

## **Understanding voice, distribution and listening in Digital Storytelling**

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### **Abstract:**

This article interrogates the commissioning, production and distribution of Digital Storytelling made through collaborations between academics, practitioners and community groups. In this context, Digital Storytelling is defined as a workshop-based process where participants gain the skills and knowledge needed to tell a personal story using their own words and imagery. It starts with a recognition that the development of new forms of media activity enabled by digitalization have led directly to new modes of community-based media which, in turn, have created spaces for practitioners that emphasize the importance of the voice of the participant.

Couldry's (2010) three concepts of voice are used here to interrogate Digital Storytelling, namely opportunities for new voices to speak and be heard, an increased mutual awareness flowing from a greater influence over distribution and exhibition and the potential for new intensities of listening as a means to explore the notion that digitalization increased the range and number of voices across the media.

The article argues that the relatively modest ambitions of many Digital Storytelling projects mean that complex issues are either resolved or sidestepped on a pragmatic, case-by-case basis and, because of this, the work is undertheorized and often poorly understood. Processes of institutional mediation within Digital Storytelling bring into question the reliability of Digital Storytelling as a data source and too often condemn Digital Storytelling to modest outcomes.

**Keywords:** Voice, distribution, listening, mediation, Digital Storytelling

### **Understanding voice, distribution and listening in Digital Storytelling**

This article explores the relationship between the commissioning, production and distribution of Digital Storytelling projects delivered as collaborations between academics,

practitioners and community groups. In this context, Digital Storytelling refers to a specific participatory media form that uses the collaborative model of practice developed by StoryCenter (formerly the Center for Digital Storytelling) from the late 1990s onwards. Participants originate and edit their own material, and gain both the creative and technical skills needed to tell a personal story using their own words and imagery. The focus is on 'story' rather than 'digital' and the approach to participation is firmly grounded in the facilitation of the 'storycircle' where individual stories are found, developed and crafted using a series of different storytelling techniques to enable a group of around ten participants with limited technical or storytelling experience to tell a personal story. Digital Stories usually run for two to three minutes and are primarily shown on the internet, though stories have been broadcast on national media (for example, the Capture Wales initiative at the BBC which ran from 2001-2008), exhibited in cinemas, galleries or public spaces and are routinely shown in community settings. The practice is often self-consciously characterised as an emergent movement within the media landscape (Lambert, 2013, 2017), yet it is also an established international community of academics, practitioners and policy makers who gather every two years to share experience and build knowledge.

Lambert (2009) places Digital Storytelling in a distinctly American tradition and cites 'the democratized culture that was the hallmark of folk music, reclaimed folk culture, and cultural activist traditions of the 1960s' (2009, p 2) as a forebear of the process he pioneered through his work leading the StoryCenter. He locates the immediate roots of Digital Storytelling in community activism, participatory media, radical theatre and campfire storytelling – but these roots extend further than Lambert acknowledges. Plummer (2001, 17) notes how 'the world is crammed full of human, personal documents' and his classic study describes the quality, range and number of approaches to telling life stories and then interrogates the differences within and between them before noting that 'these are not mutually exclusive discrete categories but overlap and feed into each other (p45). Scott (1990) examines the positioning of different voices within particular stories to explore the relationship between people in authority and those they govern. He argues that oral traditions 'due simply to their means of transmission, offer a kind of seclusion, control and even anonymity that makes them ideal vehicles for cultural resistance' (p. 160). A consequence of this anonymity is a loss of individual or personal authorship so there is no definitive version or single text and all renditions are therefore variations. Like many forms of community or participatory media, Digital Storytelling uses all these rich traditions, something acknowledged by Lambert (2009, p.2).

Thumim (2012) draws on Williams (1983) to consider different notions of the ordinary suggested through the word 'community' and proposes four different ways in which the term can be used to investigate media production: namely as a means to explore ideas of denigration, celebration and the everyday, and as a tool for citizenship. This article explores how Digital Storytelling can be understood as a means to forge an understanding of the relationship between self-representation, media practice and citizenship, and how changes brought about through the digitalization of production, distribution and exhibition

shape practice within this simultaneously elusive yet distinctive facet of the media landscape. It uses Couldry's (2010) influential discussion of voice to explore three concepts of voice: namely opportunities for voices to speak and be heard; the scope for greater influence over distribution and exhibition; and the potential for new intensities of listening. This framework is used to explore the notion that Digital Storytelling has increased the number and range of voices across the media.

