might even suppose that these devices help expand our narrative agency.

What this picture does not capture is how self-tracking applications do more than just track and deliver raw material that can form the basis of a self-narrative. Self-tracking devices do not merely create data about us, they select what data we are provided with. The data deemed salient for tracking comes in-built into the device. When I use a fitness app it records the number of steps I (approximately) take in a day. A mood tracker records the valence of my emotions throughout the day. A health application tracks the number of calories I have consumed. The devices, therefore, set the parameters for selecting the relevant material. These parameters are often determined by practical considerations, such as what can be quantified, what is easy to track, and what a user can readily input. By relying on these devices, we relinquish some of our agential control over the emplotment process of selection to the device itself. This can lead to an overemphasis on quantifiable aspects of our experiences being used to generate our self-narratives, potentially distorting our self-understanding.

As Nguyen (2021a) has emphasised, relying on self-tracking devices for knowledge about ourselves promotes particular frames of self-evaluation. Am I healthy? Let me check my step count. Am I clever? Let me check my google citation rate and show you my wordle streak. Am I productive? Well, I've logged 50 hours of working time already this week. Self-tracking, then, does not just selectively provide us with information about ourselves, but in doing so dynamically moulds the way that we understand and value ourselves, promoting the formation of self-narratives that are specifically supported by this quantified data.

Furthermore, self-tracking devices often embed value judgments within their feedback mechanisms. My phone chides me if I have only done 346 steps that day, it congratulates me when I have closed my exercise rings, the Duolingo owl shames me for letting my daily streak lapse. While some devices do give us a prescribed set of goals that we can set ourselves, others come with these achievement markers and judgments baked into their design. For instance, it is common for fitness apps to set a goal of 10,000 steps a day and this is presented as indicative of good health if it is met or surpassed. By framing certain activities or metrics as (un) desirable, they influence the evaluative import we place on our behaviour. This can guide our self-interpretation, pushing us towards specific narratives about our health, productivity, or self-worth.

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[6] Note that self-tracking to obtain this more holistic view of one's habits is not a new phenomenon. However, self-tracking applications allow us to offload much of this work onto our devices. Some log this information automatically and many of them create graphic visuals to help us see and identify patterns of behaviour over time.

[7] https://quantifiedself.com/.

Self-tracking devices, therefore, can constrain our narrative agency by obscuring untracked and untrackable information, promoting the salience of tracked information, promoting specific evaluative frameworks, and even explicitly evaluating our behaviour. Relying on such devices leads to increased narrative railroading as we are encouraged to form and adopt narratives that they support and suggest, potentially overlooking other aspects of our behaviour relevant to our self-narratives.

5.2 Digital Platforms and Algorithmic Profiling

Bortolan (2024) has explored how social media platforms can help shape our self-narratives. She highlights the potential benefits of storing memories on platforms such as Facebook, particularly in order to maintain diverse and resilient narratives about who we are. She suggests that distributing our narratives onto our digital devices can be helpful tools, for instance, by helping combat mental health disorders that undermine positive self-narratives.

While Bortolan is primarily interested in thinking about how we can tailor our digital environments in supportive ways, she does note that the infrastructure of digital platforms also influences how our narratives are shaped. Although I might control the photos or tweets that I upload and pin to my accounts, our phones regularly show us photos and past posts unprompted. Nevertheless, Bortolan remains relatively optimistic about the use of these platforms for helping us support the kinds of self-narratives we want to sustain using these digital devices: "it is worth emphasising that we still have a significant degree of freedom as the curators of our own digital profiles, and while social media platforms, for instance, are geared toward reminding us of certain things at certain times, we still have a significant degree of control over the contents that they operate with" (Bortolan 2024, p. 8). However, I think this underplays the extent to which platform algorithms dynamically generate and shape the content that we are exposed to online and, thus, actively shape the narratives we form about ourselves.

As discussed above, we often use our physical environments to help support our narratives, either by distributing our memories onto them or using them more actively in the emplotment process. Our digital spaces, however, are more dynamic than this. They can organise and present content to us in ways that influence our perception of the past. For example, as Jacobsen (2022) explains, Apple Memories does not just show us random photographs, it curates them into themed collections and videos. In doing so, "'memories' are algorithmically imbued with story-like structures, emploted into coherent temporal narratives, they are simultaneously imbued with meaning and affect" (Jacobsen 2022, 1088). For example, the holiday photos shown to me this morning in "Summer 2017" spin a story of a happy past relationship and, through their absence, obscure the arguments and pointed silences. This might lead me to form a self-narrative of regret and self-reprisal about the breakdown of this relationship. Even though we might control the contents that our devices operate with, the algorithm's organisation of that content can significantly influence the emplotment process.

