



DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY,  
LINGUISTICS AND THEORY OF  
SCIENCE

# SHOWCASING HUMANITY

An Analysis of Audience Engagement and Narrative  
on the *Humans of New York* blog

Johanna Lingaas Türk



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Bachelor Thesis:	15 HEC
Program:	Liberal Arts, Bachelor of Arts Program
Educational level:	First cycle
Semester—Year:	Spring—2015
Supervisors:	Kenneth Nyberg, historian – Gothenburg University, Department of Historical Studies Brian Palmer, social anthropologist – Uppsala University, Department of Theology
Examiner:	Filip Radovic, philosopher – Gothenburg University, Department of Philosophy, Linguistics and Theory of Science

# Abstract

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Keywords:	participatory culture, social media, new media narrative, audience engagement, virality

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This thesis explores audience engagement and virality in social media storytelling by investigating posts and post interactions of the blog *Humans of New York* on Facebook. The aim is to understand what it is about these stories that engages the audience to interact and how the stories are shaped by their medium.

The theoretical framework is based on that of participatory culture, Web 2.0, new media narratology, as well as audience engagement, where previous studies indicate that virality is connected to emotionally triggering content (especially positive).

Collecting and quantitatively examining data of 2442 posts from January 13, 2011 to April 9, 2015, 20 top stories and 20 bottom stories are selected based on a score of the total sum of post interactions (likes + comments + shares). The 40 selected stories are qualitatively analyzed on a thematic basis, in order to identify patterns of reasons for engagement and influences of the medium.

The study finds that the top stories consist of a particularly successful, dialogic storytelling format, consistent with the expectations of Web 2.0. In line with previous studies, the content is positive; however, in addition to this, an element of relatable and thus inspiring content is identified. In building a vibrant audience, the blog has also turned into a viral library, becoming an engaging aspect in itself. By being posted in social media, the stories become a ventilation of social issues. Stories need to have a potential of meaningfulness by interaction, as they are *made* relevant by the interaction, causing them to receive what this study terms “revivals” at the relevance of the audience.

## Preface

I have been fascinated by the magic of stories for as long as I can remember. This interest has only grown throughout the Liberal Arts Bachelor's degree program at the University of Gothenburg. Stories can allow us to explore humanism, in exercising open-heartedness, bold truth, and fragile nakedness – if we dare expose ourselves empathically. In the fall of 2014, undertaking the fifth semester called *The Liberal Arts Practiced*, I had acquired an internship at the headquarters of the international, non-profit organization *The Hunger Project* in New York. As a part of the Advancement team, working towards engaging people in the issues of world hunger and poverty, I came to discover that “telling a story” was a vital, irreplaceable, part of advocating. It conveyed a human reality which otherwise was almost impossible to bring to life. This empowering aspect of storytelling is one which renowned author J.K. Rowling (2008) notes in her mesmerizing Harvard commencement address. Rowling (2008) speaks of imagination as one of the most powerful assets of the human species when it comes to mobilizing collective action.

The format of storytelling, however, and what it is to engage in a story, is inevitably evolving in the age of new media,<sup>1</sup> and it is something which journalists and humanitarian organizations alike strive to master. This is why I seek to investigate storytelling and engagement in the realm of social and spreadable media; I believe that there is a need to further deepen the understanding of viral media content and connect it with meaningful substance. One of my inspirations in undertaking this study has been vulnerability researcher Brené Brown, whose study on human connection was enabled through collecting stories. In her compelling TED talk (TEDxHouston, 2010), she notes that “maybe stories are just data with a soul”.

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<sup>1</sup> New media – “new means of mass communication considered collectively; *spec.* electronic means such as the Internet” (“new media, *n.*,” 2015).

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# 1 Introduction

The self-taught photographer Brandon Stanton may be considered one of the greatest social media storytellers of our time. Stanton created a photo blog in 2010 named *Humans of New York* (HONY) with the original aim of photographing 10,000 inhabitants of New York and displaying them on an interactive map of the city. The project, however, would eventually veer, as Stanton (n.d.) explains: “I started collecting quotes and short stories from the people I met, and began including these snippets alongside the photographs. Taken together, these portraits and captions became the subject of a vibrant blog.” As Stanton’s audience grew larger, his crowd began actively taking part in conversations emerged from blog posts on the official HONY Facebook page (Maloney, 2012), which has become nothing short of a viral phenomenon. The page ([facebook.com/humansofnewyork](https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork)) as of March 25, 2015 has over 12 million followers. In Stanton’s own view, the source of the blog’s popularity might be that “these portraits allow people to connect with strangers on a deeply personal level, in the safety of their own home” (Morris, 2012). Stanton asks his subjects personal questions, leading to long conversations; he sometimes spends hours pro conversation condensing these into cohesive blog pieces (Jonah Green, 2011; Post Staff Report, 2011).

The HONY network has organically evolved into a multifaceted platform. Besides Facebook, Stanton is also operating on Tumblr, Twitter, and Instagram. He has toured in partnership with the UN, raising awareness for the Millennium Development Goals (Kweifio-Okai, 2014), published a bestselling book (Bosman, 2013), and launched a number of successful philanthropical fundraisers. Stanton was widely celebrated for a campaign issued in early 2015 in support of the Mott Hall Bridges Academy in Brownsville, Brooklyn. Inspired by an interview with one of that institute’s students, the dedicated teenager Vidal Chastanet, Stanton began a series of interviews at the school and initiated a crowd funding for a field trip to Harvard University. This effort mushroomed, quickly surpassing one million US dollars (Hu & Bromwich, 2015). Recognized across national media, the event eventually took the blogger, together with Chastanet and the boy’s school principal, all the way to the White House to meet with and interview President Barack Obama (Corasaniti, 2015).

In likes, in comments, and in shares – the statistics indicating the impact of Stanton’s captivating stories are impressive. These remarkable numbers are indeed fascinating with regard to audience engagement in new media stories.

## 1.1 Aim and Research Questions

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of audience engagement in social media storytelling, by delving deeper into posts and post interactions of the blog *Humans of New York* (HONY) on Facebook. As a “new media native” and in creating a sustainable hub on Facebook, HONY proves an especially eligible case for this study, which will address the following questions:<sup>2</sup>

- What is it about the stories of HONY that engages people to interact?
- How are these stories shaped by their medium?

Investigating these research questions will require an interdisciplinary approach to the content of the material. It will be important to explore specific aspects of new media in the process of analyzing individual and collective engagement.

## 1.2 Disposition

The research will consist of two parts. The first will be quantitative, processing data of interaction in order to study the stories posted on HONY’s Facebook page. These data will provide a foundation for selecting the 20 most and 20 least interacted stories, for which the numbers of Facebook’s three interactive features visibly connected to each post (*like*, *comment*, and *share*) will be used as indicators of engagement. A further account of this selection is provided in the method section.

The second part of the research will be a qualitative analysis to investigate the 40 selected stories in relation to their content and media environment. Such an analysis of the material, which is deeply intertwined with the preconditions of social media storytelling, will require a framework of theory of participatory culture and social media, in addition to new media narratology. Equally important is also to review previous studies in virality and audience engagement. In order to aid the aim of the research, the theoretical and analytical framework will therefore structure and present these scientific foundations thematically as *participating*, *socializing*, *storytelling*, and *sharing*.

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<sup>2</sup> By “new media native”, I wish to emphasize the fact that HONY originally emerged from new media.

## 2 Theoretical and Analytical Framework

### 2.1 Participating

“Perhaps nothing is more human than sharing stories, whether by fire or by ‘cloud’ (so to speak).” (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, pp. 2-3). As this statement indicates, the most innovative part of the blog *Humans of New York* is probably the fact that it is new media native. “Humanist photography”, in comparison, was practiced already after World War II, when the work of certain French photographers earned them the title “humanists”.<sup>3</sup> Closing in on photo-journalism, these photographs were essentially “telling a story”, capturing the poetry and beauty of everyday life with both finely tuned humor and human understanding (Jonsson, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). This is a style, which indeed, resembles that of HONY. No previous humanist photographer, however, could ever have engaged with his or her audience in the way Stanton can, and does. Equally importantly, members of the audience can also interact with one another cost-effectively and beyond geographical boundaries, something which can be credited to the Internet.

Has the Internet then changed everything in terms of how audiences engage in a material? Not entirely, according to media scholar Henry Jenkins (2008, p. 6), an expert in the field of audience participation online. Rather, there has been a merge, “convergence” as Jenkins (2008) has it, of multiple media technologies and services, allowing a story to be adapted, experienced, and circulated on a variety of multimedia platforms – understood in terms of “transmedia storytelling” (Jenkins, 2007, March 22). An important concept which has emerged in this transformation is “participatory culture”; Jenkins (2008, p. 3) describes it in contrast to old media’s notion of passive media spectators: “Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules”. By these definitions, the impact of the Internet can be understood primarily as a shift in how individuals interact with media content as well as with one another. This is highlighted by Jenkins (2008, pp. 3-4):

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<sup>3</sup> To this group, names such as Édouard Boubat (1923–99), Robert Doisneau (1912–94) and Brassai (1899–1984) are associated (Carlsson, n.d.; Jonsson, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).



Convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives.

Interacting with a media content has an undeniable impact on the material itself, which is remade: “either literally, through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively, via its insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 27). People “are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 2). Because of this participation, there is a reevaluation of the relationship of authors and readers in creating meaning and value to a material, and there is a shift towards “understanding those roles as increasingly and complexly intertwined” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 37).

The notion of what it is to participate in our culture today is further discussed by Jenkins et al. (2013) in *Spreadable media: creating value and meaning in a networked culture*:

*Spreadable Media* examines an emerging hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways. The decisions that each of us makes about whether to pass along media texts—about whether to tweet the latest gaffe from a presidential candidate, forward a Nieman Marcus cookie recipe email, or share [a] video of a shoplifting seagull—are reshaping the media landscape itself. (Jenkins et al., 2013, pp. 1-2)

To demonstrate what they mean by “a networked culture”, the authors (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 11) refer to the viral video phenomenon of the audition of Susan Boyle, a participant in *Britain’s Got Talent* in 2009:

the Susan Boyle video was widely shared because the participating public is more collectively and individually literate about social networking online; because people are more frequently and more broadly in contact with their networks of friends, family, and acquaintances; and because people increasingly interact through sharing meaningful bits of media content.

“Audiences are making their presence felt by actively shaping media flows” according to Jenkins et al. (2013, p. 2), who present their media verdict short and precise: “if it doesn’t spread, it’s dead” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 1).

## 2.2 Socializing

In media circulation, social media play a vital role. Indeed, social networks are all about sharing personally meaningful content. At least if one should believe Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, who claims that the development of social networking is “guided by the idea that every year the amount that people want to add and share and express is increasing”

(C. Miller, 2011). Zuckerberg's voice is one of authority. Facebook is one of the most powerful players in the social media field. The corporation was noted to have 1.4 billions users at the beginning of 2015 (Schmidt & Gruvö, n.d.). Notably, there are, however, scholars who stress an opposition between "social media", which maximize audience reach (such as Twitter), and "social networks", which foster friendship (such as Facebook) (Murthy, 2013, p. 11). Others find it unproblematic to include social networks under the umbrella "social media" (Page, 2012, p. 5). Marketing professors Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein (2010, p. 60) observe that academic researchers all along the line struggle to define a common denotation or the term. To highlight some constitutive parts which may be considered as qualifications, Kaplan's and Haenlein's (2010, p. 61) own definition will be examined: "Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content."

The term "Web 2.0", commercialized about ten years ago, does not refer to any technical update of the World Wide Web per se, but rather innovative ways of utilization; "that is, as a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). In contrast to the static web pages of "Web 1.0", where readers had a more passive approach to content on a website, Web 2.0 allows users to interact with substance, as well as share their own. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) also present three criteria established by the *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD) for "User Generated Content" (UGC): "first, it needs to be published either on a publicly accessible website or on a social networking site accessible to a selected group of people; second, it needs to show a certain amount of creative effort; and finally, it needs to have been created outside of professional routines and practices". The last criterion might be considered problematic, however, as it excludes the many professional institutions, such as corporations and organizations, who indeed are also operating on social media on a large scale. Even the case of a blog such as *Humans of New York* quickly becomes debatable, as Brandon Stanton himself has made a career out of his blog. What kind of content is, indeed, *user* generated and what kind is not?

Moving into the realm of storytelling, however, in this study I will adopt the view point of new media narratologist Ruth Page (2012, p. 5), who uses the term social media “to refer to Internet-based applications that promote social interaction between participants”.