Understanding the dynamic of mediation within a space which struggles to be both adequately defined and professionally recognised is obviously a demanding task. Opportunities to create media have proliferated, yet in many respects, the emphasis within participatory media practice continues to privilege the opportunity to speak over the quality of the content or engagement with a significant audience. Groups of storytellers are often drawn from particular groups defined in the commissioning process and characterised as marginalised or hard to reach. Lynch (2017) argues that the unproblematic depiction of people within much contemporary Digital Storytelling practice as 'marginalised' establishes a creative space which can lock storytellers into the logic of their oppression. The creative freedom or insight offered by Digital Storytelling is frequently framed by boundaries set elsewhere and, as such, it is restricted. This is especially problematic when storytelling is commissioned by organisations seeking to build community or facilitate civic participation, something which is increasingly becoming the norm rather the exception. Case studies from the most recent of the biennial international Digital Storytelling conferences (in Ankara 2013, Boston 2015 and London 2017) suggest that much Digital Storytelling activity is clustered in particular sectors, which include work with young people, within Higher Education, health services, museums or libraries, and initiatives designed to foster citizenship. Understanding Digital Storytelling as a tool for citizenship requires careful consideration of the dynamics operating across each of these categories.

The active involvement of skilled professionals in Digital Storytelling is one means that practitioners use to shift the production values beyond the basic so that the product or output (story) acquires an equal status with the production process and the completed work is of a sufficient standard to engage an audience. A key challenge for Digital Storytelling is to ensure this happens. The professional's role is skilled and delicate; it is primarily facilitative as it works to find the strongest means to tell a story, to pass on technical or creative skills, and to encourage the storyteller to consider how to speak directly and honestly to the audience.

The Digital Stories cited in this article are frequently intercultural yet rooted in place to engage with themes around identity, belonging and citizenship. They focus on the lives people live and their memories of ways of being; this manifests itself in different ways depending on content or form. Community members participated as storytellers, performers, makers and audience. It is these dimensions of contemporary Digital Storytelling that writers such as Burgess (2006) have characterised as vernacular: an accessible space where people and landscapes reveal a kernel of their own reality. Trying to articulate this vernacular aspect of Digital Storytelling, Daniel Meadows, the driving force

behind the BBC's Capture Wales (2001-2008), spoke of Digital Stories as 'radio with pictures' (Lewis and Matthews, 2017). Building a clearer sense of how the complex relationship between the commissioner, the practitioner, the researcher and the storyteller shapes the voice within Digital Storytelling is an essential step to understanding form and content.

### **Voice in Digital Storytelling**

My own work through the linked action research projects Extending Creative Practice (2009-12) and Silver Stories (2013-15) enabled the production of some 800+ Digital Stories made by different older people across the European Union (EU) making it one of the larger stand-alone collections of Digital Stories in Europe. The two programmes explored the interlocking complexities of introducing digital storytelling processes into new settings across five countries, and working with older people with limited digital competencies, while serving overarching policy drivers around the provision of training for hard to reach communities. The relative creative freedom afforded by EU funding programmes means that the restrictions on storytelling imposed by a commissioner are broadly absent from the stories supported during the six years of the programme.

Couldry (2010) talks about how both the number of voices and the range of opportunities for expression have grown through digitalization; for example, Digital Stories authored by participants through these programmes could not have been made in a comparable way during the analogue era, so digitalization can be seen to have extended the range of creative possibilities for participation by non-professional in media practice. Shirky (2010) makes a similar point, but takes this further to propose that the impact of digitalization is more profound. He argues that the ability both to speak publicly and to pool our capabilities is radically different from those that we are used to within established media practices, and argues that the basic concept of media needs to be rethought, as not just something to consume, but also something used as a form of quotidian expression. Finding and teasing out the story within a facilitated form of practice is an essential part of the process, but the extent to which this can be said to be a form of everyday expression is open to conjecture. Digital Storytelling is simply one means for people to acquire a media voice and, as such, it carries a range of limitations.

