Mediating Influences: Problematising facilitated digital self-representation

Corresponding Author

Sonja Vivienne
Postdoctoral Research Fellow
University of Queensland
Room 319, Level 2. Joyce Ackroyd
Building
sonja@incitestories.com.au

Abstract

While Digital Storytelling has been lauded as an exemplary model of participatory cultural citizenship (particularly in initiatives for and with marginalised people), many mediating influences make 'authentic' self-representation far from straightforward. In this article, I consider some of these mediating influences, from both theoretical and practical perspectives, and underline their regulatory and constitutive nature. While some of these mediating influences are timeworn and pre-date digital technology, others are perpetuated and amplified, as is the case in networked personal storytelling disseminated online. I draw on some well-established strategies derived from anthropology and narrative practices to propose a new purpose for old tools. These tools support the nuanced and sensitive facilitation of both face-to-face and online Digital Storytelling workshops as well as the curation of web spaces in which they eventually circulate. I argue that making complex mediating influences visible to participants affords redress of the inherent social and technical privileges of institutions, facilitators and platforms. Finally, I consider the implications of these strategies for voice, marginalised identity, cultural citizenship and social change.

Keywords

Digital Storytelling, voice, self-representation,
authenticity, mediating influences, facilitation
strategies, social change

Biographical Statement

Sonja Vivienne is based at the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCi) at Queensland University of Technology and is a graduate of the Oxford Institute of Internet Research (OII) Summer Doctoral Programme. Her background is as a writer/director/producer of drama and documentaries, tackling subjects as diverse as youth suicide; drug culture in Vietnamese communities; and lesbian personal columns. Over recent years, Sonja has become increasingly involved in a range of community Digital Storytelling projects, including 'Journeys from Heartache to Hope' with an Indigenous Women's Healing Group, and a cross-platform Queer Digital Storytelling initiative, *'The Rainbow Family Tree Project'*. As creative principal of *'Incite Stories',* Sonja also produced and co-directed '*Wadu Matyidi',* a kids animation and documentary package exploring the rejuvenation of the Adnyamathanha language and culture of the Flinders Ranges.

Sonja Vivienne

Conjunctions. Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation,
vol 1, no. 1, 2014. ISSN 2246-3755

Introduction

Since inception, theories on computer-mediated communication have taken several quite
different forms – from utopian views of cyberspace in which identity was liberated from
corporeality, to binary comparisons between online and face-to-face interactions, and finally
to more complex understandings of interdependent modes that are shaped by social
structures (Baym 2010). The consequences for citizenship are explored by Zizi Papachirissi
who suggests that "Technology… presents a way to counter powerlessness by allowing
individuals to propose new spaces, upon which newer, more empowering habits and
relations may be cultivated" (Papacharissi 2010: 15). Fundamental aspects of 'new'
technologically mediated spaces build upon age-old and core dimensions of public spheres
and civic deliberation, which resonate with the work of established political philosophers
and communication scholars (Bickford 1996; Fraser 1990; Young 1997). Together they
establish a theoretical landscape in which voice and identity are almost always influenced by
technology and the line between face-to-face and online engagement becomes increasingly
blurry, thereby disassembling overly simplistic digital dualisms (Jurgenson 2012).

Digital Storytelling[1], with origins in community media (Lambert 2009), predates the
internet. Digital Stories are short autobiographical documentaries, often illustrated with
personal photographs and narrated in the first person, typically produced in group
workshops and now, increasingly, distributed online. As a media form they offer 'ordinary
people' the opportunity to represent themselves to audiences of their choosing, and their
stories are commonly regarded as more 'authentic'[2] than professionally crafted mainstream
media forms. The argument follows that less contrived and stereotyped self-representation
has significant repercussions for hitherto socially maligned identities and their social
participation. However, while technologies for the production and distribution of rich media
products have become more accessible, many obstacles remain. Workshop context,
facilitation and distribution processes all mediate marginalised storytelling and inevitably
influence both the content of stories and how they are interpreted.

Sonja Vivienne

Conjunctions. Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation,
vol 1, no. 1, 2014. ISSN 2246-3755

In seeking an understanding of how preferred identity narratives[3] are constructed, I consider some typical mediating influences. These include:

- the framing agendas of other stakeholders (for example, the auspicing institution or funding agency);
- the facilitated story production process (for example, whether aspects of content or production values are given precedent);
- the creative input of workshop peers;
- the technical authority of workshop editors/producers;
- storytellers' capacity to imagine divergent audiences of family, friends and potential antagonists;
- storytellers' expectations of privacy and risk;
- distribution strategies across a variety of online spaces;
- framing the influence of the space in which stories are viewed (for example, a cinema, as interstitials on mainstream TV, curated in purpose-built web spaces, Facebook etc.)