## 2.3 Storytelling

What is important to take note of, as one studies narrative in social media? One aspect which new media narrative scholars Brownen Thomas and Ruth Page (2011, p. 4) emphasize is that much of online discourse “is hybrid in nature, blending the written word with near-instantaneous communication”. Stories are understood as both a narrative unit in themselves and as a form of social interaction; one might compare it to a dialogic form, such as the one around a dinner table, where stories, and interactions with them, are part of the conversation. When undertaking research in this field, the conclusion is drawn that, especially, “the narratives that emerge in Web 2.0 environments where personal expression is inextricably interwoven with dialogue (for example through the use of conversational metacommentary) require paradigms that account for both their interpersonal and expressive qualities” (Page & Thomas, 2011, pp. 4-5).

Consequentially, there are controversies to the academic field of narratology claiming the territory of new media. English professor Daniel Punday (2011, p. 19) discusses these difficulties by referring to harsh criticism expressed by cyber text theorist Marku Eskelinen against using traditional discourse and methods when analyzing new media. According to Punday (2011, p. 19), Eskelinen finds that “any attempt to impose traditional textual categories from other media (literature primarily, but also film) is by definition a misinterpretation of the form”. Digital texts are indeed somewhat different; they are dynamic objects (Page & Thomas, 2011, p. 8), changing in the “moment of consumption” (Evans & Ree, 2012, p. 21). New media narratives exist as multimodal, multilayered, and multifaceted constitutions of different kinds of innovative pieces of computer-mediated communication (CMC).

How should these complex and dynamic forms of storytelling be approached? According to digital humanities advocates (Frabetti, 2012; Presner, 2010; Schnapp & Presner, 2009), as well as literary scholars (Lenemark, 2012, p. 11), medium awareness and specificity are both inevitable and crucial. Punday (2011, pp. 19-20) favors an awareness of media specificity while simultaneously keeping in mind that maybe “our search for what is different about a

medium distracts us from how much that medium shares features with others”. Facebook, specifically, is celebrated as “a multifaceted environment for collaborative storytelling” (Page & Thomas, 2011, p. 2) and in order to identify some particular features of such online narrative, the research of both “traditional” blog and social media narratives will be consulted.

In their study on storytelling in weblogs (blogs), linguists Volker Eisenlauer and Christian Hoffman (2010, p. 87), identify four essential features which “should be acknowledged in any serious account of online narration” – *multi-linearity*, *fragmentation*, *interaction* and *multimodality*. “Multi-linearity” speaks of the multiple pathways leading to, and from, a single narrative entity, since “a preconceived, single access to online narrative does not exist” (Eisenlauer & Hoffmann, 2010, p. 87). True already of “hypertexts”,<sup>4</sup> this feature is perhaps even more prominent in the age of sharing. “Fragmentation”, on the other hand, is a question of structure of a single narrative piece. A blog post can be dispersed into several text units, “interrelated through hyperlink relations” (Eisenlauer & Hoffmann, 2010, p. 88), or be presented as a multimodal compact, where the full narrative experience is constituted by different parts. There is also limitation of space – an aspect even more applicable to social media stories than “traditional” weblog stories – and therefore a certain fragmental structure is forced into the narrative by default.

Furthermore, of “interaction”, Eisenlauer & Hoffman (2010, p. 80) write that a “dispersion of narrative responsibility” between author and readers of blogs is articulated, and thus “narrative structure will give rise to a scheme involving different types of interactivity in weblog discourse”. This indicates that user participation is enabled, encouraged, and perhaps even required, in online narrative. Finally, “multimodality” refers to the use of different expressive modes at the disposal of a blogger such as photo, sound, and video (Eisenlauer & Hoffmann, 2010, pp. 90-92).

As is becoming clear, Web 2.0 enhances all of the above-mentioned important features with increased pathways, highlighted fragmentation, essential interactivity, and innovative multimodality. More specifically for social media environments, the interactive and dialogic

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<sup>4</sup> *Hypertext* – a text linking to other pieces of work, becoming a node in a network and allowing the reader to choose his/her own path. The term was coined by Ted Nelson in the 1960s, but obviously boomed in the 1980s with the introduction of computer-based texts. (Hjerpe, n.d.)

features are relevant to factor into storytelling online. In *Stories and social media: identities and interaction* Ruth Page (2012, p. 8) writes of “collective contributions”:

Social media interactions are emergent, that is to say, they are distributed across textual segments (such as blog posts, comments, forum threads, updates to a social network site) that are created and received asynchronously by participants who are often (although not always) geographically remote from each other. Social interaction appears in an episodic form, as sequences of messages develop over time, and draw attention to the process of storytelling, rather than focusing on a discrete narrative product.

Page (2012, p. 8) further emphasizes that these “collaborative, dialogic, emergent, and personalized characteristics of social media contribute to context-rich environments” and thus draws upon contextually oriented models of examining narratives. In her research, she (Page, 2012, p. 11) adopts (and slightly alters) such a model, designed by linguistic anthropologist Elinor Ochs and psychologist Lisa Capps (2001), which highlights *linearity*, *tellership*, *embeddedness*, and *tellability* in social media (Page, 2012, pp. 12-16). Many elements in these concepts are reoccurring and can be compared with previously mentioned ones.

“Linearity” concerns the structure of a narrative, which can be compared with “fragmentation”. Page (2012, p. 12) writes that:

stories of social media are often open-ended, discontinuous, and fluctuating. Stories can be told in their entirety within an individual unit of social media, such as a forum post, blog entry, or status-update, but they can also be distributed across multiple units, as episodes that unfold between sequenced posts, or posts and comments.

The “tellership” in social media closely resembles the qualities demonstrated in a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2008, p. 3) and the elements of interaction described by Eisenlauer & Hoffman (2010, p. 80). In line with both of these, Page (2012, p. 13) writes of tellership: “The collaborative nature of social media means that the tellership of social media stories tends to contrast with canonical expectations of a single teller and operate instead with different kinds of multi-party, co-constructed narration.”

Furthermore, “embeddedness” accounts for the contextual features necessary to fully understand the narrative. It contains participatory elements, online environment, offline environment, textual as well as generic aspects (the website settings, etcetera) (Page, 2012, pp. 14-15).

Lastly, the “tellability” of stories is “the quality that makes a story worth telling in the first place” (Page, 2012, pp. 15-16). Page (2012, p. 16) argues that:

The dimension of tellability brings to center stage the question of how tellers orient themselves and the stories they tell to their audiences (even when the audience is indeterminate), and how

their audiences respond. Tellability is thus at the heart of the *social* quality of social media and results in varied patterns of interactive engagement.

She (Page, 2012, p. 16) also notes that when the tellability fails to live up to expectations, “audiences simply refuse to contribute to the story at all”, which is “reflected in patterns of diminished page views, comments, ratings, or edits”. This aspect of social media storytelling is currently a topic for the journalistic profession, as it touches upon audience engagement. Why do readers engage in some stories online and others not?

## 2.4 Sharing

At Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, a current, key research area is “Engagement and Audience”, which “will study the new relationship between the journalist and the audience, examining the impact and new demands that social media, participatory journalism, crowdsourcing and other developments, are creating in the field” (Knight Foundation, 2015). Editors, journalists, and IT-experts alike are currently discussing the future of journalism, the shaping of a new landscape which not even the most daring explorer today can predict the constitution of. In trying to do so, huge numbers of data are accumulated, successfully mapping how news is received and spread on the Internet – through clicks, shares, and amount of unique page viewers. However, the question of how those numbers are to be interpreted remains debatable. What do these statistics actually imply in terms of reaching out and having a lasting impact on an audience?

Aron Pilhofer (MEG [Mediedagarna i Göteborg], 2015), executive editor of digital at *The Guardian* and former editor of interactive news at *The New York Times*, argues that there is an urgent need for reassessing metrics of audience engagement in media. In light of recent years of experimenting with new ways of attracting readers, Pilhofer’s claim seems like a legitimate one. Much of successful online media today are accused of fragmented journalism, headlined with *clickbaits*. Suggested by its name, the term “clickbait” originated from means of attracting clicks by readers; in business setting it “refers to centralizing the audience’s presence in a particular online location to generate advertising revenue or sales” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 4). In the year of 2009, for example, the media site *Nyheter24* went as far as establishing a salary system based on the amount of clicks their journalists received (Friman, 2014, Aug/Sep, pp. 74-75). Media scholars Jenkins et al. (2013, p. 5) are hesitant towards these kinds of metrics, which “privileges putting content in one place and making audiences come to it so they can be counted”. Indeed, there seems to be a general agreement that this

definition of online success misses its mark, as “clicks” are becoming less and less important; digital and social prosperity is at the moment more about sharing and online content becoming “viral”. Readers upload news articles and stories to Facebook in their own name and broadcast them onward to their friends, who in their turn spread the word to their friends (Friman, 2014, Aug/Sep, pp. 75-76). Traffic to and from a news site is to a greater extent initiated through social transmission, causing any content to receive attention when the audience finds it relevant (University of Gothenburg, 2014). Journalist Christopher Friman (2014, Aug/Sep, p. 85) eloquently expresses this as a shift of authority of news-value from editors to readers, a transformation which emphasizes what a piece of news says about oneself rather than what it says about society at large.

According to the *Online Oxford Dictionaries* (“virality,” 2015) “virality” is “the tendency of an image, video, or piece of information to be circulated rapidly and widely from one Internet user to another; the quality or fact of being viral”. The authors of *Spreadable Media* (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 6) oppose to the term “viral”, favoring “spreadable”. Spreadability namely “recognizes the importance of the social connections among individuals, connections increasingly made visible (and amplified) by social media platforms.” Valuing a participatory culture (where sharing, altering, and personalization merge the roles of producer and user of content) the “spreadability paradigm assumes that anything worth hearing will circulate through any and all available channels, potentially moving audiences from peripheral awareness to active engagement” (Jenkins et al., 2013, pp. 6-7). This emphasizes the active participation in audience engagement, thus centralizing the importance of reasons of interaction:

In this networked culture, we cannot identify a single cause for why people spread material. People make a series of socially embedded decisions when they choose to spread any media text: Is this content worth engaging with? Is it worth sharing with others? Might it be of interest to specific people? Does it communicate something about me or my relationship with those people? What is the best platform to spread it through? Should it be circulated with a particular message attached? Even if no additional commentary is appended, however, just receiving a story or a video from someone else imbues a range of new potential meanings in a text. As people listen, read, or view shared content, they think not only—often, not even primarily—about what the producers might have meant but about what the person who shared it was trying to communicate. (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 13)

This complex process of sharing, almost impossible to grasp in its entirety, makes it difficult to predict which kind of content will be spread. In 2006, Internet entrepreneur Jonah Peretti founded *BuzzFeed*, another vibrant media site, as a sort of laboratory with the purpose of decoding the virality of stories (Rabinowitz, 2015, April 2). According to Friman (2014,

Aug/Sep, pp. 77-78), Peretti was able to identify three important variables in attaining a viral phenomenon by analyzing the site's traffic: short articles, positive note, and an "element of humanity". According to Tracy Raczek (Climate Policy Advisor for the UN Secretary-General's Climate Change Support Team (CCST)), the benefits of a "positive note" in social media has also been confirmed by *United Nations Global Pulse* (Sustainability Media Lab, 2014, November 24). In issues concerning climate change, advocating with a positive and hopeful message has a larger impact when it comes to inspiring people to move from awareness to action.

Marketing researchers Berger & Milkman (2012) also set out to answer the question on virality in their article "What Makes Online Content Viral?". The authors examine data from *New York Times* articles published over a time period of three months to identify and establish factors of social transmission. The aim is to "demonstrate characteristics of viral online content and shed light on the underlying processes that drive people to share" (Berger & Milkman, 2012, p. 193). Undertaking the issue from a psychological point of view Berger & Milkman (2012, p. 199) argue that their collected research data support their hypothesis of *emotional arousal* shaping virality: "Positive and negative emotions characterized by activation or arousal (i.e., awe, anxiety, and anger) are positively linked to virality, while emotions characterized by deactivation (i.e., sadness) are negatively linked to virality." The hypothesis implies that "[a]rousal is a state of mobilization" and "sharing information requires action" (Berger & Milkman, 2012, p. 193). Social transmission, Berger & Milkman (2012, p. 201) argue, "is about more than just value exchange or self-presentation".