And digital devices go beyond selecting and ordering our uploaded contents. Digital walls, unlike their physical counterparts, use algorithms to personalise our digital spaces through the creation of new content. These algorithms analyse various data points, including the user's browsing history and demographics, as well as comparing these to the activities of 'similar' users. This process categorises users based on inferred tastes, interests, and traits and, in doing so, populates users' digital environments with adverts, recommended videos and accounts, and posts that the algorithm predicts they will find engaging. In doing so, platforms not only characterise the user, presenting them with content that reflects the user's past behaviour, but predicts future preferences. Information that might be construed as salient for one's self-narratives, such as one's interests, communities, and values, are therefore not just distributed across these digital platforms by the user but generated by the platform itself.

We might think that through harvesting one's data, algorithms are able to get a holistic and personalised view of who you are based on your habits. Perhaps even a better picture of your interests than you can have without this holistic perspective. As such, while we do not control the precise contents of our feeds, they are designed to reflect our interests and do so more dynamically and precisely than we are able in our physical environments, revealing to us our tastes, interests, and commitments and thus supporting reliable and detailed narratives about the kind of person we really are.

Like self-tracking devices, however, algorithms can only work with the material they track. Digital environments fail to make salient aspects of our personal lives that are not represented in our digital data. Additional time spent with students, the drive you took to see your nan, fall out of view. And what is tracked can get distorted. An increased amount of time spent on Women's Health looking at gym routines may populate my digital environment with all kinds of gym-related content (though, interestingly, mostly in the form of fitness regimes for men), underpinning a self-narrative that I am now a fitness freak. However, this does not necessarily reflect the amount of time I actually spend exercising.

Moreover, algorithms create our so-called personalised environments based upon existing societal narratives and stereotypes. For example, algorithms often profile users based on the binary categories male or female and, having

done so, tailors content and advertising to the user based on gendered assumptions regarding interests, character traits, and politics (Cheney-Lippold 2011; Fosch-Villaronga et al. 2021). Women in their mid-thirties find themselves immersed in digital environments saturated with beauty and health marketing and content, while men find themselves channelled towards sports and finance. These normative narrative associations, therefore, influence the kind of person the platform understands you to be and tells you who you are (Kent 2020; Noble 2018; Tsintzou et al. 2018). As such, algorithms push us to characterise ourselves within these limited, and limiting, frameworks. Indeed, far from personalising our digital environments, algorithms are standardising us.

By anticipating our future interests and behaviour based on past data, algorithms not only influence how we characterise and narrate ourselves, they can create a feedback loop that reinforces existing patterns of behaviour. As Pariser (2011, 16) puts it:

> Personalization can lead you down a road to a kind of informational determinism in which what you've clicked on before determines what you see next—a Web history you're doomed to repeat. You can get stuck in a static, ever narrowing version of yourself—an endless you-loop.

The categorisations and predictions that algorithms form about us, and in turn present us with, can drive us towards actions that further embed narratives that fit this digitally-created picture of ourselves. The user's (digitally trackable and profiled) past behaviour creates environments that support overly determined self-narratives and patterns of actions that validate these narratives in a tight feedback loop leading to ever-more restrictive narrative railroading.

Digital platforms, then, are not passive mirrors. They actively shape our self-narratives by curating the content we see and generating new content for us to look at and engage with based on algorithmic predictions. Indeed, sometimes our digital devices explicitly characterises us, for example, when Spotify's Wrapped feature 'tells you' what your aesthetic identity is based on the music you have listened to on the app. Crucially, while generated content is sold to us as tailoring and personalising our digital experiences, they operate through processes of categorisation and standardisation. We risk forming our narratives based upon a sum of digitally-generated characteristics, i.e., what the algorithm takes to be salient about us, rather than what we think is meaningful about who we are. Moreover, making connections between our past behaviour and the kind of person the algorithm takes us to be, reinforces these narratives through targeted recommendations. Moreover, by shaping our future

engagements, digital platforms actively shape not only how we view our current selves but also the trajectories of our future self-narratives. We might go so far as to say that we are not just distributing the emplotment process onto these devices but handing over narrative agency to these technologies, trusting them to tell us *who* we are.

