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Tacchi, Jo A. (2009) *Finding a voice : digital storytelling as participatory development in Southeast Asia*. In: Hartley, John and McWilliam, Kelly, (eds.) *Story circle : digital storytelling around the world*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

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## Finding a Voice: Digital Storytelling as Participatory Development

Jo Tacchi

Atanu Ray lives near a wide and beautiful stretch of the Ichamati River in West Bengal. In his digital story, in poetic Bengali, he tells us about his home. Most people here are paddy farmers “rice is green in the fields but golden in the home”. The vibrantly colourful scenes of rice fields and farmers give way to Atanu’s monochrome drawings of the impact of industry and the consequent and often devastating annual floods. One year it was so bad that Atanu and his neighbours lost all their homes and possessions and lived in a school for two months. Brick kilns and their waste are gradually making the river bed narrow and shallow, and the annual floods threaten to get worse. Atanu fears for the future of this place.

A small child called Maane, about eight or nine years old, is the focus of Sanjeela Karki’s digital story. In her town of Tansen, in a hilly region of Nepal, Maane is just one of many orphaned children who resort to begging to survive. They have nowhere to live, and no adults to take care of them. In this self-reflexive story Sanjeela asks herself many questions: what about Maane’s future? Will he be begging all his life? Do these children have to go to sleep hungry if they do not beg? Do all orphans suffer this fate? Who is to blame? Maane’s tiny outstretched hands, cupped to receive the five rupees she gives him, his tattered clothing and his doleful face haunt her digital story. Sanjeela reflects that if there was an orphanage in Tansen, Maane would not have to beg. He would have a place to sleep, and food to eat. “We should build a fund to build an orphanage” – after all, she insists, isn’t it our responsibility as social beings to do something?

Sayera Bano is a twenty five year old Muslim woman from Seelampur in Delhi. Her digital story ‘My Steps Forward’ movingly depicts both the restrictive nature of her position as a young woman in a large family, and her efforts to develop a career for herself. She is one of nine children in a family that does not encourage education, in a society where most women are restricted to the local area. Sayera gained a BA through a correspondence course, but tells us that she “had little information about other things in this world”. Her social life was restricted to rituals, weddings and family gatherings “I used to think that the life of a woman is confined to these things”. Sayera heard about a local ICT centre for women and went along and saw other young women learning to use computers. She joined and learned as well. She took up photography with some flair. Her first digital story won a prize from a Delhi University and her picture appeared in Delhi newspapers. This, she tells us, gave her strength. The aim of her story is to inspire other young women from Seelampur to train for careers like the media so that they too can gain new insights into the ‘outer’ world, and ‘experience new ways to earn money’.



MailToday newspaper 9<sup>th</sup> November 2006, pg 8. (seeking permission to use)

## Introduction

This chapter is about the use of digital storytelling in a research project called 'Finding a Voice'<sup>1</sup>, a multi-sited ethnographic study of - and experiment in - local participatory content creation. The project is made up of a research network of 15 pre-existing local media and ICT initiatives in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. The goal of *Finding a Voice* is to increase understanding of how ICT can be both effective and empowering in each local context, to investigate the most effective ways of articulating information and communication networks (both social and technological) to empower poor people to communicate their 'voices' within and beyond marginalised communities. We are researching opportunities and constraints for local content created by and for specific local communities, for the development and communication of ideas, information and perspectives appropriate to those communities.

We began with a broad definition of 'voice' – it references inclusion and participation in social, political and economic processes, meaning making, autonomy and expression. With a specific focus on ICT and development at the community level we wondered about the significance of voice in terms of poverty – 'voice poverty' can be understood as the inability of people to influence the decisions that affect their lives, and the right to participate in that decision making (Lister 2004). Our definition of voice has remained broad, as we see its relevance to ICT linked to issues of access to modes of expression and more generally to freedom of expression. It can be about opportunity and agency to promote self-expression and advocacy, about access and the skills to use technologies and platforms for the distribution of a range of different voices.