Another psychological study published in *Computers in Human Behavior* (Guadagno, Rempala, Murphy, & Okdie, 2013) investigates the probability of forwarding a video based on its emotional content. As the scientists (Guadagno et al., 2013, p. 2312) explain: "when people watch Internet video clips, they may experience the same emotions as the people in the clip, and by forwarding that clip, they anticipate that the receiver will experience similar emotions". Indeed, the authors (Guadagno et al., 2013, p. 2316) were able to establish that: "participants showed a significant preference for forwarding positively valenced videos over all other videos, as well as a preference for negatively valenced videos over the non-emotional control videos".

These previous studies highlight the emotional infectivity of online content, causing people to engage in the material and spread it forward. However, as previously mentioned, there is an



expressed criticism against the term “viral” – “a theory of media distribution that makes a media text sound more like a smallpox-infected blanket” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 16). While capturing the speed “with which new ideas are spread” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 17), it “does little to describe situations in which people assess a media text, deciding who to share it with and how to pass it along” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 20). Indeed, this is an important distinction; certainly it is less interesting to look at virality as a sort of passive and involuntary act of transmission, than it is to view it as media being spread in a meaningful, interactive and participatory way.

This, according to Jenkins et al. (2013), is encompassed in their definition “spreadability”. However, in this study I would like to use the term “virality” and broaden the concept of infectivity to lean towards engagement and empathy (rather than allowing it to stick to some notion of viral marketing). One could say, that we are empathically infected by stories and it is our engagement which makes the content indistinguishably our own and as such, it is passed forward. By emphasizing this disarticulation, I hope to avoid what Jenkins et al. (2013, p. 21) fear to be the consequence of the term “viral”, namely that we will “overestimate the power of media companies and underestimate the agency of audiences”. This thesis first and foremost deals with the agency of audiences and a specific kind of humanistic and empathic engagement.

Speaking out of his experience of working with the UN, Stanton insists his stories strive to enable a deeper understanding than the fact that we are alike as humans. More so, he argues, the eye-opening experience “that [the portrayed individual] *is* me, just in different circumstances” (Harvard University, 2015). Stanton attributes the success of such epiphanies through stories to authenticity as well as the level of details, as these “are the things that make a story powerful [...] that really bring it to life for somebody and allow them to kind of experience [it]” (Harvard University, 2015). Author J.K. Rowling (2008) claims that imagination enables humans to “learn and understand, without having experienced”. She (Rowling, 2008) draws upon the example of Amnesty International mobilizing thousands of people “who have never been tortured or imprisoned for their beliefs to act on behalf of those who have” to illuminate that the “power of human empathy, leading to collective action, saves lives, and frees prisoners.”

## 2.5 Implications for Analysis

In this research, the stories of *Humans of New York* will be analyzed with regard to audience interaction and content. The theoretical framework will be used as base for this analysis, which ought to emphasize what the author and audience are creating in a collaborative manner. Since the social media platform Facebook operates within the realm of the interactive Web 2.0 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), the analysis will therefore be conducted in the light of a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2008), where individual users remix and transform media (Jenkins et al., 2013). It will also be supported by concepts of interpreting online narratives, via notions of multi-linearity, fragmentation, interaction, and multimodality (Eisenlauer & Hoffmann, 2010) as well as linearity, tellership, embeddedness, and tellability (Page, 2012).

Thus, we turn to the method section to discuss how the stories will be collected, selected, and studied in order to answer the two research questions:

- What is it about the stories of HONY that engages people to interact?
- How are these stories shaped by their medium?

## 3 Method

### 3.1 Research Material

The material of this study consists of stories, in the form of blog posts and interactions, on the official Facebook page of *Humans of New York* (facebook.com/humansofnewyork). In collecting data from Facebook, one has to take careful note of what is public and what is private. All the material used in this study will be collected from a page open to the public, accessible without logging on to Facebook with a personal account.<sup>5</sup> The statistics will be collected on April 9, 2015, and while comments to the stories might be quoted at a later point in time, interactions dated after April 9, 2015 will be disregarded in the analysis.

### 3.2 Selection

The collected Facebook posts will date from the time of the Facebook page's first registered post on January 13, 2011 to the date of retrieval on April 9, 2015. However, not all of the posts are stories of Stanton's people encounters. For example, the very first post reads:

We have about 1,400 photos so far. Going to shift gears and start promoting the project pretty heavily in February. Started a facebook page and twitter account for that purpose. I will be posting my favorite photo from every day to this page, as well as links to any blog posts. (Stanton, [Humans of New York], 2011)

Clearly, this is an update from Stanton to his readers – likewise, other posts might link to the *Humans of New York* Tumblr blog (or elsewhere). This only proves how multifaceted the use of a social media platform can be; the hub on Facebook serves a variety of purposes for the author and the audience. Out of all the posts, however, it seems reasonable to disregard those which are not “telling a story” in the same sense. Since HONY was launched as a photo blog and this research focuses on the stories located on Facebook, all posts that do not include a photo uploaded to the Facebook page will be excluded in a first selection. For example, such a post could be a) linking elsewhere, b) including a video, or c) a status update without photo.

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<sup>5</sup> This is in line with Facebook policy of what information is public. ("Vad är offentlig information? [What Information is Public?]," 2015)

A second selection will be made with regard to figures of interaction, as an indication of audience engagement. Interaction will in this study be measured by a total sum ( $x + y + z$ ) of the number of likes ( $x$ ), comments ( $y$ ), and shares ( $z$ ) for each post. Ranked by this unified number, the 20 top stories, as well as the 20 bottom stories, will be further examined in a qualitative analysis.

### 3.3 Metrics

A post on Facebook has three features of interaction visibly connected to it: *like*, *comment*, and *share*. It is difficult to determine indefinitely what each feature implies, as they can be used with a number of different intentions. However, all of them are in some way interacting with the material.

Out of the three, one may consider that “like” requires the least amount of effort for showing one’s appreciation – in some ways it resembles a “click”, in others it differs substantially. While a click may be used to try and establish the level of attraction of a certain post, a like spreads material onward to others by making an appearance on the users personal profile and in the news feed of friends.<sup>6</sup> The visible number of likes, which indicates acknowledgement of a post, might also provoke further exploration of the content by a new reader (whereas the number of clicks is concealed to the user).

Liking a post can most often be interpreted as an appreciation of the content of a post, however it can also imply a form of support, as one *Humans of New York*-reader (Burns, 2014) suggests in a comment to a touching and tragic life story (Stanton, [Humans of New York], 2014b):

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Damn. There needs to be something to click on besides “like”. I know we use it to acknowledge or to say, “I hear your story.” But I wish there was something to click on that says, “I’m sorry the world is so messed up. I’m sorry you’ve experienced such horror and such loss.” So, I’m going to

<sup>6</sup> The “news feed” of Facebook could be described in terms of the home page of any website, which greets the user when one logs in and gives one an opportunity to survey what actions are happening at the moment (in Facebook’s case, this would primarily be among one’s Facebook friends). If, for example, Person A would “like” a Facebook page and Person B is Facebook friends with A, then A’s action of liking the page might pop up in the feed of B (depending on Facebook’s algorithms). Notably, however, these showcases are optional to the user.

decide that for stories like this, “like” means “sending love to a stranger and hoping and praying for a better world.”

As this comment clearly demonstrates there are no specific rules for how a like ought to be interpreted – it comes down to the intention of the action. One aspect to note, however, is that liking is an obvious choice of interaction as one might read the post without acknowledging it in any way. Still, this interaction should probably not be interpreted as one of, for example, provocation; it might be hard to claim that people who genuinely dislike the photo or disagree with its message would click the like-button.

A “comment”, on the other hand, can be employed by the angered or provoked reader to express his or her dislike. Spite can be common on Internet forums. *Humans of New York* is praised for its commentators caring spirit, and this positive environment is something which Brandon Stanton has worked hard to establish (Harvard University, 2015). He has addressed the issue several times on the Facebook page, especially when, in his mind, “the comment section is out of control” (Stanton, [Humans of New York], 2012). Stanton feels he has an ethical obligation towards his photo subjects to ensure that the experience of being photographed and published on HONY is a pleasant one. Therefore, he has moderators managing his comment sections who are instructed to remove sinister comments and disable anyone from commenting if that person is “attacking the subject” (Stanton, [Humans of New York], 2014a).

Stanton (2014a) firmly believes, however, that the comment section can be a valuable asset of expanding his work, with members of the audience expressing their own experiences. A common feature is also to “tag” other Facebook-friends in comments, causing them to receive a notification that leads them directly to the post in question. In an important sense, this is an interaction with the material, which spreads it further. In the same sense, the action of commenting on a post (whatever that comment may be) may also appear on Facebook friends’ feeds.

Lastly, the action of “sharing” a Facebook post could be considered the most deliberate way of spreading the content further. Sharing a material allows the user to express his or her reasons for sharing the particular piece with his or her audience. Sharing a piece of content can initiate conversations in other places than the original source.

In summary, when considering audience engagement and virality on Facebook, all of the interactions visibly connected to each post (like, comment, and share) are relevant, since each of them is a participatory remix with the material, causing the post to spread further.

### 3.4 Qualitative Aspects

In light of the framework discussed in the previous section, the qualitative analysis of this study will investigate the 40 stories thematically, with the aim of identifying patterns for reasons of engagement as well as account for influences of the medium noticeable in the stories. The analysis will be textual, aided by contextual factors. Thus, both the substance of a particular post and its comment section will be consulted, since the commentators may be regarded as a virtual focus group. Given the theoretical framework, it is also crucial to take note of what the author and the audience are creating together in a collaborative storytelling, which cannot be given an account of without consulting the comment section.

### 3.5 Scope and Constraints

There are three constraints in proceeding with the study. Firstly, material has only been gathered from one social media platform even though Brandon Stanton is operating with *Humans of New York* on several sites. Advantageously, the material is perspicuous and can be examined more thoroughly in relation to specific site features. Disadvantageously, however, new media participants tend to operate non-constrictively between different platforms. The choice fell upon Facebook as the most vibrant and interactive out of the different HONY establishments.

Secondly, the material will only be collected from public spaces on Facebook. This is inevitable, due to privacy considerations. With regard to the quantitative results, this should not make a difference as the research processes an altogether public page. However, qualitatively it may be considered unfortunate not to be able to follow up on the feature “share”, which directs the material onwards to other forums.

Finally, a constraint regarding the comment section must be raised. Facebook alters its interface constantly and has algorithms decide what, precisely, is shown on each individual screen. For this selection, an account cannot be given. Facebook, at the moment, sorts comments by “Most recently”, “Top comments”, and “Most relevant”. When examining comments, all of the above categories will be scouted, however the sheer number of comments (for some posts exceeding hundreds of thousands) limits the observer to these filters. It is also important to note that the moderators of the HONY comment section may receive responses they choose to delete. Nevertheless, there is an importance and relevance in investigating what is available given these constraints.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 First Selection

In the extraction of data (2015-04-09, 12:18 GMT+1:00) 2,695 posts were collected, out of these 253 were excluded in the first selection (see table 1). Out of the excluded posts, 89 were status updates with quotes, personal remarks, fundraising initiatives, people encounters, interview locations, as well as several regarding commentator ethics. 149 linked to other websites, such as Brandon Stanton's own Tumblr blog, other *Humans of*- Facebook pages, YouTube, Vimeo, Indiegogo (crowd funding site), as well as news articles, and various speeches and lectures given by Stanton himself. 8 contained video material, and lastly 7 were corrupt.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1** Number of excluded posts per type in the first selection

Type	N
Status update	89
Link	149
Video	8
Corrupt	7
Total	253

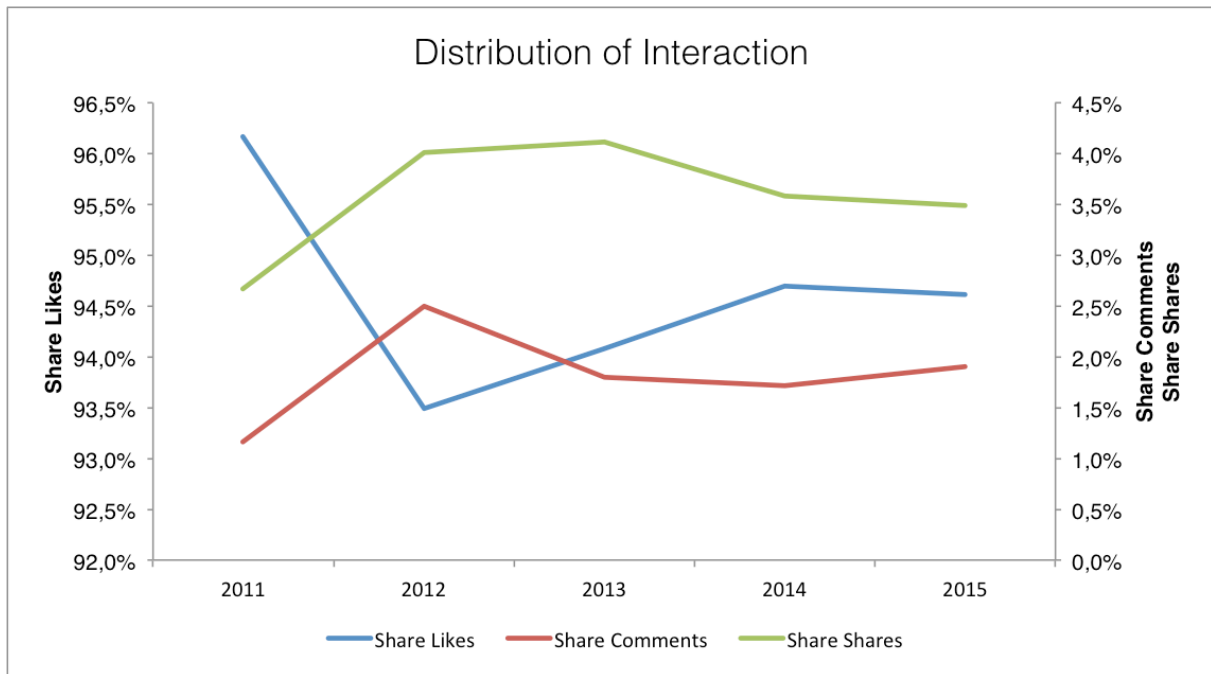
The first selection thus included a total of 2442 posts, dated within the range of January 13, 2011 to April 8, 2015.<sup>8</sup> These are fairly distributed over the total time period.

