Voices for a New Vernacular: A Forum on Digital Storytelling

Interview with Veena Raman

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What makes digital storytelling different than other received forms of storytelling?

Digital storytelling can make stories more engaging and compelling by allowing them to be interactive and immersive. This helps people to be more empathetic and develop a deeper connection to the stories presented in the digital format. There are numerous stories and books on this topic (e.g., see Lambert, 2013; Miller, 2004).

Admittedly, **digital** *is a loose term that comes with some restrictive assumptions. With that being said, what encompasses the digital for you and what particular affordances does it offer?*

I see digital, in its broadest terms, as some combination of images, text, animation, audio narration, music, and video clips. The particular combination used may depend on the story, the storyteller's purpose and consequent choices, and the audience it is meant for.

The question of affordances encompasses what people can do as creators and audiences—the practices these media formats allow and make easy. The digital format affects how easily someone might find the stories, access them, and browse through the content. As creators, employing the digital format gives us the option of playing with context and content, immersing our audiences and connecting to them through images, music, and narration. For audiences, it makes the experience rich in sensory terms and meaningful in interactive ways. The ability to collaboratively create and share widely, memorably, and interactively makes digital formats very attractive.

Why do certain forms of storytelling seem to persist regardless of platform?

Good storytelling can engage us emotionally and draw us in, irrespective of the platform, since we humans use narrative arcs and stories to make sense of our world. While some platforms can add layers of richness to stories, there is no substitute for a good story, powerfully told.

What is the most exciting prospect of digital communication for you? Why? How do you see it changing in coming years?

The most exciting aspect for me is the ability of digital forms to immerse us in the world of the story. A good example of this is Chris Milk's *Clouds Over Sidra*, a virtual reality movie made in 2015 by a company called Vrse, Gabo Arora, and the United Nations to tell the story of a 12-year-old Syrian girl, Sidra, at a refugee camp in Jordan. The movie is shot using special 3D cameras that look in every direction and binaural microphones that face in every direction. Audiences were able to experience the film on a virtual-reality headset, like the Oculus Rift device, or via the Vrse app that operates on a smartphone in conjunction with a viewer, like the cardboard one from Google. Viewing this through a headset immerses an audience member in the story and draws on our ability to empathize in a way that is impossible through text or images alone. It is a powerful way to place ourselves in someone's shoes. I believe, in the coming years, we will see more creative storytelling through such 3D technologies.

What does a focus on the digital tend to obscure? How can students, practitioners, and scholars alike give the proper kind of attention to these issues?

I think we have to be careful about becoming technological determinists and solutionists who expect new technologies to solve our narrative and representational problems. While we pursue the development of new cameras, software, and ways to manage huge volumes of information, it is important that we never lose sight of our stories and the purpose or goal behind creating and sharing these stories. Descriptions of real-life situations and authentic stories need complex and nuanced multilayered narratives; they require creative intelligence from us. While digital forms allow us to go beyond traditional conventions of storytelling, we have to remind ourselves and our students that technology has to serve our purpose of creating and sharing effective, meaningful, and powerful stories.

How can digital storytelling be an effective tool for navigating the public sphere?

In the public sphere, stories can help us cut through the noise, present varying perspectives of different groups, and share knowledge and lived experiences. It can bring publicness to personal narratives. Stories can burst through our information bubbles and allow us to overcome our implicit biases, since they appeal to our sense of empathy. In our networked public spheres, it is possible for us to only speak to, listen to, read and follow others who are like us. Compelling stories can transcend these boundaries and diversify the voices present in our public spheres.

Digital media come with a particular set of affordances that affect the civic practices they allow and make easy; these media affect the specific civic capabilities of people collectively and as individual actors in the

public sphere. In the collective arena, we've seen how digital storytelling has affected protest movements in their ability to organize, manage logistics, and generate publicity in cases such as Spain's 15M movement, Egypt's revolution, and Turkey's Gezi Park protests. In many instances, people have been able to get their narratives out to international media, in spite of censorship, because of digital storytelling.

Of course, for digital storytelling to be effective, Hartley (2009) has argued that it should be used for more than the communication of personal experience to reach its potential to bring about the "emancipation of large numbers of otherwise excluded (or neglected) people into the 'freedom of the internet'" (pp. 139–140) in a way that meaningfully challenges how knowledge is constituted, understood, and disseminated through the media. To remedy some of these concerns, Poletti (2011) suggests that digital storytelling can be positioned as an attempt to construct a globalized intimate public through the production and reception of life narratives.

This work draws on Berlant's (1997) conceptualization of intimate publics that articulates new ways of thinking about the intersection of the personal and the political in contemporary culture. For Berlant (2008), what makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the audiences "already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience" (p. viii). It relies on the universality of themes such as life, loss, belonging, hope for the future, friendship, and love (Burgess, 2006) to connect strangers who can empathize and identify with others and build communities. Since digital storytelling allows people to articulate their personal experiences of structural social and political inequalities, it can contribute positively to our construction of citizenship and shared identity in a globalized, polarized, unequal world.