As a means of teasing out and analysing these influences, in this article I describe a particular Digital Storytelling initiative and detail the considerations of storytellers who, as parents of a young trans[4] child, represent many of the hopes and fears of their fellow workshop participants. This initiative was one case study in a research project that took place between 2008 and 2013 and was granted comprehensive ethics clearance by the Queensland University of Technology. This article cannot accommodate the details of the research methodologies that I have canvassed extensively elsewhere (Vivienne 2013); however, in brief summary, the observations made herewith draw on embedded ethnographic practices, in which I was situated as a researcher, workshop facilitator and queer Digital Storyteller. Throughout this article, I use 'queer' to represent diverse identities within the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, same sex attracted continuum, sometimes represented by variations on the GLBTQIS acronym. While queer is not necessarily the chosen identifier of all participants in this case study, it is commonly used and not considered pejorative.

As a marginalised cohort, queer Digital Storytellers stake out fertile terrain for an exploration of activist-oriented, digitally mediated social participation. Generally speaking,

queer Digital Storytellers are highly motivated to share their stories in public spaces by a desire to catalyse social change through challenging gender norms, homophobia and transphobia. However, sharing personally identifiable stories invoke risks of negative ramifications for both individuals and extended networks of family and friends. The fact that this cohort of storytellers is already adept at balancing privacy and publicness behoves facilitators, institutions and platforms to mediate their stories with similar consideration of context and consequences. My focus on queer storytellers, while affording an in-depth exploration of some very particular concerns, nevertheless evokes similar concerns experienced by other marginalised identities. More broadly, questions of selective self-disclosure apply to anybody who has ever engaged in an online space.

In this article I will first raise some questions about the potentials of facilitated storytelling initiatives that employ digital technologies and, in some cases, reside in digital domains. I will describe the 'Rainbow Family Tree' case study, especially pertinent issues of visibility and queer self-representation and networked (being both face-to-face and online) story sharing (encompassing both production and distribution). I then canvas some theoretical strategies for eliciting preferred identity narratives, before considering how these play out in practice, in the making of one Digital Story 'Blue for Boys? Pink for Girls?'.

For, With, To and By

How can Digital Storytelling communities and activist-oriented individuals operating in online spaces be fortified in a fashion that affirms preferred identity narratives rather than those deemed 'worthy' by a workshop facilitator or site moderator, or 'empowering' by an auspicing institution? English author and social innovation commentator Charles Leadbeater argues:

> [T]here are only four main ways in which we organise most social activities or address social changes. 'For' solutions are delivered to us. 'With' solutions we devise cooperatively with others. 'By' solutions depend on self-motivation and DIY. 'To' solutions depend on instruction, command and coercion, to get things done. (Leadbeater 2009)

Digital Storytelling has been constituted as an example of 'With', although arguably, in its worst manifestation, conflicted by host institution agendas and unethical facilitation, it can be an exercise in 'To' disguised by 'With' rhetoric. In many instances, Digital Storytelling operates within a social service paradigm that is focused upon 'helping' those in need, to the extent that even the most well-intentioned of processes can constitute participants as 'other' and contribute further to a sense of marginalised identity. Choosing which sample Digital Stories to screen in an overview session can shape understandings of genre conventions and tone. Similarly, personal politics (of both facilitators and other group members) on issues of being 'out and proud' versus 'private' can unintentionally place a moral imperative on what might otherwise be pragmatic decisions around rendering visibility. The question of ownership is also an interesting one – in the case of Digital Stories it would be easy to assume that bestowing final cut and copyright upon a storyteller would assure the product's 'authenticity', but this negates the complex process by which identity, story construction and distribution are mediated. Many scholars have critiqued the notion of autobiographic authenticity in Digital Storytelling production (Hertzberg Kaare & Lundby 2008; Taub-Pervizpour 2009; Thumim 2008), while others dispute the very notion of 'truth' in a variety of autobiographic forms (Lejeune 1989; Smith & Watson 1996)).

How do online production and distribution spaces and processes mediate the storytellers' voices? Everything from the design aesthetics and architecture of a website through to the task-based activities that may constitute an online workshop influences user engagement. While the degree of intervention intrinsic in a face-to-face production process may be diminished in an online equivalent (simply because the storyteller undertakes primary editing responsibilities), in some cases this may mean that storytellers seek technical support from friends and family members who may not be so familiar with ethical considerations and practices that safeguard authentic voice. While it is arguably more difficult to diminish agency in web spaces that merely facilitate distribution and rely on participants to 'opt in', strategies designed to effectively engage users may inadvertently flatten complex self-expression. Additionally, web spaces that aim for communal collaboration and ownership must in some way seek consensus from divergent users,

potentially eliding the voices of 'lurkers' and minorities. Below I explore these issues with reference to the 'Rainbow Family Tree' case study.

The 'Rainbow Family Tree' Case Study

In 2009 I facilitated a Digital Storytelling initiative entitled 'What's your Story?', which was hosted by an Australian sexual health education and information service, 'SHine SA'. The institution wished to produce a DVD and educational resource that canvassed sexual identity and gender diversity, thereby addressing homophobia and gender stereotypes. The members of the steering committee, who were tasked with using their own professional and personal networks to recruit these individuals, drew up a diverse list of potential participants. Identity descriptors were discussed at length, and at one point it was suggested that an 'A' for 'Allies' be added to the already lengthy GLBTQIS acronym, to accommodate children, parents and friends. When first approached, many people were hesitant about participating, often declaring that they either had not experienced overt prejudice or did not wish to explore those particularly painful memories. Further discussion with the steering committee shifted the emphasis from stories of discrimination to stories of acceptance, which despite their positive focus would, it was hoped, reveal concomitant themes of rejection and bigotry. I draw attention to the recruitment process and the way this initiative was framed as an early and potent influence upon the content of the stories that were eventually made.