The distribution of the total amount of interaction between likes, comments, and shares, is diagrammed in graph 1. The statistics indicate that the number of likes declined in 2012 on behalf of comments and shares increasing, only to rise again between the years 2012–2014. Clearly demonstrated, the number of likes dominates the figures, constituting over 90 % of the interactions each year.

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<sup>7</sup> By judging from reconstructed figures, these posts are neither at the top nor the bottom of the interaction scale. Since the material is already extensive, the choice is made to take these out rather than contaminate the result with reconstructed figures.

<sup>8</sup> Since the extraction of data was made in 2015-04-09 at 12:18 (GMT+1:00), Stanton (located in New York, GMT-5:00) had not yet posted any stories that day.



Graph 1 Distribution of likes, comments, and shares over time.

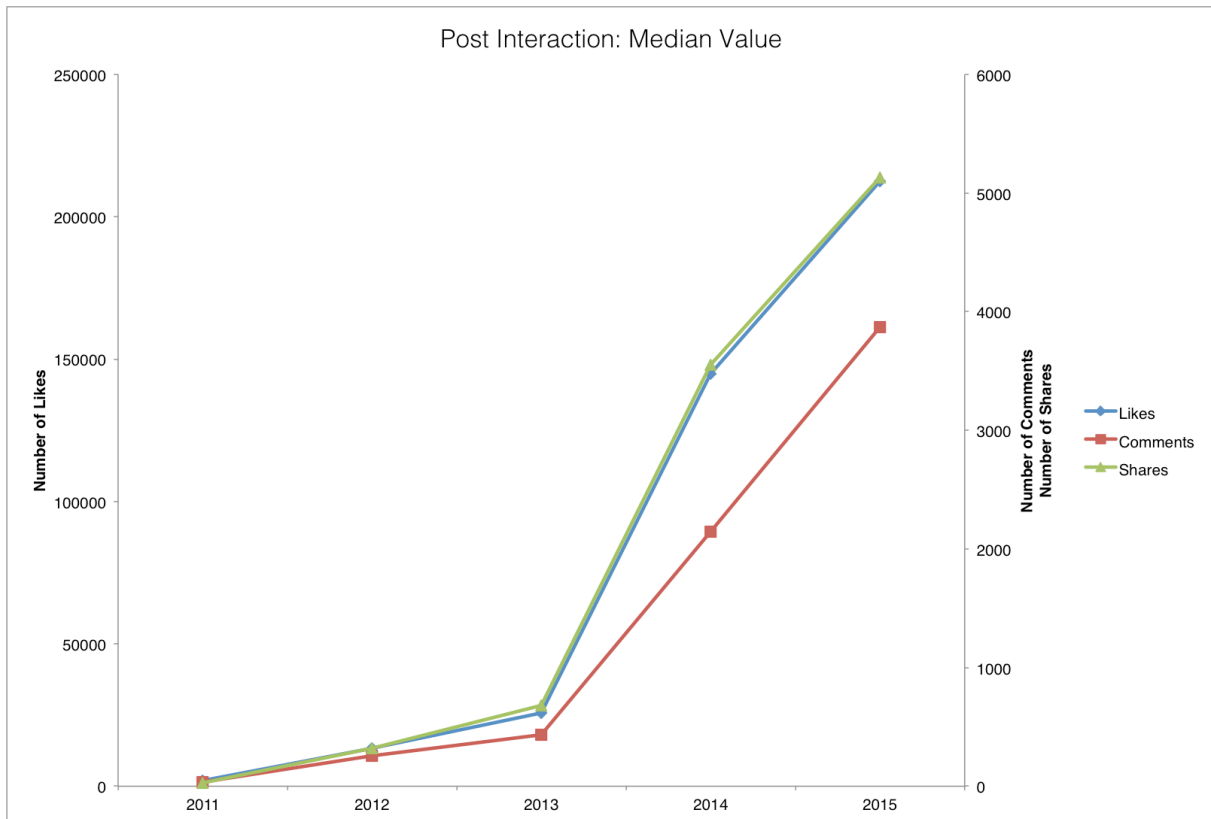
The mean value of interaction per post each year is presented in table 2, which also gives a full account of the figures underlying graph 1.

**Table 2** Statistics of the mean value of interaction per post each year

Year	Likes	Comments	Shares	Total Interaction	Share Likes	Share Comments	Share Shares	N
2011	10 525	127	292	10 944	96,2 %	1,2 %	2,7 %	489
2012	38 523	1 028	1 654	41 205	93,5 %	2,5 %	4,0 %	502
2013	46 046	881	2 014	48 941	94,1 %	1,8 %	4,1 %	566
2014	187 685	3 410	7 092	198 187	94,7 %	1,7 %	3,6 %	573
2015	255 391	5 144	9 405	269 940	94,6 %	1,9 %	3,5 %	312

However, since there are several outliers in the collected data, an account of the median value of interaction per post each year is displayed in graph 2. As clearly demonstrated by the data in graph 2, the interaction with the Facebook page has increased over the years, at a lower pace initially, only to “boom” between 2013 and 2014, causing the interactions to increase at a faster rate over time.





Graph 2 Median value of interaction per post each year.

## 4.2 Second Selection

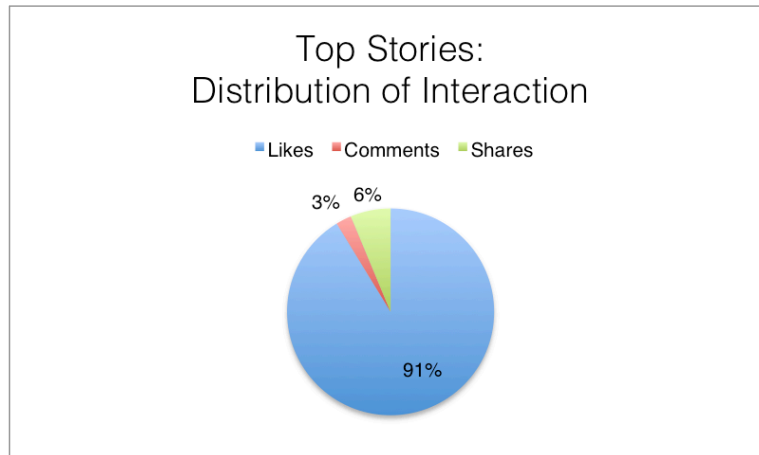
For the second selection, the 2442 posts were scored based on the sum of their interactions (likes + comments + shares) and the 20 top ranked and 20 bottom ranked stories were selected and numbered with a story ID (ranging within S1–S20 for the top stories and S21–S40 for the bottom stories). A full account of the stories of the second selection (with story ID's, interaction figures, and links) can be found in the appendix.<sup>9</sup>

The distribution of interaction for the top stories is displayed in graph 3 and the distribution of interaction for the bottom stories is displayed in graph 4. The percentage of likes, in both cases, are about 90 %, however, the portions of comments and shares differ

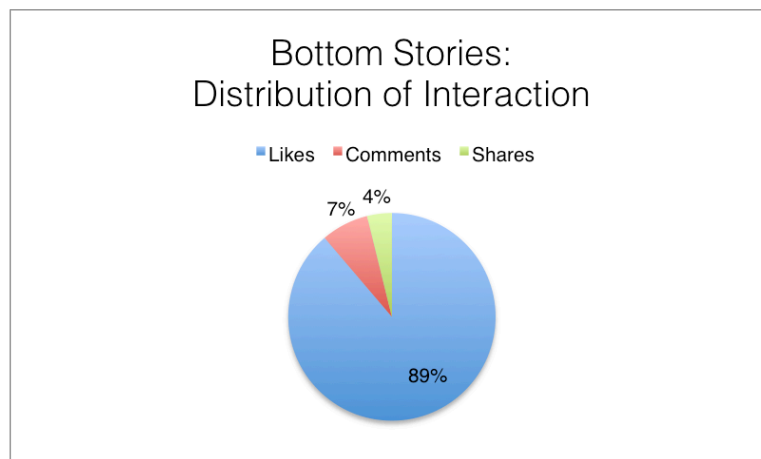
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<sup>9</sup> Since the stories of the second selection can be retrieved from the appendix, they will be excluded from the reference list.

between the two sets; for the top stories, shares amount to 6 % of the interactions, whilst only making up 4 % in the bottom stories. Likewise, the comments constitute of only 3 % in the top stories compared to 7 % in the bottom stories.

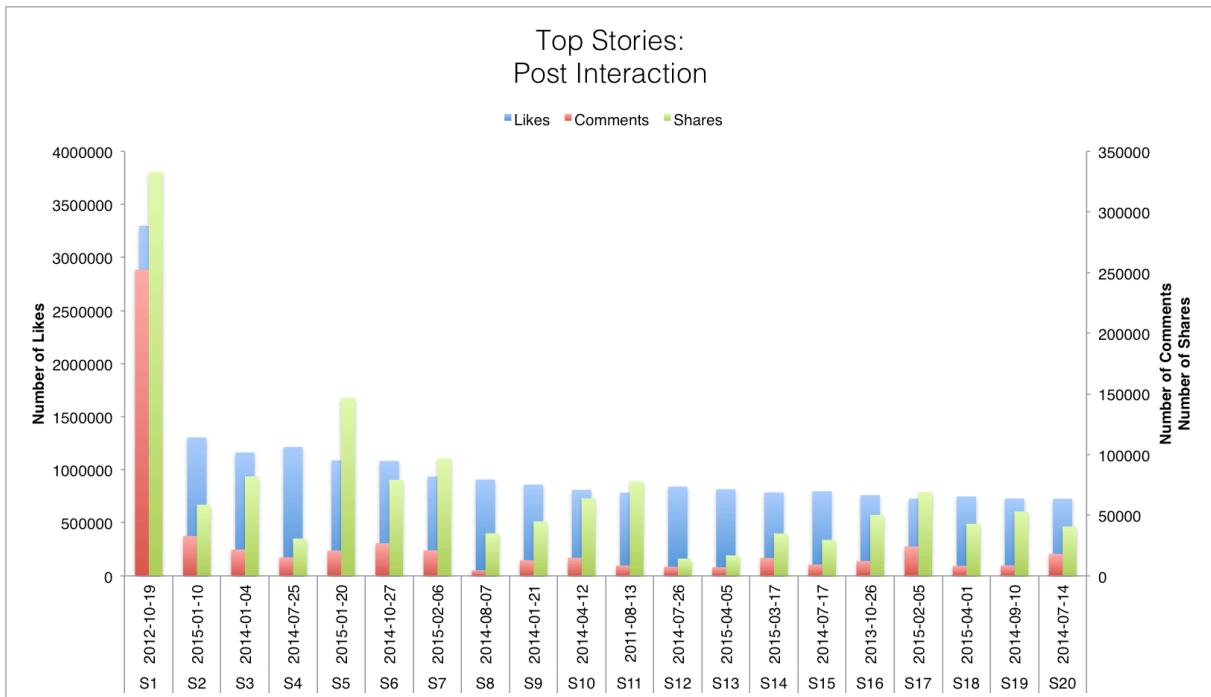


Graph 3 Distribution of interaction for the top 20 stories.