Two of the more powerful stories in the EU project were told by Romanian elders: Anisora Stamate's *Marriage in the middle of ruins*, and Ploscaru Cornelia's *Nanogenerian*. The first tells of the incongruity of celebrating a wedding in the aftermath of a tragic earthquake which left lives and buildings ruined. Anisora recalls her wedding day in Vrancea, located in at the epicenter of the 1977 earthquake which shook the Balkans with the loss of 1,578 lives and over 11,000 people injured. Speaking calmly over images of ruined buildings being demolished to make way for the reconstruction of the city centre, she describes this event as 'the greatest misadventure of my life'. Her story talks eloquently about the psychic and social impact of the past on the present, yet the pacing and editing reveal this is clearly a film about an extraordinary experience made by a non-professional. Ploscaru Cornelia's

film adopts a more poetic and distanced tone to tell a complex tale of multiple hardships and the stoicism needed to overcome personal problems. The girl at the centre of the story was orphaned at a young age, and the story describes her marriage to a man from upstream, the death of their child and their subsequent separation when he failed to return from battle. The narrator tells how the young woman 'picked up her heart and fostered her twin nephews, whose parents had perished in sickness and misery'. We then learn of her husband's unexpected return and the birth of four children. The photographs shift from monochrome to colour and we see pictures of a contented family life. The narrator talks of the importance of optimism and supporting one's children, and the film closes with a word of thanks to her mother who is, in fact, the subject of the film.

These stories, and the many others like them completed through these two action research programmes, provide an opportunity for the public telling of stories which talk directly and personally about the historical past and the deeper forces shaping people's lives. Stories describe the trauma lived through by an older generation and use this as a means to demonstrate how the past frames the present. Digital Stories are most obviously constrained by a number of formal factors including the length of each piece and the availability of imagery. The ability and willingness of the storyteller to speak publicly is a more complex process that is mediated by the interaction between the commissioning agency, the storyteller, the facilitator-practitioner and the audience. The narrative in many of these stories, and the subsequent evaluation of the project, talked directly of the storyteller's desire to share experiences to inform younger generations. In many respects, this highlights one of the more traditional aspects of Digital Storytelling, namely the roots in the time-honoured process of one generation passing on tales to the next.

Digital Storytelling may share a set of values or common processes with certain folk traditions, but it has two particularly distinctive features. Firstly, the voice within Digital Storytelling is an individualized, personal one which means it has much in common with other forms of personal storytelling stretching across form and discipline. It is not seeking to be journalistic or objective and connections made within individual stories are often personal and idiosyncratic; perspective within a given story comes from the storyteller making sense of his or her world within a format that is restricted by acknowledged and unacknowledged demands placed on the production process. The former may be the need to address particular subjects or the need to speak within the two-minute limit while the latter may be a recognition that certain subjects cannot be addressed for a range of reasons. Secondly, authorship is directly attributed to the individual storyteller; it is presented unproblematically as his or her personal story. While the genesis of the story may lie in the personal experience of the storycircle, meaning the identification of the author is relatively straightforward, understanding the story often requires the context of a larger number of stories made in a particular workshop setting or around a distinct theme.

The processes of production or storytelling within Digital Storytelling are clearly more complex than presented by Lambert (2009), and the mediating roles played by the producer-facilitator and the commissioner need to be explored carefully if we are to gain a

fuller understanding of the practice and the form. Digital Storytelling draws on and extends a multitude of established storytelling practices and so, as Couldry (2010) suggests, increases the quantity and range of voices in the media. Making sense of Digital Stories as either individual texts or aggregated collections of data is more problematic; a voice is given the opportunity to speak but understanding expression requires more analysis. In particular, Digital Storytelling needs to engage more directly with ethical questions around the aggregated use of an individual story where the material given is personal yet may also be interrogated as part of a wider archive of related stories.

