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Engagement and Empowerment
Digital storytelling as a participatory media practice

Digital storytelling is a participatory media practice of the digital era. It shares similar ideals and goals with participatory video and other amateur media practices which enable ordinary people to produce media content and to use media as a tool for civic engagement. What is distinctive of digital storytelling, however, is reliance on structured and facilitated workshops, emphasis on the art of storytelling, and the importance of the process of creating and sharing personal stories. This article explores different uses and purposes of digital storytelling, focusing on how it can contribute to empowerment of individuals and communities by developing digital skills needed for civic engagement in digitalised societies, providing a means for self-reflection and self-representation, and giving an opportunity to have a voice and to be listened to.

Digital storytelling (DST) is a form and a practice of participatory media in which digital media technology is used to create and share autobiographical stories of ordinary people. In well-structured, facilitated workshops, participants create short, first-person narratives, combining still images with a voiceover and other audio elements. These stories are shared with other workshop participants and in many cases also published online.

Besides being a specific participatory practice and form of media, DST can be regarded as a global movement which seeks to democratise the production of media content.[1]

Digital storytelling changes the traditional relationship between professional media producers and media consumers by enabling ordinary people to create digital stories themselves.[2] The philosophy of DST, as formulated by the founders of the Center for Digital Storytelling, emphasizes the importance of the stories of ordinary people, people's need to be heard, and the positive impact that sharing stories and understanding different experiences and perspectives can have in the real world.[3]

In this article, I explore the potential of DST in enhancing empowerment of individuals and communities, and especially of various marginalised groups often silenced and invisible in the mainstream media. I base my discussion on a review of literature on digital storytelling and participatory media, and on my personal experiences and observations as a trainer and facilitator of DST workshops in various projects and for various target groups. Some of these experiences have been reported more extensively in previous research-based or practice-oriented articles.[4]

I first will present the "classic" model of digital storytelling and compare it to other participatory media practices. I then will explore various contexts and uses of DST globally and in the Nordic region, and finally I will focus the analyses specifically to the empowerment potential of digital storytelling.

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The classic model of digital storytelling

The digital storytelling model was developed by community theatre professional Joe Lambert and the late performance artist and video producer Dana Atchley in the early 1990s – at a time when the Internet was only starting to become more accessible and widespread; when affordable and easy-to-use digital media tools were yet to be launched onto the market; and when no one had heard of such things as social media, YouTubers, or bloggers. It therefore is understandable, that for the pioneers of DST workshops, the idea of ordinary people being able to create their own digital multimedia pieces seemed exciting, even revolutionary.[5]

In 1994, Lambert and his partners established the Center for Digital Storytelling – since 2015 just StoryCenter – in Berkeley, California. The centre has hosted countless workshops for storytellers and taught the method to other storytelling trainers and facilitators in the United States and internationally.[6] DST has spread widely around the world, and its methodology has evolved as online environments and digital media tools have developed.

DST essentially is a facilitated group process.[7] Personal stories typically are developed and worked on in workshops, which last for several days, with assistance from one or more trainers and facilitators. The method does not require professional media skills or expensive professional equipment. Rather, digital stories are produced using whatever technology is available. Pictures can be taken with mobile phones, tablets, or digital cameras, and the story can be edited using free video editing applications on mobiles devices, laptops, or desktop computers.

A typical digital story combines visual storytelling based on photographs and other still images with a voiceover recorded by the author of the story. Digital stories also may include text elements, music, and audio effects. The final product is a short video, typically 2–4 minutes long. Digital stories are videos in the sense that they are compiled using video editing software and stored in some commonly used video file format such as MP4. They also often are published on video-sharing sites such as YouTube. They are not, however, based on moving video images, although besides still imagery, they may include short video clips, and they often use animations which imitate the movements of a video camera.

Although the final digital story might not include more text than the title and credits of the story, writing is an essential part of the production process. Stories are written – typically in a first-person narrative – and then recorded and added to the video as a voice-over audio track. This is what distinguishes the form of the digital story from a photo slideshow with text or music.

