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Hartley, John (2007) The Problems of Expertise and Scalability in Self-Made Media: Lessons from Digital Storytelling in Australia . In *Proceedings 57th Annual International Communication Association (ICA) Conference*, San Francisco, USA.

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The Problems of Expertise and Scalability in Self-Made Media:

Lessons from Digital Storytelling in Australia

John Hartley, Queensland University of Technology

DST

What is digital storytelling? Here's one I made earlier:

[**Show** *Perfect Rock*]

Scalability has two aspects: the bundling of stories and the propagation of the method of making them. *Expertise* also has two aspects: the role of the expert facilitator, and the expertise of the user. Addressing these problems translates digital storytelling - DST – from a phenomenon locked into the ‘closed expert paradigm’ to one active in an ‘open innovation network.’

1. Scale

How is it possible to bundle *myriad self-made stories* in such a way that they are accessible to and valued by some larger group, whether that is understood as a community, a public, a market or a network? This is by no means an easy question to

answer. Broadcasting and cinema completely failed to manage it. For many decades they didn't try to scale up *stories* because they were too busy scaling up *audiences*. Broadcasting had a very limited 'supply side' that was not popular at all. Consumers did not supply stories to Networks; Networks supplied stories to consumers. As a result *story-telling* became competitive and professional, undertaken by highly trained experts.

Enter the internet. The stream of content-supply began to expand, to resemble first a telecommunications network, and then a language community. So the question became: Is there something between the 'closed expert system' of traditional showbiz and the hive-like buzz of the internet that might allow individual voices to be voiced, bundled and distributed in such a way that they attract the attention of a significant number of other such individuals?

Is digital storytelling such a means? Early utopian hopes suggested that it might hold just such possibilities. Here's Daniel Meadows:

The promise of these big ideas for those of us formerly-known-as-the-audience is that we will be recast as the viewer/producers of a new participatory culture. Well, what I say is: "Bring it on." (Meadows 2006)

How does DST 'bring it on'? It universalises the individual voice. The idea is that personal authenticity can reach out without sentimentality to touch others.

The first *problem* of scalability then is this: can enough stories be made and enjoyed by enough people for the form to sustain the level of ambition imagined for it by the pioneers – to be as democratic as speech, as connected as the internet and as compelling as ... (say) ... *Pan's Labyrinth*? Current developments suggest that early ambitions have not been realised; in fact they've been scaled back. Imagined as an alternative to broadcasting, DST has been hard put to achieve the status of community media. Perhaps it has failed to spread because the requisite investment – public, private, intellectual – has not been made.

2. Propagation

The second problem of scalability is the propagation of the method. At the centre of DST is the workshop. It is labour-intensive, time-consuming, and intimate. It requires a *dialogic* approach to production, relying on a tactfully handled exploitation of a highly asymmetric relationship: the formal, explicit, professional, expert knowledge of the facilitator, and the informal, tacit, 'amateur' or 'common' knowledge of the participant. *Both* are crucial to the exercise. The pedagogy most suited to this set-up is a Socratic method rather than the techno-fix 'knowledge transfer' model. The most important element of the workshops is not the training in computer use or editing, but the so-called 'story circle' (Hartley & McWilliam, forthcoming!), a series of

dialogic games in which people draw on their own and each other's embedded knowledge of stories, narrative styles, jokes and references.

The Californian model – as I understand it – is based loosely on *independent film practice*, in a tradition going back to Lenny Lipton in the 1970s, where individuals produce work for distribution via festivals or cultural institutions. This is an *artist + festival* model, often with a radically democratised notion of 'artist.'

In contrast, the model of distribution pioneered by Daniel Meadows in Wales (and imported into Australia) is based not on arts festivals but on *broadcasting*. In the UK context that meant his funding/distribution agency was not the BFI but the BBC. He experimented with various ways of incorporating the stories into TV and radio schedules as well as on the BBC website, innovations which are a significant component of his method of propagation.

The difference between Wales and California probably reflects the fact that, unlike the USA (but like Australia and Europe), it has strong traditions of public-service broadcasting (PSB) and subsidised arts. However even in Wales the *broadcasting* ambitions of DST have diluted, perhaps because it never received more than marginal support from the BBC. The broadcast variant of DST has been 'captured' by an amalgam of education and community arts. It has developed as a *cultural practice*

rather than as a *media format*. It has not been commercialised; it is not owned or branded. It is neither 'hot' nor 'cool' in the 'economy of attention.' It does not share the ethic of iterative and collaborative knowledge like the Wikipedia or Creative Commons.

An unresolved question remains, therefore: whether the DST *form* is better suited to distribution via festival, broadcasting or network, and whether the *method* can succeed without relying on the resources of education or community arts/media organisations. If DST is to gather its own momentum and to play a significant role in public culture, it needs to address the question of how to scale up content for audiences, and how to propagate the method as part of universal education (though not as *schooling!*).

3. The expert

Turning to expertise, the first problem here is the role of the facilitator in the production of self-made media. Often motivated by both artistic and political considerations, the facilitator is in a position analogous to that of the documentarist, with a community-arts educator thrown in. Can 'ordinary people' successfully get on with whatever they want to do when their hand is being held, however 'helpfully'? How can untutored populations 'speak for themselves'?