Subsequent evaluation of this action research worked to address the process of mediation engendered through the three-way relationship between the storyteller, the workshop facilitator and the funding agency. Two particular concerns drove the empirical research conducted through interviews and online surveys. Firstly, there is the possibility that the opportunity to speak and be heard may be curtailed, enhanced or embellished by the experience of the workshop and the storycircle. This element of mediation with Digital Storytelling is partially formal. There may be stories that are just too complex to tell within a two-to-three minute piece. There may also be certain things that cannot be said or others that participants feel should be expressed or stated in a particular way. These could be personal; for example, one storyteller in the Romanian sample was concerned about the possible view her relatives may take of her story. Flowing from this is the more fundamental issue that explicit, or more likely perceived, demands placed on the storyteller and the facilitator by the funding agency or producer may work to limit the scope of storytelling. It could, for example, prioritise some story questions over others or shift the focus of the storytelling in a particular direction.

Poletti (2009) discusses the formal limitations on voice within Digital Storytelling where an emphasis on simplicity and universality of narrative coalesce around a common expectation that stories are structured to have cathartic endings. Understanding stories completed through commissioned projects is further complicated as the narrative often shifts towards an uplifting cathartic conclusion endorsing the particular interests of the commissioning agency. In this way, the storytelling vernacular may be mediated so that it is curtailed or structured to meet what may be the unacknowledged needs or concerns of a particular policy driver or funding stream.

This form of mediation is a relatively new phenomenon in participatory-based media and adds a complicating factor to the ability to speak publicly where a voice is distorted or structured in a way that addresses a particular array of concerns. For example, stories created with the support of the Salvation Army Housing Association (SAHA) through the Silver Stories programme typically end with an uplifting comment about the support provided by the Association for the storyteller. The new creative opportunities for Digital Storytelling enabled by the funding secured from outside mainstream media illustrate that the extension of the media landscape is a two-way process, with both production and commissioning opened up through digitalization. While the number of voices remains almost infinite, and the power of broadcasters is diminished, the space in between self-



publishing and professional media has been colonized by new commissioners to a point where the media landscape now readily accommodates the needs of policy makers, educationalists, health care providers and social housing concerns. Mediation has, in marketing terms, developed vertical (one to few) and horizontal (peer-to-peer) aspects. As a new form of practice, Digital Storytelling has established itself most successfully beyond the borders of the media or creative sphere in a position where the desired authenticity of the participant voice is being mediated through more complex commissioning and distribution processes in a dynamic and contested digital arena. The extent to which the voices expressed through Digital Storytelling provide a critique or challenge to mainstream media is something that can only be addressed through a clearer understanding of the forces of mediation shaping patterns of production and distribution.

### **Distributing Voices**

The second dimension of voice identified by Couldry (2010) looks at the greatly increased distributive capacities brought into being through the web. The opportunity for voices to be heard has extended the space for political discourse so that 'not only can someone in Iran take a photo at a street protest with their phone and then upload it to a website or on to Twitter; but many others can recirculate that photo or incorporate it in their own public reflections' (2010, 140). My own research has been consistently positioned at the liminal point where the earlier boundaries between producer and audience have crumbled: one primary emergent concern is therefore how the new forms of communication like Digital Storytelling shape both the ability to express yourself and the scope to be heard.

This is both a new and old problem as finding and then reaching an audience has always been a problem for participatory media. The question for contemporary practice is whether, and if so how, the changed distribution and exhibition potential created by digitalization has made this task harder or easier. The shift from the one-off broadcasting of material from a single source, such as the BBC or Channel Four, to a digitalized space where control over distribution rests with the filmmaker or storyteller has transformed our understanding of participatory media practices. Mediation becomes more complex with a shift towards fragmented forms of distribution that are simultaneously slow, diffuse and targeted. Flowing from this is a related question about who or what is reaching the audience and how this audience, or perhaps more accurately these audiences, are constructed. Papacharissi (2010, 65) notes that if 'participatory media culture becomes collective and critically diffused, then it could present an alternative to media power', and Couldry argues that there is a potential to bring 'our experience of politics closer to hand' (2010, 140). The extent to which Digital Storytelling can be seen as representing the voice of the participant, producer or commissioning agency differs according to the individual circumstance in which it is commissioned and seen.

