



## Making time for storytelling; the challenges of community building and activism in a rural locale

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### **Abstract**

*The uneven projection of voices from or within a community can be addressed, in part, by methods such as digital storytelling in a technology and media-savvy society. Whilst the use of digital storytelling to facilitate constructive dialogue has proved successful for those who participate, instilling a sense of motivation to become involved at the outset can pose a challenge. Members of different types of community groups, whether geo-physical or practice-based, will not necessarily be drawn to involvement in social action through group workshops without prior personal engagement. This paper considers which other participatory media techniques can be employed to encourage involvement in community digital storytelling workshops to inspire activism, and examines barriers to participation, with emphasis on the necessity of mandate, for project success. To help answer these issues, one particular workshop in a case study in North Yorkshire, UK will be used to identify the importance of place and incorporation of methods when undertaking community digital storytelling.*

**Keywords:** Social Change, Activism, Rural Community, Intergenerational, Participatory, Community Media, Creative Practice, Motivation, Mandate

### **Introduction**

The growing phenomenon of digital storytelling has many strands, one of which is concerned with a geo-physical connection: community digital storytelling. This paper draws on the experiences gained by the authors; a doctoral researcher and experienced practitioner-academic, in a community digital storytelling workshop held as part of a doctoral case study. This community informatics intervention seeks to investigate the effectiveness of digital storytelling as a cross-boundary method for community building and activism, set in a rural location in the UK, by exploring issues and experiences with local residents. Attracting residents of a geo-physical community to give

their time to participate in such projects has proved to be a challenge; investigating how and why this is the case and what can be done to overcome the barriers encountered in this project is examined, with particular interest in the issue of mandate.

Use of the word 'community' creates its own discourse as it is a generic term applied to a number of contexts. In this case, community is considered to be the unique structures that residents of a geo-physical place are caught up in. Bauman (2001) describes the negotiation between security and freedom, and it is this balance that perhaps restricts open communication in small communities. It is important not to underestimate the range of interests, contrasting experiences, age, gender and class differences of people within communities, and hence within community media or informatics interventions. Some literature on community and participatory media stresses the importance of moving beyond any understanding of community as a homogenous block with one shared viewpoint to addressing rich, dynamic understandings of community. A project may well encounter or reveal overlapping affiliations, varied perspectives and experiences which may be complementary, contradictory or competing (Tomaselli, 1989; Juhasz, 1995, p.236; Miskelly and Fleuriot, 2006). Alongside communication, activism, or intentionally taking some form of action, can also be affected by the structures at play.

Any geo-physical community, from urban neighbourhoods to rural villages, will include residents with differing viewpoints. While not all residents enjoy an equal voice in a community, they face the effects, at some level, of region-wide issues through impact of changing habits of society. According to the Yorkshire Dales National Park Management Plan (2007), global market forces are changing the domestic farming demand where the history of livestock farming is still "deeply interwoven into ... life and culture" (p.8) and has made the landscape what it is today. This in turn has built a tourism industry, now being adversely affected by cheaper flights abroad. In addition, the better links to larger commercial centres have brought businesses and incomers, who demand further infrastructure with inevitable environmental impact. With the increase of cars in the region, "social exclusion and a sense of isolation" (ibid, p.10) has been accentuated for those without private transport. Furthermore, the lack of affordable housing for the many low-wage earners, while housing stock is given over to holiday homes and second houses, is a thorny issue.

In places of rural dwelling, power relations can be amplified in smaller-sized community groups. As the demographic of such geo-physical communities change, the more marginalised groups of residents such as the elderly and youth can find their voices have reduced influence. In an effort to increase communication channels amongst residents and between decision makers, an appropriate community informatics (CI) approach was sought to developing an intervention. CI is concerned with use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) to "enable and empower community processes" (Gurstein, 2007, p.11), often communities considered to be at a disadvantage. Further, Day (2005, p.6) promotes 'social cohesion' in CI by highlighting social dialogue to be "a central dynamic of active community life".

When researching techniques to cross boundaries between different groups within a community, taking action through an intervention should be sensitively designed with ethical considerations.