Participatory video experiments as a predecessor

The concepts of participatory media and participatory journalism have been used to refer both to participatory practices within the mainstream media, where amateur participants collaborate with professional journalists[8] and to those forms of media produced entirely or mainly by amateurs and then published and disseminated outside the mainstream media.[9] The latter alternatively are referred to as user-generated or user-created content, as community media, grassroots media, radical media, alternative media/journalism, citizens' media, or citizen journalism.[10]

Here I use the concept of participatory media in the latter sense, defining it as those media practices in which ordinary people (as opposed to media professionals) produce media content individually or in groups, either independently and on their own initiative or in institutionally initiated projects with the help of and/or training from media professionals. I prefer using this term (instead of journalism) because a large part of the content produced by amateurs does not meet the conventional criteria of journalism and the producers may not even aspire to do so.

One example of participatory media practices, which precedes digital storytelling, is

participatory video (PV). The first participatory video experiments date to the end of the 1960s. PV essentially is a community-based practice in which community members, either individually or in groups, create short videos on issues of concern to the community. These videos then are shown to the wider community and sometimes to decision-makers outside the community. This practice aims at raising awareness and empowering the community to solve its problems.[11] Other widespread forms of participatory media from the era before the digital revolution include community radio and different forms of alternative print media.[12]

Digital storytelling can be regarded as a form of participatory media or as a "digital-era version" of PV practice. It shares several ideals and goals with other participatory media initiatives, such as the will to democratise production of media contents, the goal of engaging and empowering citizens and communities, and the emphases on the importance of the process and participation over the product.[13]

Digital storytelling, however, has some unique characteristics such as the emphasis on personal autobiographical stories. Another distinctive feature is the strong reliance on facilitated workshops – which is typical of participatory video practices. That is why some authors have pointed out, that unlike many genuinely 'bottom-up' practices of producing and sharing user-generated content online, DST typically is an institutionally led and professionally facilitated practice.[14] These characteristics connect DST to various arts-based methods, and DST could be considered to be one.[15]

Yet another distinctive feature, especially in relation to many community radio and PV projects, is the seemingly individualistic nature of digital stories, as they often focus on personal life experiences. Digital storytelling does not, however, need to be limited to individual creativity and self-expression; it can just as well be used as a form of community media. DST workshops can be targeted at a specific community with the purpose of dealing with and finding solutions to problems facing the community or documenting the shared history and tradition of a community.[16]

Uses of digital storytelling

Digital storytelling workshops typically are organised in some sort of institutional environment. In different parts of the world, DST activities have been commonly carried out by schools, universities, libraries, museums, community centres, civil society organizations, development or youth projects, and public broadcasters.[17]

In Nordic countries, DST has been experimented on and contributed to over the years by several higher education institutions and by some private companies and cooperatives.[18] Various other organizations – such as schools, libraries, public broadcasters, and civil society organisations – have participated in DST initiatives. Knut Lundby[19] surveyed some examples of early DST initiatives in Sweden and Norway.

In Finland, the first documented DST activities took place in 2006 as part of the YLE Mundo project of the Finnish Broadcasting Company,[20] and DST started to arouse more attention and interest in the beginning of 2010s. Digital storytelling workshops so far have been mostly organised in the framework of various projects. Some workshops have been targeted at professionals, volunteers, or students who might use digital storytelling as a tool in their professional or volunteer work,[21] and some have been organised for specific target groups such as immigrants or youth.[22] In Finland, students of universities of applied sciences have shown considerable interest in adopting DST as a professional tool, experimenting in their thesis projects on using it for various occupational purposes.

Adaptability of the digital storytelling model makes it a useful tool for different projects, fields, professions, institutions, and target groups. Sometimes its activities have been carried out in local workshops where anyone interested in storytelling and learning new skills could participate.[23] In many cases, however, it has been used as a tool to serve broader objectives of the organization or the

project which hosts the workshop. In those cases, digital storytelling may be a more guided process, and the workshop and storytelling activities may be framed with a more or less explicit theme. The participants may be given a specific topic or a prompt which is in line with the workshop purpose and which guides the development of the story.

In various projects and initiatives, digital storytelling has been used to reflect on one's cultural identity; document a community's history and cultural heritage; create a dialogue between generations or social groups; for civic engagement and community development, personal growth and reflection, activism and advocacy; and for professional reflection and development.[24] The DST method also has been used in the context of health care and health education to produce experiential knowledge as an alternative to institutional, professional, and expert knowledge.[25]

From the beginning of the digital storytelling movement, a fundamental purpose has been to bring out the voices of ordinary people and especially of various marginalised groups in a society.[26] Often marginalised means various minority groups, such as ethnic minorities or sexual minorities, but it can just as well refer to any vulnerable and disadvantaged groups who do not have a voice or who are under-represented in the mainstream media. Depending on the social, cultural, and political context, these could include groups such as youth, women, elderly people, homeless people, poor people, or people with mental illness.