Hartley and McWilliam (2009) characterize Digital Storytelling as a participatory media movement combining professional creative expertise and knowledge with participant

creativity, but note that ‘most digital stories persist only as unused archive’ (p.15). One could go further and add that much of that which is seen is often shared with like-minded audiences. Digital Storytelling can be justifiably criticized for its relatively modest aspirations, characterized by a focus on small-scale production that is rarely shared beyond the specific communities that participated in the Digital Storytelling workshops. Hartley (2013) returns to the theme when he notes that Digital Storytelling as a movement has to ‘combine self-representation with scaled up digital communication’ (p79); by this he is referring to a need to find new ways to reach an audience beyond the immediate and the local.

Addressing these questions directly would, in all likelihood, require the reuse and remediation of stories and therefore draw Digital Storytelling into debates around the ethical and commercial use and re-use of completed stories, which practitioners have studiously avoided. Work completed through *Extending Creative Practice* and *Silver Stories* bears this contention out. Despite the best efforts of all the partners, it proved to be extremely difficult to reach and sustain an audience beyond the core partnership and the process of mediation was restricted or curtailed by the absence of a clear means to reach a significant audience.

The most successful intervention took place through the Romanian Library network (Crisan and Dunford, 2014; Rooke and Slater 2012) but was dependent on finance from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation together with EU funds, and the particularly well resourced facilities of the Romanian network of County libraries. This provided the means to distribute around 400 stories gathered across Romania between 2010 and 2015 and a number of libraries, such as the one in Constanta, established local storytelling clubs, thus providing a further tangible example of a localized or horizontal form of mediation. However, this success also provides further evidence to support Hartley’s (2013) assertion that ‘Digital Storytelling has taken hold in various educational, therapeutic and screen culture contexts’ (p.72), as the infrastructure needed to facilitate the delivery of Digital Storytelling workshops and the subsequent distribution of stories is most frequently found in well-resourced, sympathetic institutions with the capacity to either deliver workshops in-house or, as is more often the case, commission work from small production companies with specialist methodological expertise. A further complicating factor is that commissioning within these parameters is likely to pose specific questions which may undermine the often-claimed integrity of the Digital Storytelling process. Storytelling is often framed or mediated to address specific concerns – health, housing or similar – and these may, or may not, capture the interests of the storyteller. This narrowing of the storytelling space sits alongside the exponential growth in the number of stories, and the unresolved tension between these factors lies at the heart of current discussions about the role and purpose of Digital Storytelling.



## Listening to different voices

Listening can be defined as understanding the means by which we demonstrate attention has been paid. Couldry (2010) proposes that the potential cumulative impact of the increase in the number and range of voices brought into the public sphere through digitalization is to stimulate 'new intensities of listening' to a point where 'a vastly increased range of public voices' means 'Governments cannot any longer say they don't hear' (p.140). Access to information, reciprocity of communication and commercialization restrict the potential transformation of the internet into a public sphere, but as Papacharissi (2011) notes, the notion of a digital public sphere may be different and 'not what we have experienced in our civic past' (p.125). She suggests that the merging of public and private space on the internet has created new hybrid spaces, and new forms of content and discourse are needed to fill these.

My own Digital Storytelling portfolio includes substantial material which has all been placed in the digital public sphere, yet much of my experience demonstrates the unfulfilled possibility of a conversation rather than an actual conversation involving the fruitful exchange of ideas and information. Dreher's work (2012) uses a case study of workshops conducted by Information Cultural Exchange (ICE) in Western Sydney to examine the limits of Digital Storytelling as a means for communities to tell their stories. She stresses the need for 'a dynamic conception of voice in which listening is clearly foregrounded' (p.159) so that the voice of the storyteller is clearly heard and, where necessary, acted upon. This chimes with Couldry's (2010) work on the value of voice, in which he notes there are many opportunities for giving voice, but not necessarily for listening. It also takes the discussion back to Lynch's (2017) questioning of the assumptions around individual empowerment and inclusion that underpin so much Digital Storytelling work, challenging practitioners and researchers to uncouple the storytelling voice from commissioning, or to acknowledge the processes of mediation within Digital Storytelling as part of the act of listening. New intensities of listening (Couldry, 2010) need to be placed in this context of an emergent digital space which hosts opinions expressed in different means that sometimes conflict, and often come from different traditions, yet ultimately all find a means to contribute to an open-ended dialogue.