## **Designing the intervention**

The researcher was moved to design an intervention to address issues of conflict in small rural locations in North Yorkshire, having moved to the area and taught in a local college. Initially, a blended learning approach was

considered through units of e-Learning materials in combination with group discussion, both face-to-face and on-line. But the need for a participatory approach to entice engagement revealed Digital Storytelling to offer a better solution for the social cohesion through dialogue that Day (2005) advocates, still retaining the ICT learning element. Particularly, the model developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling (Lambert, 2006) has been shown to help to bring about change in attitude through the transformational process of their workshops and to work in boundary-crossing settings in many situations, such as race relations, disadvantaged youth empowerment programs, transformational change in developing countries etc. (for example Tacchi, 2009; Clarke, 2009).

When considering the role of narrative within the context of culture, Erstad and Wertsch (2008) have described 'cultural tools' that we use for making sense of how our lives change over time. Mediated action can be fundamentally altered as a result of the "transformations embedded in the development of cultural tools" (p.36). Freidus and Hlubinka (2002) assert that digital storytelling for reflective practice, in a variety of settings, "is a valuable, transformative tool for personal, professional, organizational, and community development." They suggest one outcome of sharing stories is that the sense of community itself can be strengthened. After the story development cycle has been completed, they "serve as objects which mediate relationships" (p.26) and Couldry (2008) describes transforming society through media.

Given the capacity of the CDS model (Lambert, 2006) to be empowering to participants and to cross boundaries, it became central to the design of the intervention. However, a pragmatic and flexible approach to this design was necessary taking into consideration the specifics of this rural context where participants would not be brought together by an existing local organisation or around a single issue, as is often the case with community-based digital storytelling.

From a research perspective, this project was designed as an intervention into a community and intended to mobilise local residents. The project was informed by specific local rural concerns and communication gaps including well-known regional issues and the concerns that local residents raised with the researcher. It did not however grow out of a local movement. As with any externally resourced or initiated project, this required careful negotiation of the tensions between the desires and objectives of those taking part and the constraints of the researcher's time and resources. In addition to these negotiations, the requirement to fulfil a research brief can require intricate balancing. In terms of running the intervention, a participatory approach was deemed desirable but it was the case that practical constraints required Copeland to effectively manage the workshop as a research project, albeit in a facilitative role, inevitably relinquishing some of the control away from the participants.

This paper examines one workshop series in a case study that proved particularly challenging when recruiting committed participants. This case study was designed to review the effectiveness of digital storytelling to help strengthen community ties by facilitating communication channels and enabling some aspect of social change by amplifying lesser heard voices through ICT. Although some reported projects are located in rural areas, such as parts of the BBC Capture Wales audience and through organisations such as The Rural Media Company (<http://ruralmedia.co.uk/>), the majority seem to be based in urban settings, for example London's Voices (Thumim, 2009).

## **A North Yorkshire case study**

The research project discussed in this paper aims to assess the effectiveness of digital storytelling in rurally-located settings, where many groups in the communities are disadvantaged by their location. Focus was given to the perceived experiences between different generations living in the villages. The project findings are still being analysed, however the process of recruiting participants is complete and offered a new set of issues and results that proved as interesting as the initial research questions.

This paper centres on a digital storytelling workshop facilitated by both authors. One of two locations in this case study, this small town was chosen on account of both its remote position, with many of the aforementioned issues evident, and the presence of an educational facility in a local museum which could host a workshop. The town is at the centre of a regional livestock farming territory, and demographically holds a mix of families with a long history in the area and incomers who have been attracted to a rural life. Amongst the many location-specific issues from which this town suffers, entertainment facilities for secondary school-aged children alongside other similar issues have emerged as a key concern during this research project.

Prior to this project, Copeland had worked on a regional dialect project recording local dialogue and contextual conversation, and thus contacts were formed where expressions of interest in a digital storytelling project had been made. As she would have been considered an 'outsider', that's 'offcumden' in dialect incidentally, these first contacts were a vital entry point to recruiting participants to the digital storytelling workshop.

The workshop was designed to follow the CDS three day workshop method (Lambert, 2006) as closely as possible, but as with many projects, it was necessary to adapt the process to fit the local context (for example, Tacchi, 2009). Copeland planned to act as workshop facilitator with Miskelly as co-facilitator so that more time could be spent observing participant interaction in addition to mediating stories.

