

## Re-mediating Vernacular Creativity: Digital Storytelling

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In recent years there has been a lot of what can only be called ‘hype’ around the growing accessibility and power of digital technologies, combined with their availability and potential for use by ‘ordinary’ people. This hype registers as empty partly because it is so true as to be almost banal - textual productivity is not so exceptional these days. We should understand creative *production* to be part of everyday life for ‘digital citizens’ in developed societies in a quite literal sense. In other ways, of course, the hype is over-inflated, particularly in the context of issues around digital inclusion and exclusion.

My research in the area is concerned with what I call *vernacular creativity* – that is, the ordinary practices of creativity that are already embedded in everyday life. ‘Vernacular creativity’ does not imply the reinvigoration of some notion of a preexisting ‘pure’ or authentic folk culture placed in opposition to the mass media; rather, it includes as *part* of the contemporary vernacular the experience of commercial popular culture. Vernacular creativity is a productive articulation of consumer practices and knowledges (of, say, television genre codes) with older popular traditions and communicative practices (family photography, scrapbooking, collecting, and most important of all, everyday chat and storytelling). Above all, the term signifies what Chris Atton calls ‘the capacity to reduce cultural distance’ between the conditions of cultural production and the everyday experiences from which they are derived and to which they return.

It has been with this conceptual terrain in mind that Since mid-2004, I have been one of a team of QUT researchers engaged in ‘research-based practice’ to adapt the BBC model of digital storytelling practice (Meadows, 2004) for community media projects. I have worked as a researcher and trainer in some of the Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN) workshops around Queensland,<sup>i</sup> as well as leading a pilot workshop for the Kelvin Grove Urban Village Sharing Stories project that involved several elderly participants.<sup>ii</sup>

Digital Storytelling (by which I mean the model associated with the Center for Digital Storytelling and adapted by Daniel Meadows for Capture Wales BBC) as a ‘movement’ is explicitly designed to amplify the ordinary voice. It aims not only to remediate vernacular creativity, but to *legitimate* it as a relatively *autonomous* and worthwhile contribution to public culture. In this model of Digital Storytelling, narrative accessibility, warmth, and presence are prioritised over formal experimentation or innovative ‘new’ uses for technologies. Stylistically, digital stories tend to be deeply felt, poignant and gently humorous rather than archly self-aware, witty, or formalist. Further, Digital Storytelling gathers some of its democratic potential from the fact that it draws on *vernacular literacies* – skills and competencies built up through everyday experience, especially experience as a mass media consumer. The literacies required for digital storytelling therefore cross the divide

between formal and informal learning. They include not only ‘learned’ skills like the ability to conceive and execute an effective narrative and use a computer, but also the more intuitive modes of collecting and arranging textual elements (as for scrapbooking), the oral performance of personal stories (learned through everyday social interaction), and the combination of sonic and visual elements to create televisual flow (learned through the consumption of television, film and animation).

Digital Storytelling therefore works to ‘remediate’ vernacular creativity in new media contexts: it is based on everyday communicative practices – telling personal stories, collecting, and sharing personal images – but remixed with the textual idioms of television and film; and transformed into publicly accessible culture through the use of digital tools for production and distribution. Through this process of remediation, it has the potential to transform ordinary personal *experience* into shared public culture. These individual stories balance the personal with the universal and the universally accessible, through a combination of familiar tropes and the strong affective resonances created by the warmth and visceral presence of the narrator’s voiceover. Because of the way it is presented in the sound field (mixed front-and-centre and dry, with sound effects and music very much subordinated to it) the digital storytelling voiceover represents what Michel Chion calls the “I-voice”: ‘at once the voice the spectator internalises as his or her own and the voice that takes total possession of the diegetic space’ (1990, pp. 79-80).

The primacy of the recorded voice, then, places digital storytelling at some distance from the textual and visual emphasis of most ‘new media’, especially web-based, culture. This can be understood as a kind of reverse engineering of new media aesthetics, recapturing the warmth of human intimacy from the imperative of innovation.

John Durham Peters suggests that this desire for presence and intimacy underpins all modern communication:

If success in communication was once the art of reaching across the intervening bodies to touch another’s spirit, in the age of electronic media it has become the art of reaching across the intervening spirits to touch another body. Not the ghost in the machine, but the body in the medium is the central dilemma of modern communications. (1999, pp. 224-225)]

As Peters implies, meaningful communication has something to do with a sense of *presence*. The digital story is a means of ‘becoming real’ to others, on the basis of shared experience and affective resonances; many of the stories are, quite literally, *touching*.

