Mediating Identity Narratives: a case study in queer digital storytelling as everyday activism

Sonja Vivienne
Queensland University of Technology
Australia
sonja@incitestories.com.au

Abstract

Digital Stories are short autobiographical documentaries, often illustrated with personal photographs and narrated in the first person, and typically produced in group workshops. As a media form they offer 'ordinary people' the opportunity to represent themselves to audiences of their choosing; and this amplification of hitherto unheard voices has significant repercussions for their social participation. Many of the storytellers involved in the *Rainbow Family Tree* case study that is the subject of this paper can be characterised as 'everyday' activists for their common desire to use their personal stories to increase social acceptance of marginalised identity categories. However, in conflict with their willingness to share their personal stories, many fear the risks and ramifications of distributing them in public spaces (especially online) to audiences both intimate and unknown. Additionally, while technologies for production and distribution of rich media products have become more accessible and user-friendly, many obstacles remain. For many people there are difficulties with technological access and aptitude, personal agency, cultural capital, and social isolation, not to mention availability of the time and energy requisite to Digital Storytelling. Additionally, workshop context, facilitation and distribution processes all influence the content of stories. This paper explores the many factors that make 'authentic' self-representation far from straight forward. I use qualitative data drawn from interviews, Digital Story texts and ethnographic observation of GLBTQIS[1] participants in a Digital Storytelling initiative that combined face-to-face and online modes of participation. I consider mediating influences in practice and theory and draw on strategies put forth in cultural

---

[1] This acronym refers to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Same sex attracted people whom I henceforth refer to as 'Queer' which is not to say that all the people I include under this umbrella would necessarily embrace the term themselves. Participants in the Digital Storytelling case study also included parents and children of GLBTQIS people.

anthropology and narrative therapy to propose some practical tools for nuanced and sensitive facilitation of Digital Storytelling workshops and webspaces. Finally, I consider the implications of these facilitation strategies for voice, identity and social participation.

Keywords

digital storytelling; everyday activism; identity; voice; mediating strategies

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 autonomous online and face-to-face interactions and finally to more complex and interdependent understandings, as represented in Nancy Baym's recent work:

> mediated communication demonstrates many new qualities, but continues to display and reinforce the broader cultural forces that influence messages in all contexts... the social structures that shape us and our potentials manifest in our communication, identities, relationships, communities, and networks online just as they do offline. (Baym, 2010, p 71)

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, p15) Building upon Habermasian notions of the public sphere Michael Warner proposes:

> Some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general. Discussion within such a public is understood to contravene the rules obtaining to the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying. This kind of public is, in effect

> a counterpublic; it maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. (Warner, 2005, p 56)

While Warner considers the possibilities for socially engaged discursive practices within 'counterpublics' Papacharissi considers the possibilities afforded by technologically mediated realms by proposing that:

> the public sphere model no longer works. This would require that we shift emphasis away from models of rational deliberation within representative democracy, and examine alternative formats of information and opinion exchange that develop in late modern democracies. Perhaps it is best to examine the geographies proposed by online technologies as hybrid spaces capable of hosting both public and private, commercial and public interest, political and social activities. (Papachirissi, 2010, p 20)

As a marginalised cohort Queer Digital Storytellers stake out fertile terrain for exploration of the opportunities and obstacles of activist oriented, technologically mediated social participation and I explore this in more depth shortly. In seeking understanding of production and distribution processes particular to these preferred (self-defined) identity narratives[2] I consider some typical 'mediating influences'. These include the framing agendas of other stakeholders; social construction of identity and self-representation in public spaces; facilitated technical and creative story production process; and distribution expectations in a variety of online spaces. By way of descriptive illustration of these issues I detail the process and considerations of several storytellers who, as parents of a young trans[3] child, represent many of the hopes and fears of their fellow participants.

The *Rainbow Family Tree* Case Study

In 2009 I facilitated a Digital Storytelling initiative, 'What's your Story?', that 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. A diverse list of

---

[2] 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

[3] 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

potential participants was drawn up by the steering committee who were tasked with using their own professional and personal networks to recruit these individuals. 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. Many people were hesitant about participating when first approached, often declaring that they either hadn't experienced overt prejudice or didn't wish to explore those particular 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. This resulted in more participants who later spoke in interviews of a range of motivations including highlighting social injustice on behalf of themselves and others. Several people used their stories as activist tools with which to lobby parliamentarians on issues ranging from access to fertility services through to gay marriage. Others sought affirmation and acceptance of their preferred and often complex identities from more intimate audiences including friends and family members.