In planning the initiative, optimal modes for engaging marginalised participants (particularly those living in social or geographic isolation and those with significant work and/or family commitments) were also discussed. Two workshops were offered to over eighteen participants over an extended time frame and with both face-to-face and online options. The first workshop followed the conventional route of organising hardware, facilitators and storytellers into a physical location but was modified by spreading the three 'contact' days out over five weeks. Participants were instructed in the use of editing software that they had access to on their own home computers, and they were offered support in between the workshops via a yahoo group. The second workshop was conducted primarily online via a customised 'Ning'[5] website (known as 'Rainbow Family Tree'), combined with two informal face-to-face workshop opportunities in which some storytellers recorded their

voiceovers and added finishing flourishes to their edits. While the respective face-to-face and online delivery of workshops shaped participant experience in different ways, similarities were apparent in the way pre-existing technical skills and digital cultural capital influenced the individuals' capacity to actively engage and/or independently edit their stories. Participants who felt less confident sought more support; however, lack of digital skills did not necessarily limit imagination or ambition. This issue of existing expertise is crucial in terms of facilitation, because traditional Digital Storytelling places great value on the participants 'owning' their stories through hands-on involvement in the editing process and mastery of post-production software. While we encouraged all participants to be involved in the process, some were nevertheless limited by time, and in these instances they were encouraged to take the lead in supervising the editing of their stories. I have also been involved in other workshops in which final post-production has, sometimes unintentionally, been dominated by enthusiastic and adept editors, which, on occasion, resulted in stories that were far removed from the storyteller's original intentions.

Shaping influences are also manifest in the way initiatives are delivered to audiences. The production stage of this initiative was completed with a launch of the educational package, the website and a theatrical screening of the eighteen Digital Stories. SHine SA elected to brand the DVD and educational resource as 'What's your Story?' to distinguish them from the evolving, organic 'Rainbow Family Tree' web community. While the original 'Ning' site was established as a space in which to host an online Digital Storytelling workshop, once this peak of activity passed, it primarily served as an archive of stories and a space for sharing activist anecdotes and distribution strategies. Regardless, both the marketing of the stories as part of an 'educational' package and the positioning of the website as a 'safe place' influence the way audiences may approach content and, further, how storytellers think about their involvement.

Visibility and Queer Self-Representation

As a genre, Digital Stories are typified by anecdotes that articulate personal worldviews, narrated with all the quirks of idiomatic speech and illustrated with characteristic snapshots. The idiosyncratic detail embedded in each story mean that there is a very great chance of the

storyteller being identified. Accordingly, they sometimes embody vulnerable identities. Many queer people are accustomed to 'passing' as heterosexual in the public spaces they inhabit, and it can be argued that marginalisation and discrimination is amplified by this invisibility. Further, queer people who choose not to declare their difference in some kind of tangible performance of self are often witnesses to bigoted asides that, while not directed at them personally, nevertheless have implications for their self-esteem, identity and agency.

This interactive and iterative relationship between visibility and invisibility is complex. While Goffman (1959) argues that we all modify or bring forth aspects of ourselves depending on our context or audience, online communication yields complex intersections between discrete social networks, a phenomenon dubbed 'social convergence' or 'context collapse' by danah boyd (2008). Queer Digital Storytellers, as a result of the strategic management of identity performances throughout their daily lives, are also unusually cognisant of what Bernie Hogan calls the 'lowest common denominator' of digitally networked self-representation (Hogan 2010). In other words, they share selectively the dimensions of self that they deem appropriate for multiple audiences collapsed into singular contexts (for example, a wedding speech or Facebook update).

In proclaiming their preferred identities to new audiences, queer Digital Storytellers abandon the (problematic) security of anonymity and risk exposing themselves (and their friends and family members) to homophobic ramifications. For some storytellers, including transgender people, HIV positive people, community leaders, teachers and parents, these risks can seem overwhelming. However, these storytellers can be supported in finding creative solutions to maintaining privacy while nevertheless seeking the publicity that they hope will disintegrate social prejudices. As Hogan points out: '…one need not consider everyone when submitting content but only two groups: those for whom we seek to present an idealized front and those who may find this front problematic.' (Hogan 2010: 383). However, while queer people may be accustomed to hiding or revealing their complex or subversive qualities, this constant negotiation of identity performed differently for different audiences may evoke a mixed bag of feelings including shame, guilt, hauteur and pride. As auspicing institutions and empowered facilitators, it is imperative that marginalised storytellers are affirmed in navigating these complex pathways towards self-articulation.

10

Production and Distribution, Face-to-Face and Online

While blogs, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter all provide relatively spontaneous forums for personal storytelling, Digital Stories tend to be highly constructed and require a degree of editing and storytelling finesse that benefits from a group learning environment. Expert tuition in both technical and creative aspects of story construction is typically offered over a three to four-day intensive production period. Performing and refining their narratives in the traditional 'story circle'[6] generally includes a discussion of what storytellers are attempting to communicate and which audiences they seek to address. The prospect of online circulation with wide reach to unknown audiences has substantial influence upon story content, even in purely face-to-face production workshops.