This intervention began with participant recruitment through local events and networking. A willingness to share life stories was key, but also important was a representation of the three identified age bands; 14-19, 20-60 and 60+. When recruiting, the workshop was described as an opportunity to share experiences of living in the area and being able to create a multimedia memory. The cultural association with the area is important, and participants whose families had lived in the town for generations were very keen to be able to create heritage artefacts. These 'cultural tools' (Erstad and Wertsch, 2008) became the most prominent selling point for the workshop in terms of attracting participants from different generations, although the younger people approached were more interested in the opportunity to learn new software.

From a research perspective, the range of participants who agreed to take part offered a reasonable platform to investigate the effectiveness of digital storytelling to act as a cross-boundary method in eliciting discussion. However, a wider range of participants would have been desirable, particularly from the younger generation.

Prior to the workshop, the researcher visited each participant to discuss the aims and outcomes of the project, hold a semi-structured interview to learn about the participants' typical daily interactions with the locale, and listen to the participants share their experiences of life in the area. A facilitative rather than directive role was followed by the researcher through a process of mediation and framing of the story (Thumim, 2008; Erstad and Wertsch, 2008). Next the digital storytelling workshop took place on a reduced schedule

of two days to make it more feasible for participants to make time to attend. All participants attended the story circle on day one. Time was allocated to completing scripts and audio recording took place. The next step was to deliver the photo-editing and movie-making workshops. Finally, post-production on stories of those participants who were not able to attend the entire workshop was carried out primarily by the researcher in regular contact with the participants. On completion, the finished stories will be shared in a central location with all participants present. Follow-up interviews have been planned to investigate any changes in perception of local issues resulting from the story sharing.

During the interviews, to aid analysis of the context of place in this research project, the participants were asked to identify which areas of their locality they visited and with what regularity, as well as how far away from the village or town they travelled and for what purpose. This technique of mapping helps to view how much the geo-physical community can meet the residents' needs, particularly in view of generational differences. The image shown here approximates the distances the participants are required to travel by vehicle for facilities such as secondary schools, supermarkets, and sports and entertainment centres, denoted by the largest markers. These larger conurbations are still small towns, none exceeding a population of 4,000. It also gives an idea of the topography of the area, and how isolating it can be for those without access to private transport.



*Figure 1: The area surrounding the location of this workshop and proximity to nearest towns*

## **Participatory approaches with community media**

Digital storytelling is part of the tradition of participatory uses of arts and media for activism and social change. This tends to involve community groups in organised projects and deliberate uses of media in community settings, as opposed to everyday practices of domestic media-making or record-keeping. It

is worth situating digital storytelling within the wider context of community media practice to help consider how participants become involved, what might constitute a mandate or focus for such a project, and how a project might be understood as successful in, for example, strengthening community ties, or amplifying lesser heard voices.

Community media is “a notoriously vague concept” (Howley, 2002) covering a wide array of uses of media to represent community experience, however there are common assumptions and claims made for community/participatory media production and digital storytelling. It is often underpinned by a belief in the right to self-expression and access to means of production as an instrument for social change. It is generally understood to result in products that can be used to catch the ear of others and to constitute processes that involve developing new perspectives of one’s own or shared experience (Berrigan, 1979, p.8; Nigg and Wade, 1980, p.7). In addition to these emphases on advocacy and social change, an agenda for education and creative process-focused projects has become a significant part of community media practice (Howley, 2002; Sobers, 2004; Miskelly and Fleuriot, 2006).

To avoid oversimplifying, romanticising community or intentionally reinforcing communication divides, community media practice needs to be carefully shaped to take into consideration the complexities, specificities and communication practices of each setting. Tacchi, who has researched local communication practices across a range of contexts in developing countries, states:

There is no one single model for local communication initiatives that can be applied universally, [...] each place requires an approach to the development of projects tailored to local needs, which take account of local lives and environments (Tacchi, 2003, p.1).