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 use of editing software that they had access to on their own home computers, and support between workshops was provided via a yahoo group. The second workshop was conducted primarily online via a customised *Ning*[4] 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 SHine SA auspiced the entire initiative they were reluctant to be associated with the website on an ongoing basis and elected to brand the DVD and educational resource as 'What's your Story?' to distinguish it from the evolving *Rainbow Family Tree* community. The production stage of the initiative was completed with a launch of the educational package, the website and a theatrical screening of the eighteen Digital Stories. While the original *Ning* site was established as a space in which to host an online Digital Storytelling workshop, once this

---

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

peak of activity passed, it primarily serves as an archive of stories and a space for sharing activist anecdotes and distribution strategies.

Visibility and Queer Self-Representation

As a genre, Digital Stories are typified by anecdotes that articulate personal world views, narrated with all the quirks of idiomatic speech and illustrated with characteristic snapshots. As such they embody identity and, even when they are pitched at a mainstream unknown audience, the idiosyncratic detail embedded in each story mean that there is a very great chance of the storyteller being identified. 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 witness to homophobic asides that, while not directed at them personally, nevertheless have implications for self-esteem, identity and agency. This interactive and iterative relationship between visibility and invisibility is complex and nuanced. Goffman argues that we all modify or bring forth aspects of ourselves depending on our context or audience (Goffman, 1959). Online communication yields complex intersections between discrete social networks, a phenomenon dubbed 'social convergence' by danah boyd in her explorations of *Facebook* and other social networking spaces (boyd, 2008). Queer people are accustomed to hiding or revealing the complex or subversive aspects of their 'true' identity, but this constant negotiation of identity performed differently for different audiences may evoke a mixed bag of feelings including shame, guilt, hauteur and pride. The act of creating and sharing an identity-themed Digital Story online often amplifies and complicates these feelings but also offers an opportunity for what Barbara Myerhoff calls 'definitional ceremony' which she defines as "collective self-definitions specifically intended to proclaim an interpretation to an audience not otherwise available…" (Myerhoff, 1982, p111). However, 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. These storytellers find creative solutions to maintaining privacy while nevertheless seeking the publicity that they hope will disintegrate social prejudices. As such they are demonstrably vulnerable to the prevailing social winds that influence identity and story construction, including the mediating dimensions of production and distribution both face-to-face and online. My focus on Queer storytellers, while affording in

depth exploration of some very particular concerns, nevertheless evokes similar concerns experienced by other marginalised identities.

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. Workshops are frequently hosted by an institution, with expert tuition in both technical and creative aspects of story construction offered over a three to four day intensive production period. Performing and refining their narratives in the traditional 'story circle'[5] generally includes 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, often using DVD compilations in training and education environs and in some cases stories are made available online. While storytellers are generally informed of these strategies 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 fully exploit 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, 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

---

[5] 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 anothers' narratives

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 different resonance when distribution is less mediated by institutions and storytellers are more directly connected with their audiences. While the risk of confrontation and critical feedback seems less likely at a theatrical screening, it's 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 Digital Storytelling practice. It might also be said that, by playing an active role in distribution, they acquire capacity as everyday activists.

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? Are there facilitation strategies that have been employed in similar contexts that may be adapted to co-create these stories and mediate distribution processes?

English author and social innovation commentator, Charles Leadbeater argues:

> there 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, 2008)

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

7

proud' versus 'private' can unintentionally place a moral imperative on what might otherwise be pragmatic decisions around rendering visibility. The question of control is 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 products 'authenticity' but this negates the complex process by which identity, story construction and distribution is 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 & Eakin, 1989; Smith & Watson, 1996).

How do online production and distribution spaces and processes mediate 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. I now explore these issues with reference to 'mediating strategies' used in the *Rainbow Family Tree* case study.

Mediating Strategies in Theory

Narrative therapists, Michael White and David Epston, unpack Myerhoff's insights into therapeutic practices that revolve around 'de-centred listening', 'loitering', and exploration of 'rich stories' (White, 1990). In brief, these practices attempt to counter the expert counsellor-receptive client relationship that underpins many therapeutic encounters by positioning people as expert 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, p.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, 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 construction of preferred identities, including friends and family members and the subjective nature of memory itself.