Unlike story production, story distribution tends not to be so orchestrated or outcome- oriented and often occurs in fits and bursts over extended time frames. Many hosted Digital Storytelling initiatives coordinate distribution with little input from the storytellers or even their permission. When DVD compilations are used in training and education environs and/or made available online, storytellers are generally informed but they are rarely regarded as distribution agents themselves. In some cases, while self-distribution strategies may be discussed, simple logistics like making the final data file of a story available (rather than an authored DVD) inhibit the capacity of the individual storyteller to easily circulate their story. Even highly motivated storytellers sometimes confront personal impediments. Sharing personal stories implies familiarity with a language of self-promotion (rather than the self reflective voice expressed in the story itself). This marketing of self conjures particular conundrums for storytellers who identify as 'private' or 'shy', and still more complications for those who see themselves speaking on behalf of others, or those who wish to retain anonymity.

Despite these obstacles, when storytellers are empowered as agents, not just of Digital Story production but also distribution, the viral circulation of stories to counterpublics (Warner 2005), intimate publics (Berlant 1997) and networked publics (boyd 2008) become possibilities. With increased circulation comes expanded potential for social change. An individual storyteller might upload/embed, share links, do blog posts, screen to friends and/or family members and/or politicians. In doing so, they may confront some of

the difficulties they encountered in story production – fear of intimate exposure to both familiar and unknown audiences; technical problems (both user and hardware-oriented); time; motivation; money etc. Some of these issues take on a different resonance when institutions pass distribution to storytellers, who then become more directly connected with their audiences. While the risk of confrontation and critical feedback seems less likely at a theatrical screening, it is not so difficult to imagine negative feedback from anonymous adversaries in online spaces. Additionally, the fear of unforeseen ramifications for friends and family are amplified when stories are distributed online. However, it can be argued that, having conquered these issues during the production phase with the support of their comrades, storytellers are better equipped with survival strategies pertinent to the distribution phase of the Digital Storytelling practice.

Mediating Strategies in Theory

In this section, I consider facilitation strategies that have historically been employed in therapeutic storytelling and/or workshop contexts and reflect upon their applicability for networked Digital Storytelling initiatives like 'Rainbow Family Tree'.

 Barbara Myerhoff is a visual anthropologist perhaps best known for the contribution she made to ethnographic practice in the form of a book and her Academy Award winning documentary 'Number our Days' (Myerhoff 1978). She challenged the anthropological conventions of the day by acknowledging her own relationship to her community of interest (the elderly Jewish community of Venice, Los Angeles) and her role in facilitating their storytelling. Therapists interested in narrative theories, Michael White and David Epston, drew substantially on Myerhoff's work including concepts such as 'de-centred listening', 'loitering' and the exploration of 'rich stories' (White & Epston 1990).

 In brief, these practices attempt to counter the expert counsellor-receptive client relationship that underpins many therapeutic encounters by positioning people as experts on their own problems; problems that are external to people rather than defining of them. Penn and Sheinberg write:

> For the therapists to resist declarative language and to stay in a questioning and
> speculative mode ... acts as a counterweight to the inherent properties of language that
> represent reality as though it were independent of our construction of it ... Maintaining
> this position also protects the therapists from assuming a hierarchical posture and
> reconfigures the idea of the therapist as an expert. (Penn & Sheinberg 1991: 32)

Digital Storytelling facilitation can replicate this style of communication by regularly
affirming the primacy of the storyteller's voice and the effect this voice has on a range of
audiences. The technical skills of facilitators are acknowledged but not predominant, and
they are harnessed in service of story production directed by participants. Additionally,
facilitators can draw attention to the context of story production and distribution and the
many influences that shape the construction of preferred identities, including friends and
family members and the subjective nature of memory itself. Myerhoff reflects upon the
process of arriving at 'collective self-definitions', including 'Re-Membering' stories in
which attention is called to the:

> … reaggregation of members, the figures who belong to one's life story, one's own
> prior selves, as well as significant others who are part of the story ... The focused
> unification provided by Re-Membering is requisite to sense and ordering. A life is
> given a shape that extends back in the past and forward into the future. It becomes a
> tidy, edited tale. Completeness is sacrificed for moral and aesthetic purposes. Here
> history may approach art and ritual. (Myerhoff 1982: 111)

Extending the normally tight time frames for Digital Storytelling production allows
storytellers to undertake 're-membering' conversations with friends, family and other
storytellers. This 'loitering' (White and Epston 1990) affords in-depth scrutiny of story
tropes and, in some cases, also results in a re-framing of stories that affirm personal
convictions, survival strategies and preferred identity narratives.

While personal empowerment is not necessarily the principal motivation of activist
storytellers (an important distinction from people engaging in therapy), endorsements from
early audiences during the production phase may substantially influence the storytellers'

Sonja Vivienne

Conjunctions. Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation,
vol 1, no. 1, 2014. ISSN 2246-3755

decision to undertake a wider distribution of their finished stories. Myerhoff saw the transformational potential for both individuals and communities in creating situations in which 'outsiders' could 'witness' marginalised stories through 'definitional ceremonies'.