Furthermore, establishing and maintaining a project and a mandate to work in a participatory way in community contexts often involves a process of negotiation and a pragmatic and improvisational approach with ongoing adaptation to add, remove, reshape and weave constituents, and to fit with others’ productions and motives (Beeson and Miskelly 1998; Porter 2007). It involves overlapping interpretive communities and multiple motivations for participation including individual and social motivations which are not necessarily closely related to any perceived aims of the project, but nevertheless lead to significant contributions. For some participants, individual or shared projects form through involvement and not vice versa (Miskelly 2002). Light and Miskelly (2008), reviewing the work of a range of actors involved in creative and /or design projects for social change, point to the brokering, synthesising, connecting and weaving that goes on to make social change projects happen, and to gradually develop a sense of project ownership. This can take time and requires on the ground presence and ongoing reviewing of ideas and methods.

Jackie Shaw (2007, p.190), writing about the use of participatory video to influence local social change, stresses that we need to be aware of the whole gamut of agendas and to embrace these in developing community media projects.

Work that aims to be empowering by its very nature intervenes in established power relationships. Encountering conflicting agendas and the resultant tensions and difficulties does not indicate a poor project. Rather it reflects the reality of attempting to tackle social exclusion. Participatory video can contribute to changing the balance of power both within a group and wider society; it can give space for groups to generate their own knowledge and to facilitate communication with other groups

and institutions. To achieve this potential, facilitators and other project workers need to consider how this transfer of power is managed, and how their own power in the situation can affect the process so that inclusion of socially excluded participants is truly transformative, rather than superficial. All stakeholders need to think about how a project can be manipulated to support vested interests and agendas that control rather than empower, as well as about the approach that is needed if they are genuinely committed to hearing from excluded groups.

Digital storytelling projects fit into ongoing community processes and will be situated within a network of activities, tensions, agendas, modes of self representation, and approaches to community and social change. These may or may not be articulated, and mandate may not be obvious to participants. As such, community-based work is messy, and digital storytelling is a method or opportunity that fits into that messiness at particular moments to tell particular stories with the people who are available and sufficiently motivated or predisposed to that process at that time for a variety of reasons.

There is very little written about how people come to be involved in digital storytelling workshops in local community contexts. The growing literature on digital storytelling has a rich variety of case studies which illustrate the many different contexts and the wide range of socially motivated organisations adopting digital storytelling as a method. However, with few exceptions there is little critique of how participants are recruited, who is excluded from involvement and why they might be excluded or exclude themselves. There are similarly few accounts in the literature of the expectations that people have of the process or workshops going wrong, not happening, or creating problems within a group. In contrast, within informal community media and digital storytelling networks there are frequently told stories of difficult and challenging projects, projects that did not get off the ground for example. We do not see the unfinished stories, and we do not know what the unexpected outcomes of those projects might have been, where abandoning story may have led to other community-strengthening activities.

More analysis is needed of what might be called problematic or challenging digital storytelling projects; but we can also look to the wider literature on community media and involvement for some indications of what can work or what might prove to be barriers to involvement or earlier steps to be taken.

## **Addressing barriers to participation in digital storytelling projects**

Here we identify a number of issues that constituted barriers during this project in North Yorkshire: resources, venues, time-commitments, context of place, incentives and motivations to participate, and sense of self confidence or mandate for the participants. In our discussion of these issues, we draw on this case study but also on the wider community and participatory media literature and on our other experiences of facilitation, participation and research in digital storytelling and other community-based social change work.

### **Resources**

Digital storytelling workshops are time and resource intensive requiring facilitation and significant amounts of digital technology, and as such are costly to run. The CDS, whose model (Lambert, 2006) has been successfully adopted internationally in a wide range of settings, offer both open workshops and workshops tailored to suit particular settings in collaboration with different organisations. In fully open workshops, participants are required to

fund their own place at the event, and this would necessarily exclude a great many people, in particular those who are already excluded from opportunities due to financial and related constraints.

In practice, community digital storytelling in community and social change contexts is usually funded as part of a wider intervention or to work within the remit of socially or culturally motivated organisations; making participation free. This is easier to achieve where such organisations have access to workshop space and equipment.

So what then happens if the cost barrier is removed? This is usually the case where charities and other intermediary organisations commission workshops, where the participants are invited to take part at no cost to themselves as part of a shared community. There remain issues around recruitment and confidence as discussed below, and also how participants are recruited. Removal of the cost issue does not guarantee interest or involvement. Other contexts like social and cultural capital may need to be present for a person to even discover that such a workshop is happening, let alone consider or be considered for involvement.