<sup>1</sup> *Finding a Voice: Making Technological Change Socially Effective and Culturally Empowering* is a research project funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (LP0561848) and UNESCO and UNDP. See [www.findingavoice.org](http://www.findingavoice.org).

What better way to combine ICT and the desire to promote voice in a development context than digital storytelling? Certainly it has become a regular feature in many of the community-based ICT centres we work with.

In this chapter I describe and discuss the reasons for the use of digital storytelling in *Finding a Voice* along with how it has been used and adapted. I discuss some specific issues around participation, and draw some conclusions about the use of digital storytelling with marginalised communities in developing countries. But first, in order to locate this project and our work, I take a little time to talk about its background and context. This is important as it immediately acknowledges the messiness and problematic natures of both 'participation' and 'development', and most certainly of 'participatory development', and it is in this difficult terrain that this application of digital storytelling resides.

### **Background and Context**

Issues of voice are receiving a great deal of attention in development communication, and development more widely – one might even consider the concern with voice to be a 'development zeitgeist' (Tacchi 2008). Listening to and consulting the 'voices of the poor' (Narayan, Chambers *et al* 2000; Narayan, Patel *et al* 2000; Narayan & Petesch 2002) marks a now mainstreamed or institutionalised concern for participatory approaches to understanding the lives of those experiencing poverty - the targets of development efforts. This is an approach supported and promoted, for example, by organisations like the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank (see <http://go.worldbank.org/H1N8746X10>; Viswanathan & Srivastava 2007). It is an approach that allows those who are living in conditions that might constitute 'poverty' to tell those who are not what this experience is like, in their own words. Such an approach might challenge our 'expert' conceptions of poverty itself. Taken for granted economic models might be seen to fall short.

Recent work on wellbeing and happiness, especially research conducted as part of the 'Wellbeing in Developing Countries' project ([www.welldev.org.uk](http://www.welldev.org.uk)) demonstrates a mismatch between incidences of poverty as measured by material indicators, and locally understood and defined subjective wellbeing and experiences of happiness (Kingdon, G.G. & Knight, J. 2006). For example, respondents in rural areas of Peru – whose poverty as measured by indicators of externally defined economic wellbeing is higher than their urban counterparts – were more satisfied with their lot than urban respondents who were unable to fulfil higher material aspirations (Copestake *et al* 2007). (This is reminiscent of Marshall Sahlins' depiction of hunter-gatherer societies as 'the original affluent society', contrary to popular views that saw them as the least developed form of society, and most in need of development (1972)). Copestake *et al* took a eudaimonic view of wellbeing. Indicators and measurements of wellbeing were determined based on feelings of happiness and *locally* defined goals along with the ability to attain or aspire to them, rather than on global and standardized views of subjective wellbeing and measures of the same.

This strongly echoes the basis of arguments for participatory and bottom up approaches to development. Rooted in the work of Paolo Freire (1972), and actively championed for more than twenty years by Robert Chambers, through participatory approaches different representations of reality can be presented, and questions asked about 'Whose Reality Counts?' (Chambers 1995). However, such voicing may be encouraged, but never really *heard*. Participatory approaches may themselves turn out to constitute 'top-down participation', where participation constitutes 'insiders'

learning what 'outsiders' want to hear, or simply an exercise in administrative task sharing or the necessary rhetoric to win funding (Bailur 2007; Michener 1998; White 1996).