In Finland and other Nordic countries, two vulnerable groups which have been in the focus of several digital storytelling projects – or projects which use DST as one tool – have been asylum seekers and immigrants[27] and young people in general or youth at risk of social exclusion.[28]

Empowerment through storytelling

Like participatory media projects more generally, digital storytelling initiatives often aim at empowerment of the participating individuals and groups by encouraging and enabling them to get engaged in issues that affect their lives and their community. Some DST workshops are designed specifically to deal with issues of concern to the participating community and to find solutions to them through shared storytelling. In other cases, stories created in workshops may deal with more personal issues and provide support to personal development.

Empowerment is a somewhat problematic concept with varying uses and definitions.[29] Despite of its shortcomings, it is a useful concept when attempting to describe and understand positive transformations in individuals and communities which can be induced or enhanced by participatory media projects.

Empowerment refers both to the empowerment process and its outcomes.[30] In the context of digital storytelling, digital empowerment[31] provides a useful conceptual starting point. According to Mäkinen,[32] digital empowerment is an empowerment-as-enablement process in which technology is used to enhance empowerment which includes two essential aspects simultaneously: 1) increased personal growth, individual competence, and control over one's life, and 2) improved capacity to participate and act as an active citizen.

In addition, the concept of psychological empowerment[33] may be helpful for understanding those positive intrapersonal and interactional/interpersonal transformations which may occur along the process of reflecting on and narrating one's experiences and sharing the story with other workshop participants. For Zimmerman,[34] psychological empowerment includes 'beliefs that goals can be achieved, awareness about resources and factors that hinder or enhance one's efforts to achieve those goals, and efforts to fulfill the goals'.[35] The intrapersonal component of psychological empowerment involves people's perceptions of their control, competence, and efficacy, whereas the interactional component refers to their conceptions of their community and socio-political issues and environment.[36]

Naturally, the empowerment potential of digital storytelling is not actualised in all cases – not in all workshops and not with all individuals. Facilitators have a great responsibility to create the kind of safe and supportive

space, atmosphere, and process which could make the empowerment process possible, but everything does not depend on the facilitators alone. After all, one cannot force empowerment on someone.[37] So much depends on the participants themselves: their perceptions, motivations, and willingness to share their experiences.

I will look at the empowering potential of digital storytelling on a more concrete level in the following sections, illustrating the issues with some case examples.

Developing digital skills

Although at the heart of digital storytelling practice is the art of storytelling and not digital media technology,[38] creating one's own digital story almost inevitably builds the digital skills of the storyteller. By digital skills I refer to both the technical and creative skills involved in using digital media tools for creative expression and communication.[39] In some cases, skill-building can be an explicit objective of a workshop, in others it is simply a by-product of the storytelling activity.

In particular, educational institutions at different levels have used digital storytelling as a tool for learning digital skills and various literacies.[40] Several studies have shown that DST is an effective pedagogical tool. It develops multiple literacies (e.g. media literacy, visual literacy, digital literacy), information and communications technology (ICT) and digital media skills, storytelling skills, oral and written communication skills, collaborative skills, and conceptual and critical thinking skills. Moreover, it enhances learning of instructional, subject-related content in formal education.[41]

Apart from schools, digital storytelling has been used for skill-building with groups which might be in a disadvantaged position in terms of their ICT and digital media skills, such as elderly people (Kirjastot.fi), people over 50 and unemployed,[42] asylum seekers and immigrants,[43] and young people in developing countries.[44]

Learning new digital skills is not significant per se – it rather is the things people can do with those skills. In information societies, possessing sufficient digital skills and literacies has become one of the prerequisites of social inclusion, civic engagement, and democratic participation.[45] As Mäkinen[46] points out, however, learning new technology can start the empowering process but does not directly lead to digital empowerment, which is a more complex process through which people gain access to social networks, communicate and cooperate, and learn to act as active citizens.