On top of funding the facilitation, the equipment, software and suitable room can be difficult to obtain, if the workshops are set outside of an up-to-date IT-equipped place or organised by groups who do not have access to such provisions. In this case study, the equipment was loaned by the researcher's university as it would have been otherwise difficult to source enough laptops with appropriate software, recording and projection equipment for all of the workshops.

## **Time**

A strength of digital storytelling methods is the intensive focused process which enables participants to engage in-depth for a few days with their story. However, this requires a significant commitment of time and energy and within quite a fixed format and process. While the process can be approached in different ways to suit different groups and needs, there is less opportunity for flexible degrees of participation than with other kinds of media and story making for social action.

The CDS model of a weekend workshop requires attendance of up to three full, consecutive days. This time is needed to take a group from the story circle to conclusion of their journey with a completed digital story shared at a final screening. In classroom or informal community settings, this format is not practical and so workshops are often broken down into blocks of time on a weekly basis. Designing a community workshop to maximise attendance should be context sensitive and is key to success.

It can be a daunting starting point and difficult to establish motives or mandate for such an activity. To encourage people to give enough time where they may not have had opportunity to reflect on how it might be of value to them or others in the community, particularly where they will encounter difficulties in making time, can be difficult. In this research project, it was the seeking of participants willing to commit the time to attend a workshop that proved to be one of the most challenging barriers.

The first of the case study workshops spanned a number of evenings over several weeks. However, the workshop being examined here was held over two full days. Both approaches had flaws which became apparent when attracting participation. Running a series of drop-in sessions in the evenings was far more flexible for participants, and they genuinely seemed to come when they could, but the end result was not a cohesive learning event; the facilitator was



constantly repeating next steps as each participant progressed at a different rate. There was also little interaction amongst the participants. Consequently, this following workshop was run as a two day block over a half-term holiday, to allow school-aged children to attend. However, this proved too much of an obstacle for many of the adults. Only two committed to both full days, and both had a vested interest in experiencing the technique as educators. The reality was that neither of these adults was there start to finish on both days due to pressures of work and family commitments.

To overcome the problem, it was arranged that the participants could all attend the story circle at the start of the first day, and follow up workshops would be held at convenient times to complete the stories on a personal level. The group will be brought back together again, assuming participant availability, for the final screening of completed digital stories.

There is no perfect method or arrangement for community participation, but in some contexts a digital storytelling process may be too intensive a commitment as a starting point. Participation and ownership are key issues in community-based media and it can be counter productive to introduce a process which will mitigate against participation in the first instance. Stuart (1989, p.8) argues that it is damaging to attempt to make rigid definition about what is participation and how members should participate.

Participation is not a binary attitude. It exists in many forms and shades along a grand continuum running from inactivity/passivity manipulations to responsible concerted action/empowered participation/grassroots movement.

Modes of participation cannot be matched to personal or shared outcomes in any programmatic way and significant changes in perspective or discovery about self or community might only involve slight engagement with the media-making process (Miskelly, 2002).

Therefore other methods and activities which are less time and resource intensive may be more appropriate where initiating a project outside of an already constituted group. This might mean approaching personal telling in different ways. PhotoVoice UK use storytelling in their participatory photography projects, including digital storytelling, in contexts where the nature of participants' lives makes sustained involvement difficult, such as with sex workers in East London who produced postcards with their own photograph and a very short story about their lives as the legend on the back. (<http://www.photovoice.org/html/projects/photovoiceprojects/ukandireland/changethepicture.html>).

Some initial work can be needed to get people thinking about their lives or community in creative ways which can precede a more intensive workshop process. A range of methods such as REFLECT have been developed for use in low resource contexts such as rural villages in developing countries. These very flexible techniques like mapping, drawing, shorter story exercises, local walks can be ways into a reflection and can help form and share ideas for the stories and for the wider interests of community building or social change that may be motivating involvement (<http://www.reflect-action.org>).

## **Place**

Relationships to place can be important in establishing local groups and ideas about that locality or community and what stories you might want to tell (Miskelly, 2006). A walk is a popular method in participatory development; this simple way of taking time to look at your environment and articulate your thoughts about it with someone else can be a powerful motivator for action.