> Socially marginal people, disdained, ignored groups, individuals with what Erving Goffman calls "spoiled identities," regularly seek opportunities to appear before others in the light of their own internally provided interpretation. (Myerhoff 1982: 105)

Aspects of her ethnographic process, sometimes resulting in visual testimonies/products, resonate strongly with the Digital Storytelling practice. A 'ceremonial' screening of finished stories for fellow storytellers, friends and family members is the traditional culmination of a Digital Storytelling workshop and frequently affirms the strength and moral fortitude required of storytellers. These affirmations are especially valuable and significant for marginalised activist storytellers who may later undertake the distribution of their stories to less sympathetic audiences.

Myerhoff also observed that the facilitation of definitional ceremonies required nuanced mediation and that, in some cases, the stories she helped gather and present were the products of a 'third voice'; a collaboration in which she encouraged the discovery of communal values and beliefs. In the book version of 'Number Our Days' (arguably a 'definitional document' in itself), Myerhoff includes verbatim passages from interviews with elders and acknowledges that they are 'heavily edited and selected'. Her friend and collaborator Marc Kaminsky critiques this process by comparing Myerhoff's 'third voice' with Bakhtin's 'double voiced discourse':

> Myerhoff's formulation emphasizes the fusion of the two voices into an abstracted third voice in which their distinct semantic intentions are erased. In Bakhtin, who is ever conscious of the power relations among speaking voices that enter into contact, the boundary marking the separation between different semantic intentions is never obliterated in double-voiced discourse. The liquidation of this difference, in Bakhtin, marks the destruction of the dialogic context and its passage into monologism. Although Myerhoff's third voice moves into the discursive terrain that Bakhtin

Sonja Vivienne

Conjunctions. Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation, vol 1, no. 1, 2014. ISSN 2246-3755

recognizes as double-voiced, her formulation evades the whole problem of the relationship between her discourse and "somebody else's discourse," thus rendering it wildly inappropriate to ask the question that the caterpillar poses to Alice, concerning the meaning of words: the question of who shall be master. (Kaminsky 1992: 129–130)

This reoccurring question of who is the 'controlling master' of the final digital text can be further extrapolated to online distribution contexts. Just as face-to-face and online workshops are *facilitated,* the web spaces in which the story products are distributed are, to a greater or lesser degree, *moderated.* This moderation may be explicit (several administrators are tasked with approving new members, content and comments) or implicit. Clay Shirky, popular culture commentator and author of 'Here Comes Everybody: the Power of Organizing without Organizations', argues that web 2.0 technology affords new forms of group formation and self-expression for 'everybody' (Shirky 2009). He has been critiqued for eliding the obstacles to participation and over-simplifying the 'rules' for mass engagement. He proposes that a successful web community requires a clearly articulated 'promise' (why join the group?), accessible 'tools' (facilitating participation) and a 'bargain' that constitutes the rules of engagement (or what you can expect and what is expected of you). While Shirky acknowledges some difficulties, he fails to address the detail of how his 'promise, tool, bargain' trifecta could be articulated by a disparate community of users. As with face-to-face workshops, an empowered individual (or small group) generally defines the terms of engagement on behalf of a divergent collective. The choice of 'tools' and 'bargain' clearly influence participation – for example, a space that functions primarily as a story archive may invite feedback in the form of 'comments', whereas other spaces may accommodate personalised member pages, blogs and facilitate interaction between community members. The greater the degree of interactivity and flexibility of design, the greater the likelihood that a storyteller will be able to shape a context for their preferred identity narratives that reflect their semantic intentions, both present and future.

Sonja Vivienne
                    Conjunctions. Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation,
vol 1, no. 1, 2014. ISSN 2246-3755

'Blue for Boys? Pink for Girls?'

Many participants in the 'Rainbow Family Tree' case study negotiated issues of voice, visibility and risk associated with socially maligned identity categories. These are highlighted in the experience of 'Molly and Brendon', parents of a nine-year-old trans child. Their story 'Blue for Boys? Pink for Girls?' describes their journey as parents, from the birth of their baby boy through their growing realisation that their child identifies as female, and on to their eventual acceptance of, and pride in, their daughter.

> When my husband and I sat down to write this story, I had visions of the opening scene from 'The Lion King': when the monkey holds the baby for all in the animal kingdom to see … as the mother and father look on with pride, love and adoration. This is how proud I am of our daughter and what she has taught us … Our reason for telling this story was to raise awareness of the predicament of transsexualism (often referred to as "transgender") in children, whilst honouring our brave and unique little girl. However, we were also concerned about how she would feel about the story as an adult. (Molly, DVD booklet, 2009)