At the same time, in the fields of development communication and ICT for development there is growing attention being paid to the local production of content. This marks a concern with promoting a diversity of voices through media and communications. There is a discrete field called Communication for Social Change (see [www.communicationforsocialchange.org](http://www.communicationforsocialchange.org); Gray-Felder and Deane 1999) which might be considered as a point of crossover or convergence between the development agenda (here specifically concerned with 'social change') and community-based, alternative, or citizens' media (Rodriguez 2001). Another interesting point of convergence can be found in community multimedia centres (CMCs), largely initiated with donor funding and fitting squarely into the development agenda, and yet strongly linked to traditions of community media. UNESCO supports a global pilot project with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation ([www.unesco.org/webworld/cmc](http://www.unesco.org/webworld/cmc)). CMCs combine traditional media like the press, TV, radio with new digital media like the Internet, computers, and cameras. The idea is that this convergence will provide a two way link to global information and knowledge available through the Internet, through the 'intermediary' (James 2004) of local traditional media.

Most of the 15 sites<sup>2</sup> in the *Finding a Voice* project can be considered CMCs. The stress here is on community-produced media content and participatory approaches to its development. Participation not only in the creation of content, but also in the decision making surrounding what content should be made and what should be done with it. In this context, can digital storytelling provide a mechanism for participatory development?

### **Digital Storytelling in Finding a Voice**

Digital storytelling was used in *Finding a Voice* because it was seen as an interesting way to explore the personal voices of people who otherwise have no access to the media, and in the process teach them skills in multimedia production and a level of digital literacy. While some digital stories could be considered a form of mini or micro documentary, what set digital storytelling apart are really the process and the purpose. The process was seen to be important, and community workshops which are community building in nature were promoted. While we anticipated that the process would be adapted to suit different contexts, we were interested in digital storytelling as it is essentially about the expression of personal voice. We wanted to explore whether personal voice could be used to effectively express social issues and promote positive social change. Another attraction of digital storytelling is that it can be distributed in a variety of formats such as DVD, Video, CD, streaming or downloadable formats on the web, television, radio (minus images) and community screenings.

Our approach had three main phases (Watkins & Tacchi 2008). The first phase was training of trainers, where we trained members of the Finding a Voice sites through a series of workshops. We were initially highly influenced by the training of trainers workshop process taught to us by Daniel Meadows of BBC Wales, adapted from the format established by the Center for Digital Storytelling ([www.storycenter.org](http://www.storycenter.org)) but soon found that we needed to adapt the process further to allow it to be more flexible to suit local contexts. For example, given the project's (and participants') desire to

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<sup>2</sup> Profiles of the sites can be found at [www.findingavoice.org](http://www.findingavoice.org).

explore content that promotes social change or has some advocacy component, we combined the digital storytelling approach and its stress on story development with a journalistic technique – the five Ws. Encouraging story makers to think through *What* is happening in the story, *Who* is involved, *When* and *Where* does the story take place, and *Why* the story is being told (see Martin 2008). In addition, we encouraged thinking about the intended audience for each story, and targeting that audience.

The second phase was the local development of participatory content creation activities in each site. Each site is different, has access to different facilities and media, and faces different local circumstances. The range of stories emerging, and varied strategies for participatory content creation employed by each centre demonstrate the need to take context into account. In all sites the process of engaging people in participatory content creation activities was challenging, for a range of reasons. Consequently a variety of strategies emerged (see Grubb & Tacchi 2008). For example, in an Indian ICT centre for women located in a Delhi slum a local worker Aseem Asha Usman<sup>3</sup> developed a vocational media course for young women. Digital storytelling is one of the main components in the three month media course which deals with various aspects of design (including web design and multimedia production), and is tailored to fit a gap in the local employment market. This is interesting because whereas this ICT centre had previously concentrated on basic computing skills (word processing, spreadsheets) and had investigated how these skills might lead to employment, Aseem found through local research that far more lucrative job opportunities were available for those with creative design skills, and indeed identified a skills shortage in this area. Digital storytelling workshops conducted in the centre, such as the one Sayera Bano (see above) had attended, had already demonstrated to Aseem that the women participants had a keen interest in the *creative* and *expressive* use of technologies. Here then digital storytelling has become an important component in an employment focussed training programme<sup>4</sup>.