For example, during a participatory video project in Belfast, Miskelly joined local residents on a walk down a residential street which led to a conversation with a local woman about the dangers of children playing in a house which had lain derelict but open for several months. Within two days of the event, the woman and several other residents had made a complaint to the council and the house had been secured (Miskelly, 2002).

Several participants for the North Yorkshire workshops were recruited as a result of walking around the localities. Walking and talking to residents also opened up issues of local discontent, which in some cases were discussed in the story circle. In others, the researcher gained personal insight into experiences that were not to be repeated to the group.

It is also important to remark that digital storytelling, once underway, can be a powerful means to demonstrate the richness and diversity within any local community and the overlapping communities, loyalties etc. that exist within a locality. Further, spaces to share these collaborative efforts, without relying on virtual territory, can prove helpful. Typically, classrooms (Taub-Pervizpour, 2009) and museums (Thumim, 2008) offer accessible local places. Message (2009) argues that UK policy makers have placed museums as cultural guardians at the forefront of changing society as increasing levels of interest in social citizenship rights are revealed. Regional regeneration programs are put in place through social cohesion policy, to encourage individuals to value and identify with their local area over nationalised homogeneity. In this case study, the local museum offered a convenient, familiar meeting place where the participants were able to benefit from the confidence of remaining close.

In a small rural community, and in this case study in particular, place in the sense of proximity and intimacy played a great part in the decision making process of potential participants. In one example, a participant only agreed to attend if no questions were asked of them at the interview stage, as they felt strongly that all of their personal choices and decisions affect the way that neighbours interact with them.

### **Motivations and incentives**

Participants have a range of motivations for being involved in a community story telling project – which may have more to do with other collective or personal goals than with the initial intentions in establishing the project. For example, participants in one community digital story project described a range of personal and social motivations some of which changed during the year-long project. They included developing personal skills, community building, celebrating achievement, raising profile, making an historical record, helping to get a qualification, impressing funders, curiosity, to please others with influence, and seeing the project as way into finding a role within a wider project and community (Miskelly, 2002).

To have or discover a stake in a project is important but can prove difficult where individuals do not hold to a well-defined or identifiable role in the community. For those without a well-defined role, involvement in the digital storytelling may in itself lead to creating a role or getting a sense of how they fit in (Miskelly, 2002, pp.242-247). Motivation might include the opportunity to gain skills or access to equipment and in that case sufficient mandate for taking part might be having digital media expertise in the room.

Just as it cannot be assumed that every group will want to include as many voices as possible in its media production, it should also not be assumed that everyone wants to be a producer. Due to their individual focus within a mutually supportive group process, digital storytelling workshops can be very powerful in allowing a group of people to work alongside each other on stories

that have strikingly different visions of the same community and thus accommodating a range of motivations. However, without a clear common or individual purpose for involvement people may not take the time and see the point of being involved. Even where motivation is apparent, such as one younger participant in this case study keen to use the movie-editing software, his girlfriend had travelled a reasonable distance to visit him, and after the lunch break he disappeared; the motivation was not strong enough despite incentive.

### **Confidence, identification, power**

Power relationships play out at all levels of community and participatory projects and there is not the space here to do a full power analysis on this case study. We will focus however on one aspect of power as it plays out in the relation to social identity and confidence.

Porter (2007) stresses that different formal approaches will lead to the involvement of different people. In-depth work at a youth centre to devise a script for a film in which the members will then act will lead to a very different community story involving very different participants than a project initiated by a local leaflet drop inviting young people to an audition. Some of the young people from the youth centre would never consider themselves as someone who might go to an audition or be involved in filmmaking had they picked up the leaflet in the first place.

A sense of powerlessness, in all its forms, deprives a person of the will to take up opportunities that will enable him or her to engage actively in both the economic and social life of the wider society. One of the keys to such engagement and a sense of empowerment can come from developing the skills to express yourself and be heard (ibid, p.91).

But how do you develop the skills to express yourself if you lack confidence or resources to seek out such opportunities? For youth, this begins with a redefinition of the self and consolidation of new ideas (Erstad and Wertsch, 2008, p.34).

Even members of a well-constituted group like CLASS, a life long learning group in South Bristol, can lack confidence when it comes to expressing their own views and reflecting on their own experience. This mainly female, mainly retired group agreed to work with researchers to explore the potential for community uses of emerging location sensitive media technology by recording their thoughts, stories, opinions and poetry about the local area where some of them had lived their entire lives and about which they conducted local history research. However, they were concerned about having their voices recorded as their Bristolian accents might undermine the authority of what was being said. They wanted actors to record their texts.