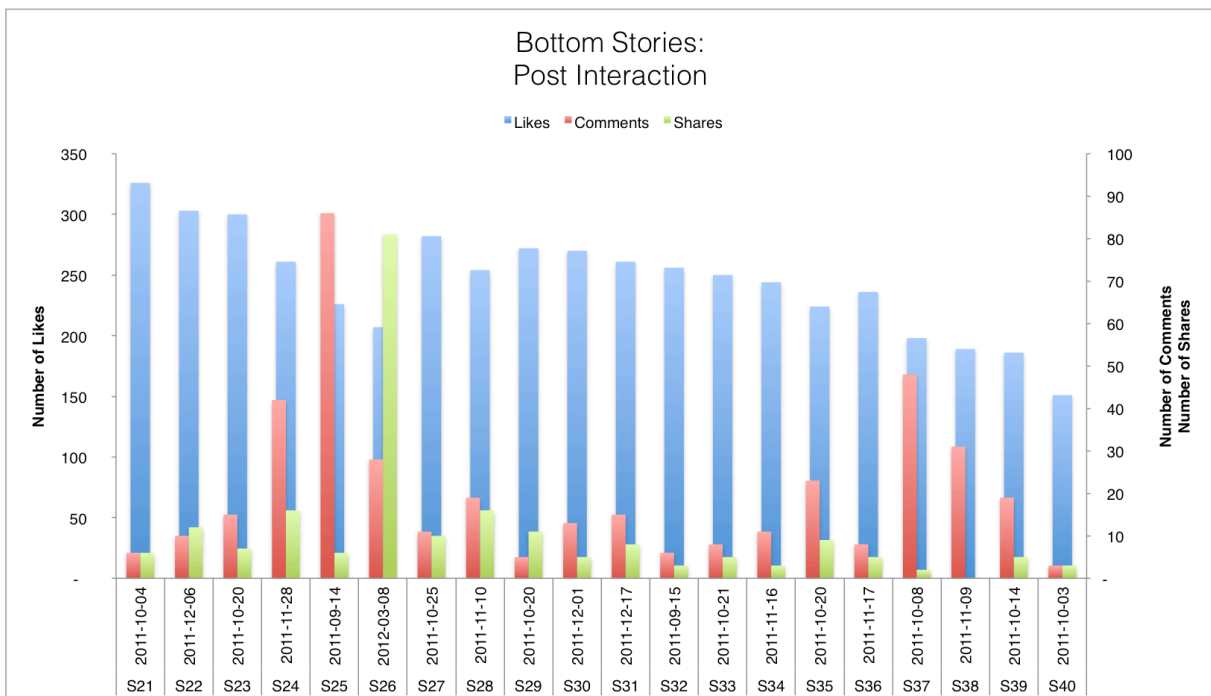


Graph 4 Distribution of interaction for the bottom 20 stories.

As previously mentioned there were several outliers within the first selection, and many of these, naturally, were included in the second selection. For the top stories, which are presented in graph 5, there is one in particular, S1, which diverges, exceeding the others by far. S5 also has a distinguishably high portion of shares. Noticeably, almost all the stories are posted in 2014 (10 posts) or 2015 (7 posts), but there is one story represented from each of the other years: 2011, 2012, and 2013.



Graph 5 Interaction per post in likes, comments, and shares for the top 20 stories.



Graph 6 Interaction per post in likes, comments, and shares for the bottom 20 stories.

For the bottom stories, which are presented in graph 6, there are also a few stories that noticeably differ, such as S25 (with regard to comments) and S26 (with regard to shares). Almost all the stories are dated to 2011 (19 posts) and one to 2012.

## 5 Analysis

For the qualitative analysis six themes of the most interacted posts are identified and processed. This study terms these themes as “speaking with own words”, “relatable content”, “a story that builds”, “conversation sparking”, “inspiring tone”, and “potential of meaningfulness by interaction”.

### 5.1 Speaking with Own Words

17 out of 20 top stories present the pictured individual’s story in his or her own words, whereas the bottom stories do not contain a single story aided by the subject’s own words. Instead there are remarks by the photographer, both related and unrelated to the picture, famous quotes, or invitations to commentators. This formula of storytelling (which incorporates the multimodality of micro story/quotation + picture), in which most top stories are structured, is one which Stanton has evolved organically and uses deliberately, as he strives for authenticity (Harvard University, 2015). Artistically and skillfully, Stanton conceals his part of the equation, almost giving the audience the impression that they are having a conversation “directly” with the subject of interview. Interpreting the story through the subject’s own words brings the audience closer to this subject; the boundaries of writer, reader, and subject, are loosened, in line with what an audience may desire from a Web 2.0 story, aiding the story’s tellability in this context.

The feature of having a quote by the subject indeed seems to be one that Brandon Stanton’s audience has come to expect of HONY over time. As one commentator (Cleghorn, 2014) notes with regard to S23 (a portrait of a man in the street with no caption): “But what did he say?? HONY definitely improved with quotes.” Without the element of the subject’s own words, the story is at risk of becoming more neutralized to the audience. It does not “tell a story” in the same dialogic way (which almost requires, or at least invites, a response). This seems to be the case for many bottom stories, where there is a lack of responses, indicating that the tellability of these stories fail to live up to expectation. When, instead introduced to the subject through his or her own words, the distance is diminished and it is almost as if one were to know the pictured person or take part of a journalistic piece. This is especially evident in a series of stories related to Mott Hall Bridges Academy (S5, S7, S17), where one

commentator (T. Miller, 2015) writes: “I feel like I know them personally and I’m proud of them.”

The text snippets also promote the already suggestive pictures. They co-exist with the photos narratively, in a fragmented and multi-linear way. It might be that this fragmented format prompts us to look closer at the different parts; the picture offers half a story and a quote can elevate this story and spur the imagination to flesh out the situation. This is clearly demonstrated by a comment (Trenner, 2014) to S3 (of an elderly woman, telling of how she once left her fiancé to study in Paris):

She’s FABULOUS! I want to know her. Look at the room she’s in, what she’s wearing, the book in her left hand, her body language! She’s so confident and self-aware. I’m sure studying in Paris didn’t hurt her self esteem.

The stories hold just enough substance to keep the audience interested and evoke its members to elaborate. A comment to the same story (S3) reads: “And this is one of those where I would give anything to hear ‘the rest of the story!’” (Laughlin, 2014) With the provided information, the audience can imagine different outcomes, demonstrated by the words of another commentator: “Probably the first of many great decisions this woman has made. She looks like she has a lot more GREAT stories, too.” (Lanier, 2014) In a thought-provoking way, Brandon Stanton’s blog pieces become a virtual jigsaw puzzle that invites the audience to piece the threads of the story together. This might be due to the linearity of social media storytelling, where the ending of a story can be, and in some sense maybe even be expected to be, open and fluctuating.

The “photo caption with a quote” can be compared to other storytelling methods, which Stanton has experimented with in order to try and engage his readers; some of these are displayed in bottom stories. One is the so-called *caption contest*, where Stanton posts a picture and the readers comment with the caption they think that the picture should have. This is, for example, done in two of the bottom stories (S25, S37). Stanton also tries to have readers send in their favorite quotes by, for example, famous people, which he then matches with photos (S29). This is a clear example of how Stanton is inviting his audience to interact in the storytelling. Intriguingly, this invitation seems more successful when it is implicit.

Another reason, I think, why letting the subject speak with his or her own words is engaging, is because it opens up for the stories to become relatable. The successful portraits are personal, focusing mostly on one individual human, in other case, humans (S6, S17, S19), or animals (S10, S20), letting their presence be felt as if one were to be face to face with

them. In contrast to this, some bottom stories do not show any live facial expression at all (S22, S31, S35, S38).

## 5.2 Relatable Content

Relatable content, that is content which is relatable in terms of the experience of being a human today, dealing with everyday life and life struggles. This specific aspect speaks to the embeddedness of the stories, due to their offline environment. The importance of a relatable content becomes evident in the light of a participatory culture, where media content is remixed and transformed by interactions with the material. As members of the audience personalize media content, the relevance of a story is, to some extent, measured by what that story says about the individual user. If a member of the audience does not relate, then why interact at all? There are especially two aspects noticeable in many of the top stories, which I think highlight the essence of how the content becomes relatable: one is of character (a humanizing way of describing the protagonist) and the other is of tale (revolving around an everyday hero).

“If only ALL journalists were like Brandon. No agenda. No slant. Just asking questions and showing the human side of life”. This is how commentator Jennifer Lewis (2015) puts it. This is remarkable, since Stanton is deliberate in his storytelling format, but by letting the subjects speak their own words, the stories become humanizing and thus relatable. As Lewis (2015) adds: “we’re all human”.

Stanton accomplishes this humanizing portrayal of people on the street (S2, S5, S6, S9, S14, S15, S18), famous people (S6, S7), people from other countries, with other cultures, (S8, S19) as well as of an older generation (S3, S11). The last category is perhaps particularly noteworthy, since older generations might not usually be as well represented on social media.<sup>10</sup> Commentator Patrick Sprung (2015) expresses this humanizing experience as follows:

I've been following honey for a while now - I check it out every day - first thing, with my coffee. Consistently mind-blowing, sometimes even tear inducing (and I'm not that sentimental)...whoever

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<sup>10</sup> For example, with regard to S3, commentator Tariq Fancy (2014) writes: “I especially like this post because I think we tend to sometimes dismiss and undervalue our elderly.”

would have thought that the generally narcissistic fb platform could produce such a life-changing gem of a page. I can honestly say I'm a better human being for having spent time here. Thanks Brandon - you're one of a kind.

Just like the words of this commentator (Sprung, 2015) indicates, many interactions may be considered to be related to some essence provoked through the shared experience and associations of what it is to be human and be living in our society today. Members of the audience may become attached to the protagonists and wish to interact to express this shared experience. For example, Liz Samara (2013) writes in a comment to S1 (which is a self-portrait of a student, a picture she has taken in her underwear declaring the ownership of judgment of her own body):

I think you are beautiful! I actually get comments said about my weight cuz im [sic] “too thin” and therefore ppl [sic] call me anorexic, drug addict, bony, and i [sic] apparently need to “eat a fucking cheeseburger” We are all different and unique and beautiful in our own way

The featured stories can be reveling in terms of the level of intimacy; as previously mentioned Stanton does ask personal questions, often related to strong emotions. This creates vulnerability on behalf of the subjects, but also opens up for members of the audience to relate on a deeper level, creating an opportunity of emotional, and thus empathic, infectivity. For example, the student in S1 is showing herself vulnerable by posting a picture in her underwear. Likewise, a blind man tells us of his encounter accidentally colliding with someone on the street (S15). We are also invited into an intimate moment of a family portrait in relation to the hopes and expectations we have for our children (S19). President Barack Obama (S7) speaks of his father walking out on him and his mother, for which a commentator (Winchester, 2015) expresses:

This picture is deeply touching, It’s almost as if we’ve stumbled onto a private moment we weren’t meant to see. The look on his face is so humbling, but also reassuring. It’s familiar. It’s vulnerability and the leader of the free world is vulnerable...like us.

The audience reacts on this humanizing essence, empathizes, and wishes to engage. Vulnerable as they may be, however, the protagonists of many stories are pictured as everyday heroes, tackling those human related challenges, such as relationship issues (S3), parenting (S2, S9), long hour workweeks (S2, S9), and living with disabilities (S12, S14, S15) – all with confidence and a smile on their lips. In the face of hardship, these individuals seem to endeavor with grace, dignity, and (above all) spirit. The child who does not differentiate between people and is open minded (S8), the parents offering their children a great start in life

and consider these life choices their wealth (S9), and the old woman looking at the world with bright eyes each day (S11).

S1, as previously mentioned, features a self-portrait of a student, which Stanton collected from the subject's own Tumblr blog and re-published on HONY along with the original caption.<sup>11</sup> The student is, by telling her story (in her own UGC), standing up to people who have harassed her all through her childhood:

This picture is for Emily from middle school, who bullied me incessantly [...] She made me feel like I didn't deserve to exist. Just because I happened to be bigger than her. I was 12. And she continued to bully me via social media into high school.

However, the story also emphasizes:

MOST OF ALL, this picture is for me. For the girl who hated her body so much she took extreme measures to try to change it. Who cried for hours over the fact she would never be thin. Who was teased and tormented and hurt just being who she was.