Dobson's work (2014) work on listening can be used to take this further. He argues that listening out for or to previously unheard voices requires paying close attention, and draws a distinction between 'cataphatic' listening, where the listener uses existing prejudices as a means to understand or shape the subject, and 'apophatic' where such prejudices are suspended or abandoned. He proposes that 'apophatic listening is the key to effective dialogue' (p178) and suggests decision-makers may need to acquire new skills to meet the challenges that this poses; he then notes that one of the challenges is to scale up from person-to-person to broader contexts. The challenge for Digital Storytelling is to open up the digital sphere so that production is uncoupled from commissioning, meaning that voices can be heard and the potential for apophatic listening is real. However, the

regrettable reality is that much Digital Storytelling practice, like the stories we delivered with the Salvation Army, is frequently mediated to a point where it is self-consciously cataphatic. Ryan Bennett's emotionally charged story *A Year of Change* was made as part of a workshop with young adults from SAHA's Foyer in Doncaster. It charts the difficulties he encountered when his Grandmother and Mother faced terminal illness within a year of his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, his subsequent depression as he struggled to deal with grief before going on to praise the supportive role played by SAHA during his recovery. He concludes 'my life isn't awful anymore, it's awesome'. In *Linzi (white space conflict)*, Linzi Williams uses her own song as a soundtrack narrated by on screen titles to describe her love for the guitar and her work as a gigging and busking musician. It ends with a description and imagery of her work teaching guitar to fellow residents at the Foyer as part of Doncaster Hackspace. The two pieces were made as part of a workshop supported by SAHA's Open Talent Programme and both concluded with unsolicited endorsements of it. A more engaged, theorized and nuanced set of practices needs to be established if the potential for apophatic listening within Digital Storytelling is to be realized, yet the fragmentation across the Digital Storytelling world provides little incentive for collaboration so the strategic opportunity is currently unfulfilled.

The mantra of Storycenter (<https://www.storycenter.org/>) is *Listen Deeply, Tell Stories*. The priority afforded to listening demonstrates the importance given to it as part of the creative process in the Digital Storytelling workshop rather than the act of sharing or using completed stories. Hartley's (2013) critique of digital storytelling revolves around his frustration that the process has done much to open up the practice of storytelling to new voices, yet the act of communication has failed as the content frequently fails to extend, enhance, or even reach an audience in the digitized public sphere. He challenges 'digital storytelling activists and agencies to try something new' (p 101). His observation that Digital Storytelling has 'taken hold' in various educational and health related settings could be extended to include activist groups. These are spaces where a personal narrative can be used to illustrate and amplify a larger point in a way which could open up a space for apophatic listening where the Digital Story talks directly to a key audience. For example, the work of Patient Voices cited in one of my earlier articles (Dunford and Jenkins, 2015) and recent stories made by Digital Story Lab for Amnesty International (Lohmann, 2015) both used commissioned personal narratives to engage directly with questions posed by policy makers and thereby ensure a horizontal conversation. In this respect, the form of direct intervention characterised by these stories uses a personal narrative to amplify the point made by Hartley (2013), yet it also draws attention to the critical mediating role played by the commissioner and, by extension, the points around the framing of the practice made by Lynch (2017). At one level, success depends on, firstly re-conceptualising our understanding of what is meant by different audiences and, secondly, securing a simple, direct route to relevant audiences. This, in turn, suggests a willingness to listen which often requires a starting position defined by a key listener at the start of the commissioning process with the consequent difficulty being that the narrative process then enters an echo chamber where

the listener hears an answer to a question they have posed. The endorsement for SAHA's work provided in their Digital Stories is simply one example. In this respect, the ambition to relocate vernacular expression in the participant-storyteller within Digital Storytelling may be thwarted if the participant-storyteller can, as it could be argued is the case with Patient Voices, the Amnesty International films or my own work, be perceived to be ventriloquizing the commissioner's voice. In these cases, the authenticity of the voice can be contested.