They were also deeply sceptical as to the value or interest of their own experience as opposed to synthesising and recording public local history information. They did not value or think others would value their life experience. The project overcame these reservations in two ways. The theme of childhood wartime experiences was chosen for a second phase to the project (a theme that had emerged but which would also attract funding). As survivors of the Bristol Blitz, rationing and other wartime experiences on the public record, these participants were able to make the link between personal stories and public histories and were more prepared to share their stories. To overcome their concerns about the way they spoke, a range of techniques were used to record the stories which included group reminiscence sessions followed up by retelling favourite stories informally to the whole group or in a private story booth (Miskelly et al., 2005; Miskelly and Fleuriot, 2006).

In this case study, several residents who were approached to take part declined graciously, citing lack of interesting life story or charismatic storytelling experience. Even in the story circle, there was an apparent perceived hierarchy of importance in story from some group members, deferring to more focal members of the community. For example, there was a headmaster present as well as a senior member of a well-established family from a local shop. Other participants were observed checking details of their own stories, where they overlapped with these highly-regarded community members. From the facilitator's perspective, every participant present had equal status in the context of the story circle, but it appeared it was difficult to transcend the understood but unwritten structure.

## **Further considerations**

All of the above observations relate to spending time within a community and to giving time to allow people to consider what it is they want to say, as well the opportunity to say it, and being ready to address or accommodate the range of motivations, concerns and expectations. Often this is the work of long-term established community organisations which commission digital storytelling facilitators to come and work with them to run workshops once funding has been established and other resources begged or borrowed. But in communities which lack the investment in youth or community structures, what happens?

Gidley (2007, pp.39-61) in an overview of his extensive evaluation of a 5 year media inclusion project identifies different aspects of involving young people in media activities intended to empower them and include them, amplify their voices and provide them with skills:

- the non-authoritarianism of the workers/facilitators in these processes
- the hook – a medium or subject or opportunity (such as digital storytelling)
- the flexibility of tools and processes to work in different contexts and with different constituencies

He also stresses that work with 'excluded' individuals and communities, especially young people, must unfold in a long-term sustained way; "doing justice to the uneven, non-linear stories of participants" (ibid, p.52). He cites the example of a participant who after a brief involvement in a media project became re-engaged having bumped into the media worker in local takeaway and developed a rapport. Once relationships are established, then more structured activities like digital storytelling can take place perhaps because trust and a sense of relevance have developed.

This almost casual approach to developing local projects is not unusual; Nigg and Wade (1980) writing about 1970s community media describe Andy Porter's participatory filmmaking practice which involved waiting around for young people who might not turn up at all, and Miskelly has had similarly ad hoc experiences working with a range of 'seldom heard' groups. Non-attendance, erratic attendance or inconsistency should not be confused with lack of motivation, rather seen within the particular contexts of participants' lives.

Digital storytelling is not always the right method in that place at that time, but within the restrictions of funding and commissioning, it can be a brave step to take another direction; into community mapping or photography or even just facilitating a dialogue. If the project aim is for members of a community to tell their own stories and to amplify their voices with a view to

moving towards social change through activism, then successful criteria may need to be broader than achieving completed well-crafted stories. However, this can be difficult to see when your focus and energies are invested in the valuable process of enabling storytelling.

In terms of the case study, mediating cultural digital stories has been viewed with importance on the part of the facilitators and the participants. However, drawing together a disparate group of residents deliberately, has given rise to the issue of mandate. In an informal community gathering which is not based in an existing organisational structure, such as in this case study, recruiting participants proved to be difficult to the point that the already adapted CDS model was further adapted to bring together eight people (five stories) to unite for the story circle. Had the participants viewed the workshop in the light of clear personal or collective incentives and/or as having a mandate from the community to both address imbalances and to create cultural and historical records, then we argue that a commitment to the full two day workshop would have been more likely. To foster this increased motivation, pre-workshop activities, as suggested above, could be implemented over a longer time to build perception of relevance and a sense of self-purpose.