6 Narrative Harms

Digital technology can be helpful for tracking our activities, storing our personal information and memories, and helping order and preserve certain information about ourselves. Thus, digital technologies can be powerful tools for distributing our self-narratives. However, our digital devices also constrain our narrative agency. By dynamically shaping, organising, and colouring the information we are provided about ourselves, they act as narrative devices. In distributing some of the narrative process of emplotment onto our devices, we open ourselves up to increasingly restrictive narrative railroading. This is further entrenched when these narratives are used to promote activities, interests, and values for the user to pursue that further reinforce these narratives in a dynamic feedback loop. While some constraint on our narrative agency is inevitable, the extent to which digital technologies can influence the self-narratives we construct, identify with, and act in accordance with, raises a particular range of concerns. I want to conclude by outlining a non-exhaustive list of potential narrative harms that I think arise out of narrative railroading in the context of digital technology.

6.1 Digitally-Enabled Narrative Harms

First, the narratives that our digital devices drive us towards are often impoverished. Nguyen (2020, 2021a, b) has emphasised that despite their many benefits, quantified systems can lead us epistemically astray. As noted above, if we use self-tracking devices to help us form narratives about, e.g., our health and fitness, we foreground information that can be measured by these devices. Yet, as Nguyen (2021a, 229) pointedly puts it: "step counts are not the same as health, and citation rates are not the same as wisdom". Somewhat ironically in the context of discussing an externalist account of distributed narratives, part of what is concerning about such narratives is that they create narratives based on highly individualised and de-contextualised data. We might, then, be increasingly relying on devices that are not fit for purpose.

Second, and relatedly, if we increasingly rely on our digital devices for self-understanding, experiences that are not easily quantified or captured are less likely to be stored

and become less salient in our autobiographical narratives. Instances of kindness, patience, or even challenging life events that we don't typically document digitally, risk fading from our memory and losing their significance in our stories about ourselves. This selective focus can lead us to prioritise the narratives that our digital devices are designed to support, such as those centred around productivity, fitness, or personal achievements, potentially neglecting other important aspects of our identity and lived experiences. We might then be railroaded towards the kinds of neo-liberal narratives prophesied by Radiohead: fitter, happier, more productive.

Third, digitally-based narrative railroading often is designed to benefit third parties. Digital platforms are not profiling us to help us achieve self-insight, they are creating spaces that we spend increasing time and money on. The narratives we have about ourselves influence our future behaviour, including our purchasing habits. Predicting, and in turn shaping, how people narrate and characterise themselves channels users towards particular products. As my feed fills up with gym routines, the floodgate of product placement for leggings, ankle weights, yoga mats, and diet programmes is opened. By driving my gym-bro narrative, I am sold products that will 'help' me meet my goals and cement my narrative, further capturing my time and money.

Fourth, is a broader worry that as individual user's narratives are railroaded towards certain (kinds of) narratives, there is a risk of an increasing homogenization of narratives. While our digital devices purport to personalise our environments to us as individuals, they work by categorising us into broad characterisations and predicting. Furthermore, as users are guided towards similar content and experiences, echo chambers and filter bubbles emerge, reinforcing existing beliefs and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives (Pariser 2011; Nguyen 2021a, b; Weyl et al. 2023). This can create a feedback loop where individuals become increasingly entrenched in these homogenized narratives, further narrowing their self-understanding and worldview. Instead of capturing our individuality, digital platforms may contribute to a flattening of our self-narratives, where we increasingly conform to the dominant narratives promoted by these algorithms. Far from digital environments and profiles mirroring the complexity and plurality of its users, they instead streamline users, leading to a constriction of the narrative buffet we have available to us. This homogenization feeds into the ease with which our narratives can be capitalised on and manipulated, as it makes us easier to predict and steer.

Finally, there is a meta-concern that using digital devices to track us alters the very way in which we think about ourselves as some kind of essential self. There is a sense that we think our self-tracking devices and algorithms are tracking 'us', our 'self'. That with enough data, they can uncover who we are. This can, I think, give rise to a more abstract impression that we are fixed selves, able to be tracked and measured.

6.2 Reflecting on Narrative Harms

All these worries, however, might be mitigated by reminding ourselves that just because our digital devices thrust certain narrative practices upon us, does not mean that we have to adopt and identify with these narratives. We can resist the constraints of our narrative agency by, for example, rejecting the values our digital devices emphasise – keeping our narrative landscape, so to speak, wider than that disclosed by our digital devices. However, what I think makes digitally-driven narrative railroading so interesting, and pernicious, is that we find often find the information produced by digital technology particularly seductive. Our digital devices offer us up information about us with a veneer of objectivity. The quantification and algorithmic mechanisms mask the human forces at play. It is easy to reject my mother's narrative about my being lazy (what does she know!), but my weeks' worth of unclosed rings on Apple fitness are harder to resist.