Matthews and Sunderland (2013) challenge us to take this further in an article which considers the potential gathering and subsequent use of collections of Digital Stories as data to inform policy-making, research or service provision. Their starting proposition is that collections of Digital Stories could provide invaluable raw data, or unheard voices, that may contribute to public discourse in new and unanticipated ways. Digital Stories could inform or enhance the Digital Sphere; this could happen in different ways either through straightforward commissions or by the top-level interrogation of collections of stories that were initially created for different reasons. The analysis takes on an extra dimension when it considers the number of Digital Stories and the relative absence of both large-scale collections and the lack of any methodology for interrogating the few collections in existence. One of the reasons for this is the fragmented nature of the Digital Storytelling world where stories are typically produced by small, scattered production entities so they are rarely brought together under a single unifying theme. However, treating stories as data in this way could be highly problematic when the underlying veracity of the Digital Storytelling process justifies scrutiny of the processes of mediation operating across the data set. The data is open to question, especially when many stories are produced by small-scale practitioners working to commission, so the material needs to be reviewed with caution.

My own research company DigiTales (<http://digi-tales.org.uk/>) has been involved in the production of over 500 Digital Stories, yet these have almost all been made in small groups as responses to particular commissions or within research projects that were frequently driven by specific questions. They have not been collated or interrogated as a single body of work across the ten-year period since the company was established. Matthews and Sunderland (2013) move beyond the practical difficulties of collecting stories to raise ethical questions around the re-use of personal stories for research or policy analysis. Foremost in these is the concern that the thematic interrogation of stories collected or commissioned as self-representations would undermine the integrity of both the individual story and the Digital Storytelling process as set out by StoryCenter. It would, in many respects, be a re-telling, or re-mediation, that turned individual, collected or commissioned stories into unreliable, qualitative research data. The trustworthiness of the stories and the integrity of the storyteller could be compromised as the collected material is viewed through the prism of a different lens. When considered from this perspective, the tension between the production and subsequent exploitation may limit the scope for the subsequent use of Digital Stories so the ethical position underpinning the practice may well restrict it to localised, modest achievements. While the number of voices across the media

continues to increase, our ability to use Digital Storytelling as a means to hold large scale conversations remains limited, while the processes of mediation across production and exhibition are neither properly understood nor adequately explored. Any process involving the re-mediation of Digital Stories needs to have an awareness of the initial production to avoid distorted meanings, yet it also needs to capture more than the initial value of the material.

### **Concluding Commentary**

The dynamics within the fast-moving Digital Storytelling sphere are often poorly understood; it is as if the practice has emerged in a digitised fog characterized by blind spots and limited vision. This article has applied three of Couldry's (2010) conceptions of voice to frame an exploration of voice and representation within contemporary Digital Storytelling as a means to provoke a discussion about the forces of mediation at play.

Thumim (2014) sets out a notion of institutional mediation to address the way commissioning organisations accrue power and agency within contemporary participatory media. Her argument that ordinary people or communities are typically defined within participatory media projects by questions posed elsewhere is borne out by my experience of Digital Storytelling. The community is mobilized to address the concerns of the status quo and power is taken away from the participant whose voice is restricted at the outset, primarily by the process of commissioning. Once again, this brings us back to the point made by Lynch (2017) about people being locked into the logic of their own oppression. My own research and practice suggests that Digital Storytelling is often driven by a complex iterative process characterized by the interplay of different tensions between the participant, facilitator and commissioner. Underpinning this is the changing dynamics within the media economy, which has seen both a rapid growth in the scale and range of media practices, including Digital Storytelling, and the related emergence of boutique independent production companies specializing in Digital Storytelling that are neither dependent on the patronage of broadcasters or public funding from the arts sector. These companies have set up camp across different up-and-coming sectors of the creative economy where demand for community voices is largest and commissioning opportunities proliferate, such as health, higher education or museums. The shift can be seen starkly in Wales where the BBC's well-resourced project, Capture Wales (2001-2008), was succeeded by the emergence of a fractured ecology consisting of a number of commissioning companies working in narrowly defined fields, such as health, education, library or the museum sector (Lewis and Matthews, 2017).