The story I will screen as an example was made by Minna Brennan, one of the most senior participants in the KGUV Sharing Stories project. Minna came along to the workshop with several exercise books filled with neatly hand-written histories of the Kelvin Grove Infant’s School from her point of view as a teacher during the second world war – histories that only close family members and fellow residents of the nursing home had seen before. At the conclusion of the workshop, I asked Minna what she thought of the workshop process and her story. She said, with a mixture of great pride and self-deprecating humour, ‘I never thought I’d be a *digital storyteller*.’

[screening of Minna Brennan's digital story]

At the same time, other forms of new media storytelling and distribution are proliferating on the internet – blogging, photoblogging/photosharing, and just in the last year or two we are seeing increasing participation in videoblogging and podcasting of video content. These enable accretive, everyday, cumulative storytelling – many small pieces, building up over time, and weaving together with the stories of others.

The key to what is 'new' about these forms of digital storytelling as distinct from broadcast media lies not so much in form as in the ways that content is produced and distributed, and the extent to which that content is open to reuse and reappropriation by other users. Also, technosocial systems like weblogs and photosharing websites like *Flickr* (<http://www.flickr.com>) represent an increased convergence of social networks – connecting people – with content distribution – connecting people on the basis of their shared interests in and practices of creating content. It is important to note the extent to which the everyday, the banal, and the personal are increasingly celebrated as the currency of these emergent media forms – from *LiveJournal* (<http://www.livejournal.com>), to *PostSecret* (<http://www.postsecret.com>), to videoblogs about the daily grind of desperate housewife and photographs of urban or rural decay. But the increased enthusiasm around the everyday in digital culture as not been without its controversy – indeed, we might see these areas of new media as an arena where those who want to perpetuate 'big media' priorities and aesthetics do battle with the vernacular.

But despite digital storytelling's aesthetic compatibility with the vernacular videoblog, the 'community media' model of digital storytelling, while a form of new media in its modes of production, is not native to the Internet, and is yet to develop efficient means of distribution, or of self-sustaining growth (as against blogs, for example). It is not immediately obvious at this moment how or whether digital stories can easily be integrated into the ecosystem of the World Wide Web - a system characterized by Dave Weinberger as 'small pieces loosely joined' (2002) – because digital stories are relatively closed texts and because they are still comparatively bandwidth-intensive. Most significantly, the workshop process that generates these stories is always going to be labour and resource intensive – it is not yet clear how many people would want to, or be able to, make these kinds of stories on their own, as part of the kind of mundane, everyday production activities that something like blogging represents.

## Conclusions

The problem of building publics for 'grassroots' content is probably the most important of all, but in all the excitement about the ever-changing array of new technologies that make it easier and faster to *produce* content, it is easy to forget about the question of who is going to see, hear or read it. So a question for moving in forward might be : where can we exploit opportunities for future convergence between community media or broadcast-focused forms of digital storytelling on the one hand, and new forms of distribution, new devices, new relationships between digital technologies, creativity and everyday life on the other?

In those terms, the major lesson from blogging, social software, and new hybrid creative-social networks like flickr is that publics for “citizens media” are not like the ‘audiences’ of broadcast media. The ‘publics’ for blogs or for *flickr* are not consumers ‘out there’ waiting to receive content that is produced within the walls of media institutions; rather, we need to think of new media publics as interconnected, fluid communities of peers who are at the same time producers, editors, and consumers of creative content. In this light, I will continue to be very interested in tracking the emergence of initiatives and technologies that not only re-mediate vernacular creativity, but that also afford ordinary people opportunities to see themselves and, importantly, *each other* as creative *authors* with a legitimate claim to a space in the cultural public sphere.

## References

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<sup>i</sup> The Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN) is an Australian Research Council funded research project led by John Hartley and Greg Hearn that aims to engage young people in an investigation of how information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be used for interaction, creativity, and innovation. The project has created partnerships with urban, regional, and indigenous communities at 10 different sites and has undertaken digital storytelling workshops at each. The fifty-one Digital Stories produced at these workshops will be included with other content young people produce on a streaming website ([www.sticky.net.au](http://www.sticky.net.au)) to be launched early in 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> The Kelvin Grove Urban Village (KGUV) is a joint venture of the Queensland Department of Housing and QUT. The KGUV is an area at the edge of the CBD that includes the QUT Kelvin Grove Campus, Kelvin Grove High School, the site of a former military barracks and a retirement home, as well as new residential and commercial developments. The Department of Housing has funded the three-year *Sharing Stories* project led by Philip Nielsen and Helen Klæbe, as part of a strategy to build a sense of community identity and inclusiveness in the development. The project will produce two books representing the history of the area from first settlement, and has launched a web site which includes community oral history, visual artworks and digital stories.