What are some of the most significant ways in which digital communication is practiced differently in developing countries than in the developed world?

In many parts of the developing world, computer accessibility is limited, and there are infrastructure challenges such as lack of reliable electricity and computer networks. Digital communication in this context means tools that overcome connectivity barriers to facilitate networking and storytelling. Digital divides are very real in developing countries. Keniston and Kumar (2004) identify four areas that manifest the digital divide:

- disparities in access to ICTs between rich and poor nations;
- a linguistic–cultural gap online between the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture and other cultures;
- the gap within a country between the digitally empowered rich and the poor;
- and the emerging gap between an affluent elite *digerati* from the rest of the people, since they live in special enclaves and disregard local conventions and authority.

These divides affect how digital communication operates in each context.

In many developing countries, the basic question about digital communication technologies is how, if at all, they can be used to ensure the fulfillment of basic human needs and to further basic human rights.

This highlights the need for community participation in dialogue so that digital media, if relevant, are woven into the contextual and situated solutions generated by each community to their problems. This is particularly true because digital media use is not just a question of investing in computers or other hardware, but has ongoing implications for communities in terms of the investments in expertise, content generation, and the time and resources required for administration and maintenance of such systems.

Since mobile phones are more prevalent in developing countries and more people have access to them, digital communication and digital storytelling in these countries involve media formats accessible by mobile phones and then comments via recorded voice message or text message. People can also use mobile phones to record and deliver new audio or text stories that are accessible online and by other phones. In places where minimal access to computers and the Internet is available, Web-based tools provide a global feed and global forum for people anywhere to publish stories, contribute to conversations, and share resources.

Digital media allow groups to carry out impressive mobilizing feats with little prior infrastructure, which is often lacking in many developing countries. Mobile phones have allowed for leapfrogging in many countries that lack robust communication infrastructure. They also facilitate new forms of networking and organization. Mason (2007) documents how mobile phones create a public area in migrant worker communities, and Qiu (2009) discusses the role of Internet cafes in allowing grassroots networks of migrants to engage in cultural expression and organize social movements in China. Donner (2008) and Duncombe (2014) provide comprehensive overviews of how mobile phones are changing power dynamics in many developing countries. However, it is important to remember that while mobile phones are great for accessing content, they provide many constraints in relation to data manipulation. Thus, digital communication and digital storytelling use different media formats and deal with different constraints in developing countries. This is a fluid and evolving landscape.

What is the democratic potential of digital communication?

Shared narratives are necessary for functional democracies. Digital communication makes it possible for each of us to generate and share these narratives in new ways. Thus, these digital communication tools help people connect with one another, cultivate a participatory culture, and develop a set of cultural competencies and social skills that people need in the new media landscape. They can help people feel empowered to exchange stories, discuss issues of common concern, and feel that they can make a difference. However, we should not confuse affordances and democratic opportunities offered by these tools with actual change and assume that such change is always easy or inevitable. There are numerous instances of digital media use leading to protest and participatory movements that failed to achieve their goals (Tufekci, 2014).

How do governments and political institutions use storytelling as a means to relate to or influence their publics?

Storytelling is central to our identities as individuals, communities, and countries. Governments and political institutions have relied on official narratives and constructed histories to influence their publics for

a long time to create shared identities. Due to its ability to bring the voices of ordinary and marginalized people into the public sphere, digital storytelling has been taken up by a range of public institutions to respond to the changing political and social environment with its attendant suspicion about elite sources of knowledge (Matthews, 2007; Thumim, 2009). Relying on narratives that touch on emotions and call on shared identities or commonalities can allay distrust that many public institutions deal with.

Government departments have tried to use digital storytelling for a variety of purposes. In March 2015, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released "Positive Spin," a comprehensive digital educational tool that used personal storytelling to promote the importance of securing HIV treatment. In the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (2014) "Towers of Victory: Ghazni Towers Documentation Project" virtual exhibit, a multimedia-rich and interactive digital feature shows how several U.S. government entities came together to document world history in Afghanistan.

Local governments have employed digital storytelling to promote tourism (Yukon Department of Tourism and Culture, 2014) and preserve community memories (Rigolet Inuit Community Government, 2010) and identities (ACMI, 2009) and local history (e.g., "California of the Past" project, City of Monterey Park, CA, 2010).

What are some key elements about digital storytelling that you think people should understand?

I find the *Seven Elements of Digital Storytelling* from the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California, to be a very good starting point to discuss digital storytelling. I find it important to emphasize the following points: As storytellers, we have to be keenly aware of who our audiences are. We have to be attentive to the types of choices we make during the creative process, our priorities, whose voice and points of view are being included, and stay ethical when we use emotional appeals. Finally, we have to consciously remind ourselves that technology has to be used in the service of the story.

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