The third phase is concerned with strategies for distribution, which depends on the message and target audience. For many of the stories produced across the sites, local screenings to small gatherings in order to generate discussion about local issues has been an effective mechanism for raising awareness, sharing perspectives, and for encouraging others to make their own content and have a voice. Returning, for example, to the Indian ICT centre where Aseem co-ordinated a range of digital storytelling activities: As well as holding local screenings to generate debate on the issues raised in the digital stories, he also used them to encourage other young women to get involved. He facilitated a group discussion with nine young women about what they might like to make a short digital story about. They came up with a whole range of ideas for stories. One young woman wanted to make a digital story about her personal feelings, her dreams, and the challenges she faces; another woman wanted to tell people about her family problems so that someone might offer her some advice. One young woman wanted to make a story about the common health problems of women in the area and prevention measures they might take. A local entrepreneur wanted to make a story in which she can show how successful she has been in developing her business, and then to show it to the government or loan agencies to sanction credits for developing her business further.

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<sup>3</sup> Aseem was also one of the local researchers in the *Finding a Voice* research project.

<sup>4</sup> See Kiran (2008) for more information on this course, and the way that digital stories are used to explore difficult social issues locally such as domestic violence.

In some cases, digital stories and their messages have been brought to the attention of larger audiences, such as in the case of the first digital story made by members of a rural community library in Nepal. The local researcher Sita along with a couple of colleagues from the community library attended a *Finding a Voice* content creation workshop and made a story about a local woman who had learned many things from 'big letter books' once she learned how to read (see Martin *et al* 2007). This digital story was screened locally, and at a meeting in Nepal's capital city Kathmandu. The story was picked up by a national newspaper, and by a local radio station. Sita realised from this experience that a local story can prove interesting and inspiring to local people as well as wider audiences, and that strategies for distribution can aid in this process but need to be tailored to each piece of local content. Across the *Finding a Voice* sites stories have been screened in local communities to generate discussion about social issues, to raise awareness, share perspectives, and to encourage others to make their own content and have a voice.

## Conclusions

The World Congress on Communication for Development, held in Rome in October 2006, produced a set of recommendations to policy makers based on an understanding that communication is a 'major pillar' for development and social change<sup>5</sup>. The *Rome Consensus* places community participation and ownership on the part of the poor and excluded at the heart of communication for development. Among the 'strategic requirements' specified in the consensus are: access to communication tools so that people can communicate amongst themselves and with decision makers; recognition of the need for different approaches depending on different cultures; and, support to those most affected by development issues to have a say. We can interpret these requirements as the need for community-based media that is context specific and that promotes a range of voices.

Through the *Finding a Voice* project a range of story ideas and motivations have emerged. Some of these stories may be more 'valid' than others in terms of promoting social change – advocacy on behalf of a marginalised or voiceless group; positive messages about excluded or discriminated groups; messages that promote good health related behaviours – there is no lack of evidence in our research of people wanting to use media to highlight social issues or demonstrate how one might challenge adversity, often through the device of providing an inspirational example. But we also see other ideas, other forms of self-expression, and other kinds of engagements with media that are as much about self expression as social change or 'development'. Notions of what we term 'creative engagement' are starting to appear in the practices of our sites. Interesting activities are beginning to emerge that are starting to allow different voices to be heard, demonstrating alternative perspectives and challenging our notions of the appropriate relationships between ICTs and poor communities. Various appropriations of digital storytelling have emerged across the sites along with other types of locally created content.

Just as with technologies themselves, this project has shown that digital storytelling can contribute to development agendas, but needs to be introduced in ways that recognise local social networks and cultural contexts, and adapted accordingly. Our research demonstrates that digital storytelling (along with other approaches to local, participatory content creation) can form an interesting component in participatory development in contexts such as those described in this chapter.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTDEVCOMMENG/Resources/RomeConsensus07.pdf>

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