While their child knew about and contributed to the Digital Story that her parents were labouring over, she was not able to provide legal consent. Many storytellers deal with the complexities of identity by choosing to speak only for themselves; nevertheless, most also become aware that their stories are not theirs alone. They are populated by friends and family members who invariably have different recollections and different perspectives on both the anecdotes set forth in the story and, in some cases, on the way the storyteller articulates 'self'. When Digital Storytellers address intimate audiences (friends and family members who are also either explicitly or implicitly linked to the story), they must consider not only whether they are violating the privacy of individuals, but also what effects their renditions of history and relationship dynamics will have. In some cases, the storytellers' activist intentions inspire them to address primarily unknown audiences. As Susan Bickford notes in her oft-cited work on listening, conflict and citizenship, expectations of an audience's capacity to listen may also influence the tone in which a story is presented,

16

Sonja Vivienne

Conjunctions. Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation,
vol 1, no. 1, 2014. ISSN 2246-3755

ranging from emotive to factual (Bickford 1996). Molly voices the story from her perspective as a parent, and she addresses her daughter directly with words like *'We love you very much'*. Despite this, there is a relatively subtle but explicit intent to speak to and challenge mainstream assumptions around gender. When speaking of how a child's gender is determined, the storyteller uses words like *'branded'* and *'untruth forced upon you'*. This message is reinforced with a selection of images like blue and pink pencils hovering over a noughts and crosses grid; an image that seems to connote that gender identity is a somewhat arbitrary game of luck.

Not only were Molly and Brendon challenged by the task of speaking, to some extent, on behalf of their daughter, they also had to consider the fluid and evolving nature of her identity and the ramifications of 'fixing' one iteration of this 'self' in a public space that is searchable and enduring. What if, in ten years time, their adult daughter does not wish to be 'out' as trans but to get on with her life as a legally affirmed woman? Obviously, digital documents like 'Blue for Boys? Pink for Girls?' are hard to erase from cyberspace or DVDs. Further, in situations where storytellers speak on behalf of others, 'consent' can only ever be sought for one particular rendition of identity, accurate at the present point in time. I explore social imperatives that enforce immutable performances of gender identity in more detail elsewhere and consider the ramifications for Digital Storytelling (Vivienne 2011).

In constructing their daughter's identity as they do, Molly and Brendon reveal their own values, informed by the journey they have travelled together, from assumptions that gender is biologically and physiologically determined to a more complex understanding that nevertheless ascribes to the notion that there are two and only two genders. The final question posed in the story *'So how do we know what sex we are? Not from a tick in a box or a body part… Just close your eyes, you'll know it… because you'll feel it'* fits with a dominant ideological paradigm of 'inner truth' (Tregoning 2006). While a portion of the trans community espouses this essentialist notion of gender, it is also highly contested. Alternate notions emphasise the social construction of gender and the possibilities of 'gender queer', being neither male nor female (Stryker 2006; Valentine 2007).

Trans identity is a highly regulated category in which any variance from what is medically and legally constructed as 'normal' may have serious ramifications for the people involved. Use of the hormone blockers required to redirect a trans child's adolescent

Sonja Vivienne

Conjunctions. Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation,
vol 1, no. 1, 2014. ISSN 2246-3755

development must be approved by endocrinologists, psychiatrists and family court judges. Family dynamics and the motivations of parents are highly scrutinised and any behaviours (like blatant political activism) that may be construed as not in 'the best interest of the child' may be penalised. The child's right to determine who knows the details of their biological sex and gender identity is not always of paramount concern to authoritative figures, and Molly spoke of 'accidental slips' perpetrated by teachers, lawyers and other parents. Weighing up all the ramifications of seeking an audience for their daughter's story (publicity) and the damage perpetrated by invisibility (or 'secrecy' as opposed to privacy), Molly and Brendon had a lot to consider in constructing their Digital Story.

> At risk of exposing our daughter's identity and taking away her right to privacy we decided to conceal pictures and any possible connection to her. This became a technical and creative challenge in our storytelling process that in a way prevented us from truly celebrating our daughter, free from shame and secrecy. (Molly, DVD booklet, 2009)

Molly expands on the themes of privacy (defined by her as issues that are nobody else's business) and secrecy (issues that are not spoken about out of fear of negative social consequences and are therefore tinged with shame). In one anecdote she described the quandary she and her husband experienced as they became increasingly close with new neighbours who were not aware of their child's genetic history. A harmless enough conversation about their two daughters' physiological development (being similar in age) came to an awkward halt on the subject of menstruation. Similarly, a school camp became complicated by one of the daughter's classmates disclosing her gender variance to previously unknown camp participants from another school, which caused a great deal of distress and humiliation.

While difficulties like these are just a feature of everyday life, Molly felt that representations of their daughter's gender identity become substantially complicated when it comes to online engagement with divergent social networks. She described having a 'proud mummy moment' that caused her to upload some photos of her kids to her Facebook page.

18

There was a party … with a group of people that I went to school with ... that knew me from years ago. And it was the middle of the night, and they said *'Oh, I'm friends with 'Molly' on Facebook!'*. Somehow we must have come up in the conversation ... *'Let me show you this'.* (They) pulled up my page, and were looking at pictures of [my daughter] going *'That's a dude. That's a dude. Oh, look what they've done to this kid!'*. (Molly, interview, 2010)

Molly immediately removed the photos but ponders what impact their Digital Story may have had on the same audience, imbued as it is with all the subtle complexities of loving and learning from a child who is simply and unapologetically 'different'. The manner in which the story is constructed elicits (though does not guarantee) a sympathetic interpretation. The context in which the story is presented also influences how it is interpreted. For Molly and Brendon, a degree of control over this context (that is, where the story may be distributed) was as significant as maintaining control over how their daughter was represented both with words and pictures in their story. In the following, I discuss some of the practical facilitation strategies undertaken to reinforce this sense of proprietary control and empowered voice.