The student's story is relatable. She is a strong protagonist and "represents", as one commentator (Eagle, 2013) has it, "what a lot of women and some men struggle with today: body image".

Likewise, people identify with, and praise, a hard working mother in S2, who says: "After I finish my shift at the bakery, I start my shift at Starbucks. I work 95 hours per week at three different jobs." In response to this commentator Jeremy Sacramento (2015) writes: "95 hours a week, three kids, and still smiling? Lady, you're hero." Similarly, Jen Green (2015) expresses:

I am on my way to my weekend job, after working all week, because I am a single mom with a daughter who will graduate high school next year and wants to go to university for sciences. This post brought tears to my eyes. Sometimes hard work feels easy when it's for your kids. She is an inspiration.

In S3 a lady making the life changing choice of breaking her engagement when her fiancé left her with an ultimatum of her studying in Paris or them staying together, is featured. To this, Tamara J. Huesers (2014) comments:

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<sup>11</sup> Being able to repost UGC is an important element of the Web 2.0 environment, and thus, important for the embeddedness of the story. It also highlights the aspect of "speaking with own words" since no evident editor of the material is present.



I had a similar experience. I got offered a wonderful job as an assistant director of nursing in a small nursing home right out of college [...] Because of the distance of this job from where my boyfriend was going to school (only about three hours away!), he said, "If you take this job, we're over." I declined the job, and have always regretted it.

These kinds of interactions are fascinating in their engaging aspects. Not only do members of the audience seem to relate with the content of the stories; they also wish to add their own experiences. This is line with distinguishable participatory essences of new media narrative, where the audience as well as the author, is responsible for the outcome of the story, because of a more collaborative storytelling manner. The tellership is one of interaction by all parties. In a sense, the fate of the posted stories is completely dependent upon what happens with them once they are posted and at disposal for the audience to elaborate with. That this is permitted, and even encouraged, can be compared with the notion of the open-ended linearity. The story is allowed to take different turns, gaining different outcomes and relevance as the audience sees fit, since adding your own experience enriches the story.

For example is this enrichment the case of commentator Prakash Malla Thakuri (2015), who, in connection to S2, writes:

Her story reminds me [of] my own story back in 2008-2013. I'm an immigrant from Nepal with a civil engineering degree from TU Nepal. I got a part time job opportunity to work in a construction company as an junior Estimator which was not quite enough to support myself and my family back in Nepal and same time I had another full time job in Casino. I used to wake up at 7 in the morning and go to Engineering(construction) job 8AM- 2 PM and I had to go to Casino 4PM -midnight.

Or Elizabeth Resendis (2015), who is inspired by the statement of the Brooklyn student (S5) and wishes to express her own story and recognize of her own principal:

I don't think I've ever told you this before but before I started high school I finished middle school being bullied to the point that I hated going there because the school didn't even care. Once I met you you've managed to change my perspective and see that I mattered and that one day I was going to be going places in life. Never have I come across an adult who believes in every single kid. You're the best principle ever Mr. Leeper and thank you for always being there for me. You deserve to be recognized too just like Ms. Lopez! John Leeper [the underline is representing a Facebook tag]

Or the mother (Simmons, 2015), who reads of the 23 year old young man born with his organs externally (S14) and tells the story of her own son:

OH! my son was born with his organs externally too and he doesn't have a belly button, either. he was born with a giant omphalocele containing liver, intestines, and stomach. he's 6 now and just the light of our lives. we tell him all the time he can do anything he sets his mind to. i'm going to read this to him later. he always LOVES to hear about people who are similar to him. ☺

Elaboration can also take the form of speculating of a different outcome of events for the pictured subject's, such as Dee Bowers' (2014) comment (with regard to S3), which reads: "If

he was smart, he would have asked for your friends ticket and come along!” Indicating that instead of placing an ultimatum on his fiancée, the man should have taken the friend’s (who did decide to stay) ticket and gone with his wife-to-be. This is also remarkably noticeable in S15, which tells of a blind man (the subject) colliding with a woman on the street, causing her to drop her ice cream cone. Many members of the audience are almost disappointed that the story did not entail a romantic ending (Santi, 2015). One commentator (Butler, 2015) chooses to retell the story with a different scenery:

And here in the south it would have gone more like..... "Oh darlin! Im so sorry now there's ice cream all over your nice jacket!" "Not at all ma'am, my fault completely! You see, I've lost vision in one of my eyes and I'm still getting used of it." "Oh bless your heart. If you ain't got too much to hurry off to, what do u say we sit down and carry on this conversation over an ice cream, my treat! See this place used to be my uncle's, grew up in this place! Now that good ole' uncle Vernon's passed on his son Junior took it over. But dear lord in heaven they still make the best ice cream you'll find within a hundred miles of here!" "Well then ma'am, let's get to it! I could sure use a good conversation, not to mention some homemade ice cream! Now that's a good time even a blind man can see!" (They both chuckle and walk inside) and CUT.

When the story fails to take the anticipated, or perhaps desired turn, the audience thus steps in in accordance with their interactive part in storytelling.

However, the story seems to need to be engaging enough to begin with, for the audience to take up their part of the tellership. Traces of audience elaboration can be found of one of the bottom stories (S23), where the commentators are prompted by the photo to interact. “Intriguing” writes user Cathy Ward (2011) and Joshua Dendy (2011) expresses: “He’s been down a few roads in his day.” However, there does not seem to be enough material to spur a further elaboration, a certain level of stimulating pieces needs to be provided. Noticeably, the most interacted story (S1) is also the textually most voluminous one.

### 5.3 A Story That Builds

Many of these true-life event stories are also *good stories*, in the sense that they are designed almost as if they were scripts for potential blockbuster movies. This is perhaps especially evident in the case of the story series of Mott Hall Bridges Academy (S5, S7, S17). In S7, President Barack Obama is interviewed:

“Who has influenced you the most in your life?”  
“My mother. She had me when she was 18 years old, and my father left when I was one year old, so I never really knew him. Like a lot of single moms, she had to struggle to work, and eventually she also struggled to go to school. And she’s really the person who instilled in me a sense of confidence and a sense that I could do anything. She eventually went on to get her PhD. It took her ten years, but she did it, and I watched her grind through it. And as I got older, like everyone else, I realized that my mother wasn’t all that different than me. She had her own doubts, and fears, and

she wasn't always sure of the right way of doing things. So to see her overcome tough times was very inspiring. Because that meant I could overcome tough times too."

The content of the story, the daily life struggle, is of course relatable: "I'm a single mother trying to get my Ph. D. I hope my 7 year old daughter sees me the same way you see your mother." (Sparkman, 2015) Obama's mother is an everyday hero: "What a woman. She turned what others would consider a 'mistake' at 18 into a President." (Koveos, 2015) However, commentators also glimpse a bigger picture, not the least because the story builds in a "meta"-way. The story series is namely closely related to the notion of HONY "making it", as the stories traveled across different social media before making it to the national news. Members of the audience were practically ecstatic over the turn out:

HONY introduced us to Vidal, who introduced us to Ms. Lopez, who introduced us to Mott Hall Bridges Academy, who introduced us to a community in need which connected to the whole world, thus introducing them all to Ellen and then President Obama. A boy with a single mother ultimately connecting to another boy with a single mother. Wow. (Alexandro, 2015)

S17 (featuring a statement from Brandon Stanton himself, of his journey with Mott Hall Bridges Academy) becomes an ultimate story of "HONY, the phenomenon": "Brandon-- from unemployed to photographing the president! This is the American Dream." (Perry, 2015)

In the period of 2011 to 2015, *Humans of New York* has clearly become a phenomenon and being interviewed by Brandon Stanton is almost a life changing experience in itself (which is fascinating because the featured stories are usually about life changing moments in the subject's life). The man interviewed in S12 simply states: "I knew you'd stop me one day." Perhaps it can be compared to the notion of Internet *memes* – some stories on the Internet just keep building over time, assembling more and more associations as it exchanges hands and is remixed by various Internet users.<sup>12</sup>

In one sense, the top stories (generally posted at a later point in Stanton's career) therefore might attract attention simply because it has become "a thing" to be on HONY. There is actually one of the bottom stories, which is addressing a similar topic (that a Mexican billionaire tweeted about HONY (S38)). Clearly, this "hype" aspect is only relevant once one has "made it".

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<sup>12</sup> Meme – "A humorous image, video, piece of text, etc., that is copied (often with slight variations) and spread rapidly by Internet users." ("meme," 2015)

Another aspect one has to take into consideration with regard to the Mott Hall Bridges Academy story series, is the transmedia storytelling-essences. In graph 5, it is notable that S5 has a proportionally increased portion of shares compared to the rest of the top stories. This might be precisely because S5 became transmedial, going viral on social media, making it to the national news, to the oval office, and initiating fundraisers. Therefore, the original story (S5) could be considered as a sort of “this is what started it”-piece. Transmedial elements might also play a vital part in why S1 (the story of the self-portrait of the student) took off so tremendously, surpassing the others stories by far. It appeared on the student’s own Tumblr blog before Brandon Stanton re-posted it, and the initial story (as well as its appearance on HONY) was recognized in national media, causing other bloggers to join in the conversation. For example, many top comments are dated to December 2013, over a year after the story is posted on HONY. This occurrence, of a story gaining relevance in waves over time, is one which this study terms “revivals” and we shall return to this notion in the discussion.

#### 5.4 Conversation Sparking

Conversation sparking stories hold elements of starting conversations, often causing members of the audience to interact and discuss with one another. Many of the top stories also touch upon various issues in society; social issues, like education (S2, S9), controversial issues, like body weight (S1), nationality borders (S8), and immigrants (S2), or current issues, like racism (S5).<sup>13</sup> These are conversation starters. This becomes clear as one scouts the comment section; the commentators often react by responding as if all participants sat around the same dinner table, sharing their own remarks, stories, or outbursts or reaction in relation to the fate of the individual, issues of society at large or one’s own experiences. The story branches spin offs, which are applicable to a greater context. In contrast, commentators on the earlier stories make remarks on for example fashion, photo composition, neighborhoods in New York, as well as visual appearance of the individual (S21, S22, S24, S26, S27, S30, S32, S33, S34). Some associations are made, but these never really take off and create their own meaningful platform, they are dependent on the original story for any value of content. A common trait is

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<sup>13</sup> S5 was posted in the aftermath of an entire fall of demonstrations against racisms, due to the shooting in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9 in 2014.

also to try and make a “clever” comment, which is far from unique on the Internet (compare it to, for example, memes). The comments of photocomposition and fashion, for example, might also be relatable for a smaller group of people, who have the relevant expertise in question, whereas issues that affect society at large are interesting for a larger group of people. If we return to the notion of the dinner table: when is a story worth telling (when is it tellable)? When it is of relevance, or interest, to the people in the conversation. This is a natural outcome of the stories being posted in social media, that this social aspect is highlighted.

The student’s story (S1) touches upon the controversial issue of size and body image and commentators struggle to agree upon whether or not she is doing a good deed, posting the picture, or whether or not she needs to care for her health. For example, commentator Joshua Messier (2013) writes: “I know that this is about to piss a lot of people off, but I don’t agree with this at all. There is a difference between celebrating characteristics that you were born with, and choosing to live an unhealthy lifestyle.” Many are horrified by other commentators and wish to take the student in defense.<sup>14</sup>

S2, with the hard working mother, was slightly controversial, as the woman in the photo appears to be Latino. Commentator Jacob Paul Stevens (2015) addresses this:

You people can say all you want about “illegals” (we don’t even know she is one. The very fact that some of you assume she is is pretty racist.), but a lot of these “illegals” have more ambition in their tiny finger than you do in your whole body. And that ambition, if I remember history correctly, was what built the nation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

There is also a controversy regarding “the American dream”, which is brought into question by S2: “To everyone saying this is the American Dream: no. Working 95 hours a week—working more than twice as much as we have decided is a full-time week—in order to give your children a good shot is not the American Dream.”

In one of the bottom stories (S24) there is a potential conversation sparker, which indeed causes the commentators to interact with one another. The comments are initially somewhat superficial, until someone (Haven, 2011) turns on the judgers:

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<sup>14</sup> For understandable reasons, the offending comments are not to be found in the comment thread (as discussed in the method section, Stanton has moderators clearing the comment section from attacks on the subject).

Sorry. All this b.s. about ‘true beauty at any age.’ We get messages 24/7 that our looks are unacceptable, our faces too old, our butts too big, the thingummes [sic] under our armpits or elbows are ugly. This is the logical endpoint of those values and that thinking. What could be more predictable?