### **Legitimising community media workshops for social change**

A key issue emerging is that of mandate, whether mandate to hold a workshop or mandate to take part and tell a story. Without a specific objective in taking part or a sense of legitimacy as a representative of a community, a potential participant seems much less likely to be willing to commit. This appears to be the case particularly when collaborating for the greater good, beyond the realms of producing a personal reflection, in the form of social activism. Furthermore, this is a workshop initiated as part of a research project; Day and Schuler (2004) remind us of the need to conduct collaborative community research with sensitivity, and that it should be “completely open, beyond reproach and sanctioned by the community itself” (ibid, p.220). This can be difficult to achieve given local or community based barriers to participation.

However, where it is apparent that issues causing discontent to one group or another in a locality exist (and they exist everywhere) we would argue that there is a legitimacy to intervene. The mandate to facilitate communication channels in a mediated environment comes from the discontent and desire to improve the situation on the part of or with the residents. And in the context of community/participatory media and informatics, projects have usually arisen out a combination of local activism and external enthusiasm.

Building successful community media projects does not just happen organically; Porter (2007, p.79) writing about his 30+ years experience of community media in London stresses that this work and practice is stimulated usually from people outside of the local communities and who have to work and spend time to develop projects and build relationships.

The people didn't rise up and demand TV. It was an interaction. If I look at the people who were involved in community video projects across London, in the main they were college educated. And initially we didn't come from within the communities in which we were working. We were propelled there by a mixture of beliefs, hopes and aspirations for social and political change, and I am reckoning often a personal experience of exclusion, of not belonging to the system in which we had been nurtured.

Not all residents may see the existence of a mandate for activism or even storytelling, particularly where their experience in the community is not

adversely affected by the issues in question. This returns us to a primary goal of digital storytelling for community building and activism: amplifying the lesser-heard voices in the community. Providing opportunities for the underserved members of a community to share their experiences through stories more widely is an important first step in social change.

Inviting focal members of the locality that represent each of the groups to take part can act as mandate and motive for others, by being seen to legitimise the discussion. This is particularly helpful where some present have connections with the locally-elected representatives at council level, or other formal or informal organised groups from the community; awareness of issues can be discussed with the insight of more than one viewpoint. However, as we noted during this case study, having local authority figures present can silence others or shape what they choose to tell. This is the case both for formal authority figures such as a head teacher as well as those imbued with informal authority such as business owners and community elders. So there is a potential contradiction between the community mandate given through the involvement of such figures and limiting of the mandate of individuals or lesser heard groups. There may in some instances be a case for disaggregated workshops where the dialogue and mobilisation is focused at the point where completed stories are shared. This has resource implications.

In this case, the ethical considerations of both the participants and the wider community must be put before any research agenda to promote activism and social change through the issue of mandate which is generated from within the community.

## **Conclusions and further developments**

A number of issues have been identified and discussed in this paper that often prove challenging barriers to overcome when organising and facilitating community digital storytelling workshops: the resources to fund equipment and places at workshops, time available, the context of place in the group, motivation to participate, and a sense of self-confidence in a participant that allows an activity such as storytelling to be considered.

We have discussed how some issues pertinent to rural community storytelling can help to shape participatory workshops, such as how the “new cultural tools change the use of narratives and the act of storytelling in fundamental ways” (Erstad and Wertsch, 2008, p.37).

Further debate regarding the practical issues of organising and facilitating community based digital storytelling workshops would be welcomed. Unlike many educational or organisational (including publicly-funded and charity-led) programmes, informal community interventions can suffer from lack of time, resources, motivation and opportunities to be flexible in approach.

Through a growing community of practice of digital storytelling facilitators, finding workable solutions to the barriers discussed in this paper will continue to be a helpful development. However, more open discussion of projects that are less successful will enhance our practice and our understanding of processes intended to enable social change. After all, the so-called ‘classic’ model of digital storytelling developed by the CDS (Lundby, 2008) has proved powerful in personal empowerment and transformation due to the process, and “there are all kinds of stories in our lives we can develop into multimedia pieces” (Lambert, 2006, p.27), so let us continue “capturing lives, creating community” (ibid.) by using digital storytelling as part of the wider community media genre for activism and social change. This may prove to be the key to instilling mandate for digital storytelling practice in informal community settings.

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