Mediating Strategies in Practice

A range of mediating strategies were undertaken in the 'Rainbow Family Tree' case study to reinforce a sense of proprietary control and empowered voice. Specific and practical tools were derived in part from Myerhoff and narrative therapy and include:

- establishing personal connections between storytellers and between storytellers and facilitators, thereby assuaging risk, secrecy and shame;
- acknowledging (and discussing) multiple influences on the construction of preferred identity narratives;
- creating meaningful and frequent opportunities for storytellers to articulate their Digital Stories in a range of creative ways determined by them;
- building trust over an extended period and 'loitering' throughout production and distribution processes;

- confirming that the end product and distribution context reflect the storytellers' semantic intentions and that storytellers have the capacity to alter these contexts, should they wish to, at any point in the future.

In Molly's case, opportunities for developing strong connections with other participants were frequent and flexible and occurred both face-to-face and online. Molly's capacity to invest large amounts of energy in both the story production and distribution was facilitated by offering access to workshop activities at home. This also allowed her to develop and create the story in collaboration with her husband, thereby also sharing the risks that were implicit in telling their story. While other trans participants in the storytelling group had different notions on the issue of innate or constructed gender identity, there was no attempt to seek common ground on the subject. Mutually supportive relationships were forged as a result of clearly established group norms that positioned each storyteller as an expert in the construction of his or her own 'truth'. Storytellers and facilitators offered feedback on the aspects of each story that especially engaged or moved them and constructive criticism of aspects that were confusing or perceived as being 'off the (central) subject'. Molly's technological aptitude was considered (and extended) during the production phase, when she and her husband were supported in using software they could access for free at home and on existing hardware. This 'hands-on' approach afforded them control over every aspect of their story. An extended production time frame allowed deep consideration of the consequences of 'putting their story out there', and as a result several revisions were made. Baby photos were blurred and the voiceover, having initially been recorded by Molly, was re-recorded by a family friend because of concerns that Molly's voice might be identifiable.

Later, during the distribution phase, Molly's concerns for privacy determined that pseudonyms were used on the 'Rainbow Family Tree' site. She declined to share her story with her Facebook network, but its presence on the 'Rainbow Family Tree' site allowed other members to disseminate the story widely. Similarly, after lengthy consideration of the terms and conditions of YouTube and Vimeo, Molly chose not to upload to YouTube, which currently licenses use of all content for a wide variety of purposes and repurposing. Finally, the positioning of the story across multiple platforms and contexts (educational DVD and numerous web spaces) supports storytelling complexity and evolution. The booklet that accompanies the DVD offers background insight into some of the significant concerns

around privacy and publicity pertinent to trans people and their families. Molly and Brendon's presence on the 'Rainbow Family Tree' site also allows them to provide updates on the stories' progress articulated in a strong activist voice that nevertheless preserves their anonymity. Their daughter may also wish to add her perspective at a later date.

In the 'Rainbow Family Tree' case study, Shirky's 'promise' and 'bargain' are articulated (albeit somewhat vaguely) in the home page banner that announces: *A haven for queer Digital Storytellers and their friends and families … view, create, share … and do your bit to 'change the world'.* The site architecture operates within the confines of 'Ning', and decisions regarding design and layout, which key features are enabled and how people are encouraged to interact are made by a core group of unpaid community members with administrative privileges (including myself) in regular consultation with the wider community. After a group scoping session in which feedback was solicited on 'where to next?', it was decided that 'Rainbow Family Tree' should also establish Facebook, Vimeo and You Tube spaces as a means of circulating the Digital Stories more widely. While these decisions are generally arrived at by consensus (and individual storytellers decide whether they opt in to various spaces and how they participate) the site 'bargain' must nevertheless constitute a middle ground among members with diverse needs (particularly on issues of privacy and publicity) and motivations for participation. Some wish to utilise the various web spaces to market their own stories and advance their personal social reform agenda, while others wish to view (and sometimes share) existing stories with friends without ever participating as storytellers. The site has not yet developed into a self-sustaining community, but is highly dependent on the investment of a small group of alpha users. In order to avoid Kaminsky's indictment of Myerhoff for her elision of the storytellers' voices, what covenant can be brokered between these 'moderators' and the wider community that ensures the authentic telling of collective and preferred identity narratives?