This, indeed, is an issue in our society and the conversation touches upon both transsexual identity and feminism. How does this conversation differ from the popular stories? In one aspect specifically: the comments mainly concern the pictured individual and do not take off in the same way as with the popular stories to turn the debate into a societal one. I believe that S24 simply does not hold ground to be a valid case in a larger debate – since the commentators do not know any circumstances of the pictured individual (it is a portrait with a caption by Stanton himself, which reads “Forever Young”), they are left to guess and elaborate, focusing on the single piece instead of being able to plug it into a greater context. This could, however, also be true of many top stories. What do we really know of these people’s circumstances, apart from their own statements? Is it precisely that personal touch which causes us to interact?

A story that might be described as “cute”, conveying sweetness and being attractive in an endearing way, like S10 (picturing a dog with one blue and one brown eye), can also spark a conversation. In this case regarding the use of expressions like “Native American myth”. The caption of S10 reads: “His owner told me that according to a Native American myth, dogs with different colored eyes can see both heaven and earth.” The comment section is full of remarks with regard to employing such expressions, claiming cultural origins. Commentator Ahmed Faraz Aslam (2014) sums it up nicely: “He is cute as hell and that ain’t no myth.”

## 5.5 Inspiring Tone

Inspiring protagonists, with confidence, as well as positive, uplifting, hopeful, and “cute” content (which makes us happy); all of these fall under a sort of category of an inspiring, one might almost say “tone of voice” (however, there is no sound on the web page). This is demonstrated in S18, where a young, smiling girl states (in response to what the happiest moment in her life was): “I don’t think I have one yet but it’s probably coming up and it’s going to be a surprise.” She personifies a positive, uplifting and hopeful tone of voice. Undoubtedly, almost all of the top stories feature this element, and while none of the bottom stories are spurring opposite reactions, they are definitely more flat and uninspiring of affection. The pictured individuals of the bottom stories are simply nondescript.

The strong characters of the top stories are inspiring; these people are nothing short of self-made and are far from moping (S1, S2, S3, S5, S7, S9, S11, S12, S14, S18). The student of S1, for example, is not devastated, instead she is declaring her independence and dignity. After reciting numerous of horrible situations where she was treated badly because of her weight, she proclaims: “I’m so over that.” Likewise, S2, the story about a mother working 95 hours a week at three different jobs to put her kids through college, displays a strong character at heart. The woman in the picture says: “And when they [the children] finish, I want to go to college too. I want to be a Big Boss. I’m a boss at the bakery right now, but just a little boss. I want to be a Big Boss.” The elderly lady, of S3, who tells us that she left her fiancé when he would not let her study in Paris, is confident and, as commentator Amber Clark (2014) puts it “a true role model for young women!!”. She (Clark, 2014) further exclaims: “i [sic] just wish the media would portray positive stories such as this”.

There also seems to be a tendency of cute content being popular. As far as I can tell, it is simply because it makes the audience happy. The top comments are generally shorter, and there is a tendency of puns, Internet cleverness, and pure joyous exclamation. Like S13, featuring a kid dressed up as a bunny or S16 picturing a boy and his dog dressed up as Batman and Robin, where there are many exclamations of “cuteness”. Likewise S4, featuring a wonderfully sweet girl laughing at the camera proves a good example of how this type of positive content might make us happy. It is almost as if the audience wants to participate in the same spirit as the post. Bill Curtis (2014) for example, simply writes: “She wins the Internet today.” George Ikeadiashi (2014) is a bit more expressive with his feelings: “I smiled with my heart. Cheesy but true... Again, the best thing in my feed. After reading of the Algerian flight, the latest Malaysian flight, Palestine vs Israel... Her innocence, smile and the joy from having her photo taken, gives me hope.”

An interesting comparison can be made between S20 and S35 – the relatable experience of “Monday” and of “Laundry Day”. Why would the picture of the dog (S20) be more relatable than the advertisement picture of the sour guy about to do his laundry (S35)? Well, one answer might be authenticity; the dog is simply authentic, whilst the staged picture is not. This makes the dog more relatable, it feels “real”, and sparks more emotion. More likely, however, is simply the fact that the dog is much cuter.

## 5.6 Potential of Meaningfulness by Interaction

An important aspect to account for is not only that members of the audience interact because a certain content is meaningful per se, but also that the audience *makes* it meaningful by interacting. If there is a potential of meaningfulness, the audience steps up to fulfill the stories, in line with the integrated role of authors and readers in social media. Whether that is by liking, commenting or sharing (which also can be seen as a form of transmedia storytelling, letting the stories be told in a different setting, potentially also a different medium). Therefore, stories that hold enough substance to be engaging to begin with and also are able to be constructed, and re-constructed, in a numerous ways, hold the potential of meaningfulness by interaction. Thus, it is not as simple as saying that there is a specific outcome due to substance, instead authors have to open up to the possibility that the content (and its meaningfulness) is up to the readers to decide by how and why they engage with the material. This is due to the fact that the stories are not only intriguing by themselves, they are also part of a conversational context. The concept of tellability in social media is dependent upon engagement and highlights the social, dialogic, aspects of a story. We socialize around media – news is social, content is social, and our interactions are social. Social media material is constantly fluctuating and adaptable, because we intervene and personalize it. Posting a story on Facebook inevitably puts it in the midst of this social context, where members of the audience are ascribing relations, associations, and relevance to the story.

Therefore, these stories are made meaningful in a way they never would, were it not for the social network they are posted in and the interactions they are receiving. The comment section could be considered an asset for the storytelling in collaboration, where the pictured individuals resonate with the audience through empathy and the audience then wishes to engage in the story. Adding their own experiences or thoughts, allow members of the audience to alter the faith of the story, elevating its associations and spreading it onwards. These participatory features, of course, are not unique to HONY, but build upon the culture of new and social media, which is all about mixing, remixing, and sharing content. Members of the audience are allowed, and even encouraged, in Web 2.0 to participate and collaboratively shape the fate of the pictured individuals. The stories contain everyday, relatable, meaningful content, which also is *made* meaningful by participating, conversing and integrating. Just like one of those stories I used to rush home from school to be able to tell at the dinner table.



## 6 Discussion

This section will reflect first upon quantitative, and then qualitative, outcomes, whereupon the claims of the study will be addressed.

### 6.1 Quantitative Analysis

A general observation is that almost all the top stories are posted in 2014 (10) and 2015 (7) while almost all the bottom stories are posted in 2011 (see graph 5 and 6). There are, however, a few deviations, which are important to note. A factor in this equation is probably that *Humans of New York* has grown more popular over time, gaining more followers, and thus stories posted more recently are exposed to a greater audience, causing them to spread further and faster. This is supported by the data in graph 2, where there is a noticeable increase of interaction with the site overall between 2013 and 2014 (something which can probably be credited to Brandon Stanton's *New York Times* bestselling book *Humans of New York* (2013) hitting the stores in October 2013).

Among the 573 posts from 2014 as well as the 312 posts from 2015, the 17 top stories from these years were, nevertheless the most interacted ones and out of the 489 posts from 2011, those 19 of the bottom stories were indeed the least successful ones. Thus, there is a relevance in investigating these stories with regard to content, even if popularity is partly due to HONY's existing or non-existing hype.

Another reason why the top stories generally are posted at a later point in time could also be that Stanton has found a successful storytelling format. As previously mentioned, he has worked hard to find a sustainable and prosperous formula in micro story/quotation + picture. Popularity indeed also seems intimately connected with this structure. For instance, one story from 2011 (S11) makes the top list and that story indeed holds elements of his later employed and successful format. Looking at the interactions of S11, however, it also becomes evident that the story has received "revivals" after the "boom" in 2013, which indicates that it could be a late-coming audience that has caused the story's popularity. A probable answer may incorporate both elements of a successful format and of a vibrant audience (which has to be obtained over time). In any case, if it is due to the audience that Stanton has built and maintained, the members nevertheless choose to engage with *this* story above any other from 2011. The same can be said of the story from 2012, as well as 2013.

Over time the distribution of likes, comments, and shares has shifted somewhat (as displayed by graph 1), however, likes portions more than 90 % of interactions, overall, for all of the years. It is hard to say if one can draw any particular conclusion of changes in these distributions over time, since the posts remain active on the site and engagement with them are possible at any point in time.

Perhaps then, is it more useful to isolate the distributions to the top and bottom stories, separately, as displayed in graph 3 and graph 4, where the noticeable difference between the two was the one between comments and shares. All together, the shares had a greater portion of the interactions for the top stories (6 %) than the bottom stories (4 %), while the bottom stories had a greater comment portion of the interactions (7 %) than the top stories (3 %). This may be because there are transmedial elements in many of the top stories, which have been featured, in, for example, national media, such as *New York Times* and *CNN*. Thus, it may induce an individual member of the audience to further share the story to other places, more so than it perhaps would with a story that has not “made it” elsewhere. The portion of comments exceeds the portion of shares for the bottom stories, which is probably more so due to a lack of shares than an increase of comments. There are, however, some bottom stories, which have a remarkable high portion of comment interaction (compared to the other bottom stories), as displayed by graph 6. For the highest one (S25), comments are most likely induced by the caption contest feature that Stanton initiates. This is also the case with the story with the second largest amount of comments in the bottom stories (S37). Out of the bottom stories, S26 has the highest amount of shares, as far as I can tell there is nothing which in particular sets the content apart from the rest of the stories. Rather, it could be that this is the only post from 2012 and as shown in graph 2 there is a tendency indicating that, over this specific time period, the portion of shares were generally higher than that of comments (there is a noticeable difference between 2011 and 2012). However, as previously mentioned, it can be deceptive to analyze with regard to the date the post was posted, as interactions can supervene at any time once the story is posted.

This is also true of the top stories, which are presented in graph 5, and this might also be the reason why S1 has such outstandingly numbers of interactions – the post has simply had more time to gather engagement. This is supported by the fact that many top comments are dated over a year after the story was posted, showing that the post is still sparking conversations. S5, S7 and S17 also have a distinguishably high portion of shares. Noteworthy,

all of these stories belong to the series of Mott Hall Bridges Academy. These are also stories that could be considered in terms of transmedial elements, appearing in national news and relating to the bigger story of the phenomenon of *Humans of New York* itself. A development that might be hard to determine, is if the portion of shares really is increasing over time (since many top stories are dated at a later point in time). If one were to look at graph 1, the answer might be “not particularly”, however this may also be because the number of posts from 2015 is underrepresented (as the stories were collected already in April 2015) and perhaps these figures would appear differently if the data were to be collected at the end of 2015.

As previously mentioned S11, however, from 2011 also has a distinguishably high portion of shares and many of the comments date from as late as 2015, which indicates that the story has had at least one “revival” since it was posted. The notion of what this study terms as “revival” is supported by the fact that interactions, in many cases, cannot be confined to one single time period. Instead old stories might get a “revival” at a later point in time – really, all that has to happen is that a new member of the audience scrolls down the pathway of old stories and interacts with them in order for the stories to gain new relevance and being spread onwards once again. Indeed, scrolling down HONY’s official Facebook page, one can find remarks by “late coming” fans who claim they have gone through all of the posts. It is almost as if the official HONY Facebook page was an everlasting electronic, viral library, filled with stories only waiting for someone to borrow them once that someone finds them relevant, an action which causes the stories to be recommended to friends. This tendency, where interactions flush, supports the notion of virality in terms of some sort of infectivity. However, again, it is important to view this as a participatory act. For some reason the story must be of some relevance to each participating audience member interacting in the “revival”. This can be connected to the notion of how we are to interpret statistics, in terms of actually reaching out and having a lasting impact on an audience. This study deals with the metrics of likes, comments, and shares, and therefore investigates interactive features. We know that these stories engage the audience, and apparently, may continue to do so over an extended period of time, where these flushes of interaction come in waves. Maybe then, the idea of a viral library, answers this in some way. The hub, the collection of stories, the forum itself, could be a lasting impact.

The notion of “revivals” also opens up to crucial questions of how one ought to observe the journey of a story online. Would it perhaps be more reasonable to follow up on one single

story over time, being able to follow through on all shares, for example, to account for how and why the story is altered, when it receives a “revival” and how this circulation may be cyclic – something which closely resembles the notion of memes on the Internet in general. The notion of the S11 “making it” to the top (displayed in graph 5) is remarkable, as it displays a sort of new media logic, where interactions with a post can cause it to “bubble up” from the depths. A story posted on HONY today will be displayed it to a huge audience, just like a story in major daily newspaper would. However, in social media, there are also voyagers seeking posts in the depths and all that is require to cause a story to revive, may be one single like.