Our experience from a DST workshop for young adults in RLabs Iringa, Tanzania[47] showed that learning new digital skills can be a very empowering experience for participants. Learning new skills was something the participants valued a lot and were excited about, and having new digital media skills made them feel optimistic about their future prospects. The participants' perceived self-efficacy was very high in the end.

Even if a person's perceptions of their digital skills do not reflect reality (the actual skills) completely accurately, from the perspective of empowerment, perceived self-efficacy may be even more significant because it provides a motivation for continued digital engagement.[48] In other words, if the experience of creating a digital story makes the storyteller believe they are capable of creating digital stories, and moreover, through their stories they can make a meaningful contribution to digital content online, they are more likely to continue using the newly learned skills.

Self-reflection and self-representation

In the context of digital storytelling, self-representation can be understood in two complementary ways. First, it can refer to the opportunity of ordinary people to speak for themselves (to represent themselves) through digital stories, instead of being spoken for and represented by someone else, as ordinary citizens and various marginalised groups of society often are in the mainstream media. This has to do with having a voice and being listened to.

Secondly, the concept of self-representation describes the ways digital storytellers use

digital stories to construct and define their identities and to represent their "selves" and their lives to others. Lambert[49] believes that the appeal of DST lies in the fact that the practice responds to our need to constantly present and explain our changing identities to other people, and many scholars have been interested in the self-representational dimension of DST.[50] Lundby[51] even sees this as an inherent attribute of digital stories – because they are based on the storyteller's life, they are self-representational stories.

This is, of course, not that different from how people nowadays are constantly narrating and performing their identities in social media. Digital storytelling, however, is a rather structured practice in which participants use considerable amounts of time to create stories, making use of their personal materials in the process. Therefore, one can assume that the process is more reflective and that the resulting self-representations are more carefully constructed than fairly spontaneous utterances or selfies in social networking sites.

The process of creating an autobiographical digital story provides a unique opportunity for recollection and reflection on the significant life events, experiences, and emotions related to them. Just going through an old photo album or digital photo archives to collect material for the story can bring back vivid memories. Looking at pictures can spark impressions and thoughts beyond the conscious level, and pictures may even arouse sensations of smells, sounds, rhythms, or physical feelings.[52] Verbalising the experiences, thoughts, and feelings through narrative writing – to create the script for the digital story – has a similar power to other forms of creative, expressive, and autobiographic writing, and thus it may enhance self-awareness, self-assurance, self-esteem, and self-determination.[53]

Digital storytelling workshops can encourage participants to reflect on and represent different aspects of their identities, lived experiences, and goals and dreams for the future. In the Näkymättömät – Nuorten digitarinat (The Invisible – Digital Stories of Young People) project, we have experimented with using digital storytelling and other autobiographical, arts-based methods to engage and enhance empowerment of young people who are either out of school and work or at critical transition phases of education. The explicit objectives of these DST workshops included enhancing self-assurance and positive thinking of the participating young people by making them reflect on their strengths and potential; and amplifying positive future orientation by encouraged participants to think of, write about, and visualize their dreams. Depending on the participating group and their life situations, and of the institutional context of the particular workshop, digital storytelling was framed with topics such as My Dream, My Strengths, or The Best Possible Future.

In the workshop in RLabs Iringa, DST was used – besides for skill-building – for amplifying participants' sense of positive self-transformation and life change. Participants were asked to create stories about the change they experienced as a result of the six-month GROW Leadership Academy training they had just completed. We expected that reflecting on positive changes would make participants more aware of them and that sharing their positive stories with others in the community would amplify their sense of empowerment. The participants' digital stories indeed were stories of newly acquired skills, newly discovered self-confidence and sense of direction, and above all, of hope. Participants found the process of creating their story to be a rewarding one.[54]

Besides focusing on individual identities and personal aspirations, digital storytelling can be used as a tool for professional reflection and construction of professional identity. The Arts Academy of Turku University of Applied Sciences has used digital storytelling as one method in a professional autobiographical process which is an integral part of Master of Arts students' studies in the Arts Academy.

Having a voice and being listened to

Another important aspect of digital storytelling which contributes to empowerment of participants is the social, interactional, in-

tersubjective, and communicative aspect of sharing personal stories. It is not enough to just "have a voice" (to create a digital story) – it is just as important that someone actually listens to it.