White and Epston drew substantially on the work of visual anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff who is perhaps best known for the contribution she made to ethnographic practice in the form of an Academy Award winning documentary *Number our Days*. 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. 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, p111)

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 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) these endorsements from early audiences during the production phase may substantially influence the storytellers decision to undertake 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, p105)

Aspects of her ethnographic process, sometimes resulting in visual testimonies/products, resonate strongly with 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 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 product 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 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 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, p129-130)

This reoccurring question of who is 'controlling master' of the final Digital Storytelling 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 Digital 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'. 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.

'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.

11

> 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.

While their child knew about and contributed to the Digital Story 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 Digital 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 what effect their renditions of history and relationship dynamics will have. In some cases the storyteller's 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, 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 this essentialist notion of gender is espoused by a portion of the trans community 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 & Whittle, 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 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 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

13

were not aware of their child's genetic history. A harmless enough conversation about their two daughter's 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, causing 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 becomes 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.

> 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 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. Now 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 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 end product and distribution context reflects the storytellers semantic intentions and that storytellers have capacity to alter these contexts should they wish to, at any point in 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 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 expert in the construction of their 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 it's 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

15

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 *YouTube* 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 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 storytellers voices, what covenant can be brokered between these 'moderators' and the wider community that ensures authentic telling of collective and preferred identity narratives?

Conclusion

Is it possible that liberating Digital Storytelling from institutional agendas and face-to-face workshops into web spaces where communities of storytellers can support one anothers' endeavours might take Digital Storytelling practice one step closer to an example of

Leadbeater's 'By', thereby eliminating dependency on the helping hand of 'With'? If Digital Stories are constitutive components of a digitally enabled counterpublic can they "make possible new forms of gendered or sexual citizenship - meaning active participation in collective world making through publics of sex and gender"? (Warner, 2005, p 57). On the other hand, acknowledging the mediated nature of production and distribution spaces, as with all social spaces and in fact all identity narratives, means acknowledging thematic complications of voice and identity. While activist individuals and communities have opportunity to thrive online they nevertheless face similar socially constructed obstacles as those apparent in wholly face-to-face realms. Key strategies in facilitating production and distribution of preferred identity narratives, whether face-to-face or online, include transparent and reflexive practices that draw attention to mediation and the social construction of stories; listening deeply to storytellers and their semantic intentions; and creating opportunities to relinquish (facilitators, moderators) control. While it is difficult to measure the social impact of activist oriented Digital Stories there is no doubt that they substantially reshape public representations of marginalised identities thereby making a profound contribution to cultures of gendered and sexual citizenship.

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.

Berlant, L. (2008). *The female complaint: the unfinished business of sentimentality in American Culture*. Duke University Press.

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

boyd, d. (2008). Facebook's Privacy Trainwreck: Exposure, Invasion, and Social Convergence. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, *14*(1), 13-20.

boyd, d. (2010). Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites* (pp. 39-58).

Burgess, J. (2006). Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, *20*(2), 201-214.

Fivush, R., & Haden, C. A. (2003). *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self: Developmental and Cultural Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.

Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: the social construction of preferred realities*. A Norton professional book. Norton.

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

Hartley, J. (2008a). Problems of expertise and scalability in self-made media. *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-representations in New Media* (pp. 197-212). New York: Peter Lang.

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

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

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

Leadbeater, Charles. (2009). *The Art of With*. Cornerhouse.

Lejeune, P., & Eakin, P. J. (1989). *On Autobiography*. Theory and history of literature. University of Minnesota Press.

Meadows, D., & Kidd, J. (2009). "Capture Wales": The BBC Digital Storytelling Project. *Story Circle: Digital Storytelling Around the World* (pp. 91-117). West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Myerhoff, B. (1982). Life History among the elderly: Performance, visibility and re-membering. *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*. Digital media and society series. 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*. Penguin Books.

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

Stryker, S., & Whittle, S. (2006). *The Transgender Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge.

Taub-Pervizpour, L. (2009). Digital Storytelling with Youth: Whose Agenda is it? *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. *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-representations in New Media* (pp. 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). Trans Digital Storytelling: Everyday Activism, Mutable Identity and the Problem of Visibility. *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review*, *7*(1), 43-54.

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

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. A Norton professional book. Norton.