A meaningful notion of institutional mediation needs to be extended to embrace the complex role played by the facilitator-practitioner and the storyteller which, in the case of the former, remains wilfully unacknowledged. The work of my own company DigiTales with the Salvation Army Housing Association (SAHA) has seen the production of some 60 stories to a brief set by SAHA; many of these involved recently homeless young people and their

support staff crafting short stories about their experiences which ended on a redemptive note of praise for the work of SAHA. Similar examples have been highlighted from the work of Patient Voices with the NHS in the UK or Digital Story Lab and NGOs from their base in Denmark. One emergent issue is around how both the storyteller and the independent facilitator cede unacknowledged power and agency to the commissioner, to the extent that the participation enabled by digitalization takes place on terms set elsewhere. In this respect, the voice is stifled, compromised, distorted or curtailed through processes of institutional mediation rather than enhanced by digitalization.

Papacharissi's (2011) notion of a public digital sphere where old, new or different types of discourse can occur provides a means to contemplate representation within participatory media. The development of radically new and different opportunities for distribution stretches beyond ideas of either vertical or horizontal reach to cover a fuller, more nuanced range of possibilities. These have the potential to extend dialogue into uncharted territory where peer-to-peer spaces and one-to-many broadcasts co-exist with a myriad of other opportunities to reach a listening audience. This creates space for the new intensity of listening called for by Couldry (2010), and is a means to further explore the transformative potential within Digital Storytelling. It needs to be treated cautiously as firstly, the use and re-use of material raises ethical concerns around repurposing and secondly the veracity of the storytelling can only be understood with a thorough understanding of each production context.

Changing processes of mediation call into question the authenticity of participation by channelling storytelling and dialogue into a predetermined space. This commissioning process favours the work of small-scale, fleet of foot facilitators moving from one well-intentioned project to the next. Practice is often based on an assumption that participatory media production has a positive benefit and, more often than not, will enable marginalised people to tell their own stories, albeit with particular limitations. This draws attention to a particular facet of mediation within the Digital Storytelling world, namely the tendency for specialist producers to work with very distinct societal groups in a way that limits the scope of representation. One consequence of this is an increasing focus on therapeutic outcomes from participatory media projects that are often funded as a means to meet individualized needs. Within the Digital Storytelling movement there is now a predictability about the range of groups represented and it is notable that there are no stories about, for example, young racists or aspirant bankers. From this perspective, Digital Storytelling can be seen as less inclusive than more mainstream media where programmes do engage more directly with unpalatable views. The number of stories increases while the range of stories told falls. Many digital stories, like those produced by DigiTales with SAHA or by Patient Voices for the NHS, are anecdotal reflections firstly mediated by the commissioning process and then re-mediated by cataphatic listening as the commissioner hears what they wish to hear. The work is often deliberately small scale and centred on individual experience, because of this it can be criticised for a certain modesty of aspiration that inadvertently shields it from

issues around the opening up of the media space, thereby perpetuating the small-scale nature of the work.

In this respect, Digital Storytelling has reverted to type and is a form of participatory media that is more focused on the process of making rather than distribution or exhibition; there is a notable reluctance to capitalize on the distribution potential inherent within the burgeoning digital media landscape. Practice is often underpinned by a belief that the work empowers participants, yet this assertion sidesteps the processes of mediation at play in the commissioning, production and distribution of Digital Stories. The consequence is a preoccupation with short-term production rather than strategic or theoretical issues around the development of a particular media form. Practitioners avoid complexities and lower expectations to localise the process. In doing this, they sidestep concerns about the reliability of Digital Storytelling as a form of data. Questions about how marginalized people are heard and represented through Digital Storytelling and our understanding of the implications this has for the processes at play within the distribution and exhibition of stories have yet to be fully interrogated.

### **Biographical Note:**

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