It is also important to note that the narrative railroading that I've suggested flows from digital devices does not arise from necessary features of digital technology. The analysis I have offered is based on digital technologies as they are currently designed. We might imagine a world where our digital devices are designed differently, designs that promote user-agency and diversity (Weyl et al. 2023). Though, given the benefits that narrative railroading likely affords tech and marketing barons, we might not hold much hope of alternative visions of technology being realised.

A more complex issue, however, is how we identify whether something is harmful or not. Above I suggested that using a self-tracking device might constrain narrative agency by nudging users to self-narrate using quantified data that might be impoverished, even misleading. However, if seeing my step count goals routinely met makes me form a narrative about being fit and healthy and this makes me feel good, is this really harmful? Even if it may not give me a perfectly full picture of my fitness, it may in fact help me feel productive, happy, and successful. A somewhat flawed fitness narrative might seem worth it if it leads to an affective pay-off due to bolstered self-confidence and self-motivation. The argument could also be made in the other direction, that while using self-tracking applications narratively railroads individuals in ways that could lead to individual harms, there may be distinct benefits to having a society inhabited by individuals with closely aligned narrative practices and norms. Something might, then, appear harmful through one lens, but not another. I do not, then,

intend to suggest that something straightforwardly either is or isn't harmful and it is easy to identify it as such. Nor do I want to suggest that we want to live a life free of constraints on our narrative agency. Constraints can, of course, be restrictive and harmful, but they can also be enabling. The reality, then, is messier and more complicated than my account has done justice to and more work needs to be done to more fully unpack the implications of narrative railroading. Nevertheless, I have sought to show how the concept of narrative railroading can help bring to the fore concerns that arise when someone's narrative agency is subject to overbearing constraints.

7 Conclusion

Our self-narratives are important. They help us make sense of experiences we have gone through, they help us establish a sense of who we are, they ground our self-conceptions, our values, our projects and commitments, they can even impact our well-being. Yet, our narratives are vulnerable to what I've dubbed narrative railroading. Narrative roading is a process by which an individual's ability to exercise their narrative agency is constrained in ways that restrict a person's ability to select, organise, and interpret their own personal experiences. Narrative railroading takes place on a spectrum, from less to more restrictive, and can occur through both obscuring or limiting a person's narrative options, as well as by more forcibly nudging a person towards adopting a specific self-narrative. We can be railroaded by other individuals, but also through systemic means, as well as through artefacts and environments.

In this paper, I've primarily explored narrative railroading through the lens of distributed self-narratives; examining how interacting with other people and artefacts in the construction of our self-narratives can lead to increasingly tight constraints being placed on our narrative agency. However, this certainly does not exhaust the range of ways in which narrative railroading might occur. I want to close by sketching out some further directions for developing the concept of narrative railroading in more depth and detail.

First, as I briefly suggested, there are clearly many ways that our inherited narrative templates can play a significant role in determining the contents, shape, and evaluative and emotional import of our narratives. While this can certainly occur through the proliferation of narratives in our social milieu, these narrative templates themselves are scaffolded by our socio-material environments. An ecological account of how our environments embed and entrench narrative templates that railroad, harm, even oppress, individuals is, therefore, one way in which we could further explore the notion of narrative railroading.

Second, we might wonder whether and how we narratively railroad ourselves. Our own self-characterisations, ideologies, and values can constrain our own self-interpretation, self-narration, and identification. We can, unintentionally and deliberately, organise our lives in ways that drive us down certain narrative pathways. This might be done as a way of forming empowering self-narratives or to overcome pernicious ones. However, as John Sutton put it to me, we should also be careful to acknowledge our own ability to disrupt and sabotage ourselves. It, therefore, should be recognised that we can are capable of inhibiting our own narrative-making agency.

Third, narrative railroading is not limited to our self-narratives. Algorithmic profiling, for example, works to shape what news we are exposed to, shaping the kinds of narrative frameworks through which we understand the world. As such, our digital environments can certainly be understood as strongly influencing the kinds of narratives we form about the world and other people. This could, for instance, complement work done on how epistemic bubbles reinforce beliefs, to help understand how such digital environments work to railroad the narratives of their members (about themselves, each other, others, and the world) in ways that both entrench these beliefs and a sense of belonging and community with other bubble members.

Finally, while I have restricted myself to thinking about the potential narrative harms that might follow from narrative railroading, it would be worth considering how narrative railroading can contribute and perpetuate the oppression of marginalised individuals. Given that narratives are important for making sense of ourselves and our experiences, impediments to narrative agency may well give rise to epistemic and affective injustices, maybe even perpetuate narrative injustices.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares she has no conflicting interests to declare.

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