Low and colleagues[55] emphasize the importance of the experience of being listened to in digital storytelling and other community-based participatory media practices. For them, listening is an active, ethical, and mutual engagement, and it is precisely this relational experience of intersubjective listening which explains the transformative effect of storytelling.

Many facilitators have noted the same: The experience of sharing their storyline ideas and completed stories within a group, in a supportive and safe environment, often is the most important aspect of DST for workshop participants.[56] Being listened to in the workshop group can be much more meaningful than having one's story published online for potential outside audiences to see. Low and colleagues[57] even argue that if the expected audience expands beyond the workshop space, the experience becomes less intimate, and telling difficult stories may not be possible for the participants.

Through the five DST workshops organised for young people in Turku region in the Näkymättömät – Nuorten digitarinat project, we learned the importance of sharing and listening within the safe space of the workshop. In the beginning of the project, we conceived "having a voice" and "becoming visible" in terms of the mainstream media and publicity, putting emphasis on the final digital stories produced in the workshops and hoping to have as many as possible published online. Working closely with young people facing various challenges in their lives taught us that what actually may matter more to the participants is being listened to during the workshop process by other participants and by the adults who facilitate the workshop or participate in it with the young people. The latter meant the teachers, tutors, or others who already were familiar with the young participants and who cooperated with us in planning the workshop.

On the other hand, depending on the participating group and on how they perceive themselves and their position in relation to other social groups (potential audiences), showing the digital stories to people outside the workshop group and/or publishing them online for anyone to see may be an important aspect of the experience.[58] There are individual differences: Some storytellers may use stories for private self-reflection and don't want to share them with others, whereas others think of the potential audience from the beginning and use their stories for communicating and connecting to others.[59]

Cultural differences also may have an impact on the willingness to share experiences with a wider audience. In the DST workshop organised in RLabs Iringa, all the participants were happy to publish their stories online and felt it was important to share their stories outside the group. Participants were very aware of the communicative aspect of digital storytelling: They felt that their stories would make other people understand their realities, and other people could learn from their experiences – of how to face and overcome challenges of life – and be encouraged by them.[60]

In the Näkymättömät – Nuorten digitarinat project, we learned that groups of young people are very different from each other in terms of their willingness to open up and share experiences in the group. In most workshops organised in Turku region, participants were happy to have their stories watched together in the group at the end of the process, and many of them also were willing to have their stories published online. In one workshop, however, participants were reluctant to even share their stories in the group and kept their stories rather impersonal.

According to our observations, the context of the workshop (the hosting institution) and the group atmosphere were decisive factors for the motivation of the participating young people and for their willingness to share experiences in the group. Voluntary participation seems to be an important condition for a successful workshop; if a DST workshop is organised as part of obligatory activities of an educational institution or a workshop for unemployed young people, creating and sustaining motivation can be a challenge.[61]

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As Low and colleagues[62] note, there also is an emotional risk involved in sharing your story with other people. Someone struggling with their life and having trouble trusting other people might not be willing to take that risk. Young people regarded as "at risk of social exclusion" especially may have experiences of encounters with adults in various institutional contexts which do not make them willing to trust adults and open up to them.

Concluding remarks

The media ecosystem and media culture seem drastically different today compared to the situation more than 20 years ago when the digital storytelling model first was developed. In the context of the current participatory digital culture based on "bottom-up" participation,[63] the idea of ordinary people being able to share their views, experiences, and stories online does not seem revolutionary anymore. Quite the contrary – posting status updates, photos, videos, blog posts, or podcasts online has become a rather mundane activity for citizens of information societies.

Regarding digital storytelling as just another form of user-generated content is not doing it justice, however. It misses something essential about the practice – namely the significance of the facilitated group process, as well as the personal and often emotional nature of digital stories created and shared in the workshop. Even if at the macro level of the current media ecosystem, digital storytelling is not a game-changing practice, at the micro level of participating individuals and communities it can be an emotionally powerful experience which may enhance empowerment. From the participants' perspective, its significance does not depend on how many digital stories are published online or how many viewers they reach. For the storytellers, being listened to during the workshop may be much more important.

As with other forms of participatory media, digital storytelling can serve many purposes. It is what we do with digital storytelling that matters the most. If the workshop is planned carefully, based on the needs of the target group, and implemented in the way that best serves the specific purpose, digital storytelling has the potential to foster civic engagement and community development, and therefore, can have positive impacts beyond the workshop participants.