## 6.2 Qualitative Analysis

The outcomes of the analysis are in concordance with previous studies. These previous studies tell us that emotion is strongly connected to virality (Berger & Milkman, 2012) and that positively associated content is more likely to be spread than negatively linked content, however both of these have a stronger tendency to be spread further than emotionally neutral content (Guadagno et al., 2013). The findings of Jonah Peretti are also confirmed with such positive correlation, in addition to emphasizing an “element of humanity” (Friman, 2014, Aug/Sep).

The outcomes, however, also add more substance to these previous findings, noting an importance of relevance of content in the stories. Notably, in the analysis of the material, 17 out of the 20 top stories featured the photographed subject’s own words, while none of the bottom stories displayed this feature. Like discussed in the previous segment, this can be interpreted to be both a successful format in itself (supported by its intriguing, open-ended and invitingly dialogic aspects, well adapted to Web 2.0) as well as a feature that the audience of HONY has come to expect over time. Letting his protagonists speak with their own words, however, Brandon Stanton allows for his subjects to become relatable. If an audience cannot relate, members cannot empathize to the same extent, which is important in the context of connecting emotion to virality. I would also like to add that inspiration could be seen as a form of activation or mobilization, causing the individual member of the audience to interact and it does not seem far-fetched to assume that in order for a content to be inspirational, one has to be able to relate to it. As noted by the *UN Global Pulse* (Sustainability Media Lab, 2014, November 24), positive messages also inspire people to move from awareness to action

(which perhaps in the case of members of the HONY audience could be interpreted in terms of interaction with the material and taking part in the story). I think this is undoubtedly one of the most evident patterns in the research material. The portrayed subjects are strong individuals, who tackle life struggles high-spirited. This celebration of the individual in this networked way is a noteworthy socializing essence in a networked era. However, the pictured individuals are also vulnerable humans, revealed by answering personal questions. This may enable members of the audience to dare to tell their own story in relation to the post.

However, there is a tendency of turning harsh social reality into picture perfect stories of the individual life struggle. This is hardly unique to HONY and probably neither to social media in general, instead it can perhaps be considered a modern ideology (in the “blockbuster movies and Marvels era”) of some sort of American Dream and “the power of one”. It is probably no coincidence that over 90 % of all interactions constitute of likes, or that the top stories are as popular as they are (or that HONY is such a hit on Facebook) – indeed, Facebook has the layout of a sort of picture perfect scenery and of course this aspects reflects upon the outcome of what stories are mostly interacted with. There is a reason there is no “dislike-button”; the experience of being on Facebook would probably quickly become a horrible one. If I am to keep an account on Facebook, the time I spend on there should be worthwhile. Noteworthy is that Brandon Stanton has worked hard to keep his hub environment a positive one, for example through moderators of the comment sections.

However, even if the conversation is moderated, it seems members of the audience engage to talk about everyday issues. Socially we can do this through stories and many top stories are indeed conversation sparkers, opening up for addressing social issues. This only seems applicable, however, if greater parts of the audience in the conversation find the issue relevant. Perhaps it can be compared to the phenomenon of the famous (or infamous) gold and white or black and blue dress.<sup>15</sup> Over a night, a Tumblr photo took the Internet by storm and had the entire networked world discussing the color of one dress. Due to a light phenomenon in the photo, people apprehended the colors differently. Of course this was

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<sup>15</sup> ”A photograph of a dress on Tumblr prompted an Internet discussion: What color is it? Some people see a white and gold dress in dark shadow. Some people see a blue and black dress washed out in bright light. Some people see one interpretation and then switch to the other.” (Corum, 2015)

discussed widely, not only was everyone stricken; people also had a given standpoint to argue from. It simply was a conversation of relevance and interest to a great audience.

It is also fascinating that stories seem to be interacted with if the interactions hold a potential meaningfulness to them. This implicates that the question of engagement in social media and that of how stories are shaped by social media, are integrated. Stories are defined by being interacted with and the outcome is determined once it has entered the realm of social media. This can perhaps be circled back to the notion of convergence and what the Internet has changed in terms of audience engagement. If content becomes meaningful by interaction, then, of course, it is not the meaning of stories that is defined by the Internet, only by which means we make them meaningful. We give applauses at the theater, we “like” on Facebook, nevertheless the action happens between people, and is one of human connection. In the end, it is also a social action and the stories on Facebook have to be kept social in order to gain relevance in a social medium.

### 6.3 Claims

The analysis was conducted based on the theoretical and analytical framework, in order to extract substance in a methodological way. To answer the research two questions of what it is about the stories of HONY that engages people to interact and how these stories are shaped by their medium, the material was addressed in context. This was due to the framework of the research, which proclaimed the essence of new media to lie within what author and readers are creating in a collaborative manner, and engagement was seen as an act of relevance on behalf of the participating member of the audience who chooses to remix the story. The identified patterns in the qualitative analysis are, thus, one reading of an extensive material, which has taken into consideration stories and story interactions in the online (and offline) environment of Facebook.

## 7 Conclusion

### 7.1 Answering the Research Questions

The aim of this research was to contribute to the understanding of audience engagement in social media storytelling by delving deeper into posts and post interactions of HONY.

#### 7.1.1 “What is it about the stories of HONY that engages people to interact?”

The analysis of the material indicates that one aspect might be a successful storytelling format, which the blogger Brandon Stanton has developed over time, where he lets the photographed subject speak with his or her own words; a dialogic style, which invites the audience to interact, elaborate, and piece together a sort of virtual jigsaw puzzle. This is a format that the audience of HONY has come to expect, which is also something that has to be taken into consideration. Engagement could be described in terms of an effective storytelling format as well as an already vibrant audience, which readily engages in what they expect to come. Another important outcome of the analysis is that *Humans of New York* has become a phenomenon over time. Therefore, both being featured on the site and interacting with the content has an element of “hype”.

The outcome of this study confirms previous studies, which indicate that emotionally triggering content (especially positive) becomes viral. However, this study also adds an element of relatable and, thereby, inspiring content. This is due to relatable aspects of humanizing stories and everyday heroes. The HONY stories also become conversational ventilation for social issues, where experience, thoughts and comments can be shared. Therefore, the stories need to hold a potential of meaningfulness of interaction, since members of the audience *make* the stories meaningful by interacting with them.

#### 7.1.2 “How are the stories of HONY shaped by their medium?”

The outcomes of the study demonstrate that the stories are to some extent dependent on the interaction of the audience for their outcome. In social media the full experience of a story is only completed by the entire context of a photo, caption, interactions, and the very feature of being posted on *Humans of New York*. Therefore, it is up to members of the audience, rather than the author, to decide the relevance and turnout of story. Being posted in social media put the stories in the midst of a social interaction and, therefore, they will be addressed and

treated as social inputs. They become conversation starters, just like a story at a dinner table may be. On Facebook, the stories become part of a viral library, where they are made relevant by the interactions of members of the audience at any given point in time, causing them to receive what this study terms “revivals”. Facebook is also a picture perfect provoking environment, and it may be that this atmosphere partly shapes the engagement of the stories. The stories are also shaped by their medium in the sense that they have to be kept social, in order to gain relevance on social media.

## 7.2 Further Research

Based on the outcomes of this study, I have two suggestions for further research.

Firstly, an exploration of social media stories, in terms of the level of relevance they are ascribed, might be productive to measure over an extended period of time. This could perhaps pinpoint and better explain the “revival” aspect of stories, identified in this study. It might also be generative to study this in relation to the theory of Internet memes.

Secondly, if one could follow up on the specific interactive feature of “sharing” on Facebook (identifying where and how people choose to share stories), this would be fruitful with regard to understanding how members of audiences choose to remix content, personalizing it before they send it onward. Perhaps this could further explore the notion of having to keep a story social, in order for it to receive relevance.

I believe there is much to be learned of audience engagement and narrative in social media. Studying stories on social media is a fascinating odyssey, where one has tickets to the front seat as the story of a human fate pulses through interactions and ascriptions of meaning by others.



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## Appendix

**Table 3** Figures of interaction and links for the posts of the second selection, for which Brandon Stanton [Humans of New York] is the author of all (when accessing the stories, please make certain that no inadvertent spacing appears in the copied link)

Story ID	Date Posted	Likes	Comments	Shares	Link
S1	2012-10-19	3 298 719	252 429	332 924	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/375691212504985/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/375691212504985/?type=1</a>
S2	2015-01-10	1 304 073	32 887	58 673	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/858863220854446/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/858863220854446/?type=1</a>
S3	2014-01-04	1 163 122	21 760	82 074	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/581844811889623/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/581844811889623/?type=1</a>
S4	2014-07-25	1 214 495	15 355	30 802	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/727593650648071/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/727593650648071/?type=1</a>
S5	2015-01-20	1 089 057	20 958	146 805	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/865948056812629/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/865948056812629/?type=1</a>
S6	2014-10-27	1 082 980	26 910	79 311	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/796883523719083/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/796883523719083/?type=1</a>
S7	2015-02-06	936 604	21 104	96 962	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/879794438761324/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/879794438761324/?type=1</a>
S8	2014-08-07	907 906	4 627	35 143	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/737629846311118/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/737629846311118/?type=1</a>
S9	2014-01-21	859 521	13 026	45 017	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/591404977600273/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/591404977600273/?type=1</a>
S10	2014-04-12	811 125	14 949	64 017	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/641553455918758/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/641553455918758/?type=1</a>
S11	2011-08-13	785 257	8 624	78 120	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/160887830651992/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/160887830651992/?type=1</a>
S12	2014-07-26	840 933	7 594	14 254	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/728543310553105/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/728543310553105/?type=1</a>



S13	2015-04-05	816 735	7 161	16 932	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/938340849573349/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/938340849573349/?type=1</a>
S14	2015-03-17	786 026	14 819	35 023	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/912239232183511/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/912239232183511/?type=1</a>
S15	2014-07-17	796 679	9 387	29 748	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/719056054835164/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/719056054835164/?type=1</a>
S16	2013-10-26	760 849	12 321	50 321	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.527171964023575.1073741826.102099916530784/543964462344325/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.527171964023575.1073741826.102099916530784/543964462344325/?type=1</a>
S17	2015-02-05	727 741	24 296	69 151	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/878725818868186/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/878725818868186/?type=1</a>
S18	2015-04-01	748 016	8 382	42 979	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/932736526800448/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/932736526800448/?type=1</a>
S19	2014-09-10	728 088	8 673	53 126	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/762131107194325/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/762131107194325/?type=1</a>
S20	2014-07-14	726 661	18 205	40 703	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/715822578491845/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/715822578491845/?type=1</a>
S21	2011-10-04	326	6	6	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/183620835045358/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/183620835045358/?type=1</a>
S22	2011-12-06	303	10	12	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/212580702149371/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/212580702149371/?type=1</a>
S23	2011-10-20	300	15	7	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/190111064396335/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/190111064396335/?type=1</a>
S24	2011-11-28	261	42	16	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/208059862601455/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/208059862601455/?type=1</a>
S25	2011-09-14	226	86	6	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/175133675894074/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/175133675894074/?type=1</a>
S26	2012-03-08	207	28	81	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.268276083246499.62113.102099916530784/268279579912816/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.268276083246499.62113.102099916530784/268279579912816/?type=1</a>

S27	2011-10-25	282	11	10	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/192306434176798/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/192306434176798/?type=1</a>
S28	2011-11-10	254	19	16	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/198665026874272/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/198665026874272/?type=1</a>
S29	2011-10-20	272	5	11	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/190150297725745/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/190150297725745/?type=1</a>
S30	2011-12-01	270	13	5	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/209221392485302/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/209221392485302/?type=1</a>
S31	2011-12-17	261	15	8	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/218726811534760/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/218726811534760/?type=1</a>
S32	2011-09-15	256	6	3	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/175715042502604/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/175715042502604/?type=1</a>
S33	2011-10-21	250	8	5	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/190505547690220/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/190505547690220/?type=1</a>
S34	2011-11-16	244	11	3	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/202017829872325/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/202017829872325/?type=1</a>
S35	2011-10-20	224	23	9	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/189990287741746/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/189990287741746/?type=1</a>
S36	2011-11-17	236	8	5	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/202076939866414/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/202076939866414/?type=1</a>
S37	2011-10-08	198	48	2	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/185215718219203/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/185215718219203/?type=1</a>
S38	2011-11-09	189	31	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/198623123545129/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/198623123545129/?type=1</a>
S39	2011-10-14	186	19	5	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/187771764630265/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/187771764630265/?type=1</a>
S40	2011-10-03	151	3	3	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/183080751766033/?type=1">https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/183080751766033/?type=1</a>

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