Conclusion

Liberating Digital Storytelling from institutional agendas and/or face-to-face workshops into web spaces of mutually supportive storytellers is potentially one step closer to Leadbeater's 'By', reducing dependency on and the mediating influence of the helping hand of 'With'. On

21

Sonja Vivienne

Conjunctions. Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation,
vol 1, no. 1, 2014. ISSN 2246-3755

the other hand, acknowledging nuanced and timeworn mediating influences upon identity narratives means acknowledging inherent complexities in the public expression of voice and identity across *all* social spaces and time. While activist individuals and communities have the opportunity to thrive online, they nevertheless face similar socially constructed obstacles as those apparent in wholly face-to-face realms. It is therefore imperative that the facilitated production and distribution of preferred identity narratives make use of transparent and reflexive practices that draw attention to these mediating influences and the overarching social construction of stories; that we listening deeply to storytellers and their semantic intentions; and that we create opportunities to relinquish (facilitators, moderators etc.) control.

The queer Digital Stories made in the 'Rainbow Family Tree' case study 'reflect active participation in collective world making' and therefore 'make possible new forms of gendered or sexual citizenship' (Warner 2005: 57). While it may be difficult to quantify their social impact, there is no doubt that these Digital Stories substantially redress public representations of marginalised identities and can therefore be regarded as constitutive components of a digitally enabled counterpublic that, in turn, makes a profound contribution to on-going social change.

References

Baym, N. K. (2010). *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Berlant, L. (1997). *The Queen of America goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Bickford, S. (1996). *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict, and Citizenship*. New York: Cornell University Press.

boyd, danah. (2008, Fall). *Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics* (PHD in Information Management and Systems). University of California, Berkeley.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. *Social Text*, (25/26), 56–80.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.

Hertzberg Kaare, B., & Lundby, K. (2008). Mediatized lives: Autobiography and assumed authenticity in digital storytelling. In *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-representations in New Media* (Vol. 52, pp. 105–122). New York: Peter Lang.

Hogan, B. (2010). The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, *30*(6), 377 –386. doi:10.1177/0270467610385893

Jurgenson, N. (2012, June 28). *The IRL Fetish – The New Inquiry*. *The New Inquiry*. Retrieved November 20, 2013, from http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-irl-fetish/

Kaminsky, M. (1992). Myerhoff's "Third Voice": Ideology and Genre in Ethnographic Narrative. *Social Text*, (33), 124–144.

Lambert, J. (2009). Where it All Started: the Centre for Digital Storytelling in California. In J. Hartley & K. McWilliam (Eds.), *Story Circle: Digital Storytelling Around the World* (pp. 79–90). West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Leadbeater, C. (2009). *We-Think: Mass Innovation, Not Mass Production*. London: Profile Books.

Lejeune, P. (1989). The Autobiographical Pact. In P. J. Eakin (Ed.), K. Leary (Trans.), *On Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Myerhoff, B. (1978). *Number Our Days*. University of Michigan: Dutton.

Myerhoff, B. (1982). Life History among the elderly: Performance, visibility and re-membering. In J. Ruby (Ed.), *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Papacharissi, Z. A. (2010). *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age*. Cambridge: Polity.

Penn, P., & Sheinberg, M. (1991). Stories and Conversations. *Journal of Strategic & Systemic Therapies*, *10*(3-4), 30–37.

Shirky, C. (2009). *Here comes everybody: the power of organizing without organizations*. London: Penguin Books.

Smith, S., & Watson, J. (1996). *Getting a life: everyday uses of autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

Stryker, S. (2006). (De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies. In *The Transgender Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge.

Taub-Pervizpour, L. (2009). Digital Storytelling with Youth: Whose Agenda is it? In *Story Circle: Digital Storytelling Around the World* (pp. 245–251). West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Thumim, N. (2008). "It"s good for them to know my story': Cultural mediation as tension. In *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-representations in New Media*, *52,* 85–104. New York: Peter Lang.

Tregoning, W. (2006). Authentic Self, Paranoid Critique and Getting a Good Night's Rest. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, *20*(2), 175–188.

Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining Transgender: an ethnography of a category*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Vivienne, S. (2011). Shouting from the Rooftops: Queer Digital Storytelling for Social Change. In B. Scherer & M. Ball (Eds.), *Queering Paradigms II: Interrogating Agendas*. New York: Peter Lang Pub Inc.

Vivienne, S. (2013). *Digital Storytelling as Everyday Activism: Queer Identity, Voice and Networked Publics* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis). Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane.

Warner, M. (2005). *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books.

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York: Norton.

Young, I. M. (1997). *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sonja Vivienne

Conjunctions. Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation,
vol 1, no. 1, 2014. ISSN 2246-3755

[1] Capitalised Digital Storytelling generally refers to the specific workshop based practice and distinguishes it from an array of storytelling processes and practices that are mediated by digital tools and platforms.

[2] While I do not have space here to unpack the many problematic dimensions of a singular, objective truth connoted by authenticity, I utilise quotation marks to draw attention to the disputable legitimacy of the term, particularly in regard to self-representation.

[3] A term coined by Barbara Myerhoff and widely used by narrative therapists to connote the empowered stories people choose to tell about their own lives, often in opposition to dominant 'victim' discourses.

[4] I use 'trans' as an umbrella category inclusive of both transsexual and transgender identities acknowledging the fact that these monikers are highly contested and mean different things to different people.

[5] A white label platform enabling customised construction of social networks - www.ning.com

[6] A facilitated process of game playing, trust building and story sharing whereby storytellers are challenged to think creatively and laterally about their own and one another's narratives.