Notes

1. Burgess (2006), Hartley & McWilliam (2009, 5), Lundby (2008, 2–4).
2. Hartley & McWilliam (2009, 5), Meadows (2003, 192).
3. CDS (2014).
4. Juppi (2012, 2015a, 2015b).
5. Meadows (2003, 192).
6. Hartley & McWilliam (2009, 3), Lambert (2009a, 1–10), Lambert (2009c).
7. Lambert (2009b, 25).
8. Carpentier (2003), Deuze (2008).
9. Bowman & Willis (2003, 9).
10. Atton (2002, 2003, 2009), Downing, Ford, Gil & Stein (2001), Rodriquez (2001).
11. Lunch & Lunch (2006), Shaw & Robertson (1997).
12. Atton (2002), Downing et al. (2001), Fraser & Estrada (2001).
13. Downing et al. (2001), Rodriquez (2001).
14. Brake (2008), Hartley (2010).
15. Tonteri et al. (2013).
16. McWilliam (2009).
17. Hartley & McWilliam (2009, 5), Lambert (2009a, 91–104), McWilliam (2009).
18. These include at least *Digital Storylab* in Denmark (still active), *Digitalbridge* in Sweden (contact info available at www.merinfo.se but no active online presence), and *Be.Tell* (closed down) and *Osuuskunta Glokaali* (exists but is not active) in Finland. The author of this article is a member of the cooperative *Osuuskunta Glokaali* and was active in its digital storytelling training and workshop activities in 2011–2014, while on a leave from Turku University of Applied Sciences.
19. Lundby (2009).
20. YLE Mundo (2006).
21. Kohtaamo (2012), Koivuporras-Masuka (2013), Medios (2010).
22. Määttä et al. (2015), Näkymättömät (2015), Raunio & Juppi (2012), YLE Mundo (2006).
23. Meadows (2003), Meadows & Kidd (2009).
24. Lambert (2009a, 91–104), McWilliam (2009), StoryCenter (2017).
25. Hill (2004), Patient Voices (2004).

26. Burgess (2006), Lundby (2008, 2–4).
27. Juppi (2012), López-Becha & Zúñiga (2017), T&D Stories (2015).
28. Hemgård (2017), Herzberg Kaare (2008), Herzberg Kaare & Lundby (2008), Määttä et al. (2015), Näkymättömät (2015).
29. Siitonen (1999, 82–93).
30. Zimmerman (1995); see also Siitonen (1999, 93).
31. Mäkinen (2006, 2009).
32. Mäkinen (2009, 24, 102).
33. Zimmerman (1995).
34. Zimmerman (1995).
35. Zimmerman (1995, 582).
36. Zimmerman (1995, 588–589); see also Speer (2000).
37. Siitonen (1999, 93).
38. Hartley & McWilliam (2009), Lundby (2008, 3).
39. Juppi (2015b).
40. McWilliam (2009, 39–53).
41. Czarnecki (2009), Gregory & Steelman (2008), Li (2007), Niemi et al. (2014), Robin (2008), Smeda et al. (2014), Sylvester & Greenidge (2009).
42. See Turku AMK (2017).
43. Juppi (2012), T&D Stories (2015).
44. Juppi (2015a, 2015b), Reed & Hill (2010).
45. Livingstone (2004), Mäkinen (2006, 2009), Warschauer (2004).
46. Mäkinen (2006, 2009).
47. Juppi (2015a, 2015b).
48. Juppi (2015b).
49. Lambert (2009a, 14–15).
50. Brushwood Rose (2009), Kaare & Lundby (2008), Nelson & Hull (2008), Thumim (2009).
51. Lundby (2008, 5).
52. Hentinen (2009, 42).
53. Hunt & Sampson (1998, 2006), Lindquist (2009).
54. Juppi (2015a).
55. Low et al. (2016).
56. Meadows & Kidd (2009, 106–107).
57. Low et al. (2016).
58. Burgess (2006), Juppi (2015b), Thumin (2008, 89–91).
59. Thumim (2008, 89–91).
60. Juppi (2015a, 2015b).
61. Cf. Määttä et al. (2015).
62. Low et al. (2016).
63. Deuze (2008), Jenkins (2004).

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