This is part of a larger problem. In general, across industrial cultures, the ‘expert paradigm’ has been an impediment to the development of self-made meaning. The *closed expert system* has produced a serious gulf between the high level of talent among the best ‘*practitioners*’ and the impoverished ‘media literacy’ of the *punters*.

And there’s the rub. Work produced by the imaginative elite is excellent by any standard; it is granted that status not least by the approval and enthusiasm of the punters themselves. So when experts do seek to facilitate the ‘universal’ voice of individual humans, the result can be brilliant; great *collaborative art* imagining a genuinely *popular culture*.

So the *problem* of the expertise of the facilitator – turning the ‘authenticity’ of others in to the ‘authorship’ of the expert – would not be solved by simply firing all the filmmakers and letting consumers get by on their own. It is important not to fall for an ‘either/or’ model of digital storytelling: either *expert* or *everyone*. To hold on to both, it is necessary to abandon the linear model of communication and to replace it with one founded in dialogue.

According to Yuri Lotman, the development of ‘human intelligence’ is necessarily dialogic; everyone is an ‘interlocutor,’ even when expressing their ‘inner self.’ This applies to digital as well as to oral and print communication. It follows that there will

be uneven competences, ambitions, and levels of 'literacy' in play, but also that dialogue is still possible. Indeed, Lotman argues that what he calls 'bipolar asymmetry of semiotic systems' is the generative mechanism of meaning, where 'a parallel pair of mutually untranslatable languages' are 'connected by a "pulley," which is translation' (Lotman 1990: 2).

His model is helpful for understanding the role of the expert as a 'translator,' especially for those who are culturally 'monoglot' when it comes to literacy – i.e. they have print but not media or digital literacy (and vice versa). In DST there is a clear asymmetry between facilitator and participant, but it doesn't have to be construed in terms of differential *power*. When coupled with a 'parallel' intelligence from the lay population the expertise of the filmmaker can result in new and compelling stories that do credit to both parties.

4. Expertise

In 2006 Australian filmmaker Mike Rubbo made a documentary called *All About Olive* for ABC-TV, featuring Olive Riley, who is 107 years old. Recently he assisted Olive to produce her own blog – *The Life of Riley* (www.allaboutolive.com.au) – in which she claims to be the world's oldest blogger. A recent entry is the story of Olive going to have her portrait painted.

The site has attracted worldwide attention and high levels of visits, along with many comments. The format is that Rubbo records dialogue with Olive and types it up, interspersed with photos old and new, and with occasional commentary in italics from ‘Mike the helper.’ The result is a new hybrid form – part blog, part DST transcript, part multiplatform publishing. Rubbo replies to almost every comment posted on the site, maintaining a conversation that extends the themes. A notable feature of this is that Rubbo – who is himself nearing 70 years old – is no more a ‘digital native’ than Olive. He’s an expert filmmaker and has a fine documentary sensibility, but computers are another matter. He shares his learning curve with visitors, explaining to one why he doesn’t podcast the conversations with Olive: *‘I’m a senior too and way out of my previous comfort zone already. Mike the helper.’*

Rubbo’s position as a ‘helper’ shows how professional expertise can be deployed in a convivial way. It demonstrates how the asymmetrical relationship between expert (Rubbo) and first-person storyteller (Olive) can produce something new that stretches both of them. Meanwhile, the blog and its associated media coverage calls a sizable ‘conversational public’ into being, for whom the personal contact with Olive and side-bar chats with Rubbo are both of value. It’s a multiplatform ‘open innovation network’ in miniature.

Conclusion

The Riley-Rubbo mode of digital storytelling developed by happenstance, not by workshop, and its one-to-one relationship between facilitator and user would be hard to replicate. But it does point the way towards a ‘dialogic’ development of expertise among users, based on a conversational ethic and ‘parallel intelligence’ applied to concrete but nevertheless objective issues. Olive’s blog is actively producing and sharing new expertise among all parties. It helps us to visualise a digital storytelling ‘system’ in which the myriad producer-citizens who are doing it for themselves can build their own expertise, call in that of others, and use their new-found ‘digital literacy’ to do previously unimagined things; unimagined by the expert providers of mainstream media and by consumer-users themselves, especially as individuals.

This means that DST not an end in itself, but part of a larger cultural process – which may be ‘natural’ but also needs effort – both to *extend the users* of digital literacy across whole populations, and to *elaborate the uses*, so as to democratise public engagement with digital media, and to contribute generally to the growth of knowledge, especially of the kinds most suited to digital media. It is only one step along the way.

Karl Popper has linked the evolution of objective knowledge, and thence science, modernity and the open society, to the invention of printing. This is one reason why universal education was thought wise. It is worth asking whether the invention of

digital media may be enabling a further evolutionary step in the growth of knowledge. By what means can the general public join the life of science, imagination and journalism, as well as that of self-expression and communication? DST is an excellent initiative for recruiting new participants into that open network, and for lifting levels of digital literacy and popular expertise. It may be modelling for the coming century the role – if not the methods – of public schooling in the early period of print literacy. If the problems of scalability and expertise are well-handled, digital storytelling can play a progressive role in this endeavour, by democratising both self-expression and expertise, such that presently unthought-of innovations can occur in the growth of knowledge.