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Digital storytelling as an act of academic courage

Research is often framed as a pursuit of knowledge – rigorous, methodical, and objective. Yet, beneath this structure lies a deeper question: what stories emanate from these endeavours and who are they for? Annalena Oppel proposes that a renewed engagement with storytelling, and specifically digital storytelling, presents an opportunity for research and researchers to reconnect with their original motivations and engage in collective action. However, to do so requires the courage to resist increasingly institutionalised and isolating forms of scholarship.

Digital storytelling refers to practices that **combine traditional storytelling with multimedia tools** including image, sound, or movement. In a research context, this translates into the recognition that stories have the power to move beyond the confines of academia. That they can re-shift a focus on 'for whom' we carry out research: to help build human connections in new and transformative ways.

Storytelling is ancient, serving as a vital tool for conveying social norms, creating collective memories, or building social cooperation. The stories we tell are not just containers of information but vehicles for human connection. Aristotle emphasised this power through the concept of **catharsis** – a release of emotions through storytelling. Emotions shape how we engage with narratives, an emotional reaction is indeed necessary for us to be connected, to listen and care. Stories can also provide a means to *feel* in control: a process of sense-making in a complex world. As a tool in the making of culture, a '**deep story**' reveals the collective emotional structures that underlie political attitudes and social divisions. Here, emotions become collective resources and by emphasising some and discouraging others '**shared feelings**' are brought into the focus that can **lead social change**.



Storytelling can become an act of resistance when they do not seek to exploit people's fears.



Digital stories play a vital role to reach and move many in a world where **the politics of fear** often dominate public discourse. In her discussion of 'Mainstreaming: The Normalization of Exclusion', Ruth Wodak describes how stories can build imagined threats through us versus them sentiments, making exclusionary policies and actions necessary or reasonable. At the same time, storytelling can become an act of resistance when they do not seek to exploit people's fears. It provides an avenue for counter-narratives – stories of hope, where uncertainty constitutes a space of transformation that challenges prevailing narratives.

By crafting and sharing stories that acknowledge both struggle and possibility, digital storytelling can enable individuals to reclaim authenticity, agency and **foster a sense of collective imagination and potential for change**. Especially when looking at intimate or personal aspects linked to people's selfhood, such as their stories about dreams, imaginations, or aspirations. Digital stories through their blend of audio and visual can provide deep portraits that resonate even when words fall away.



Digital ethics of storytelling

Translation: One should occupy oneself with those matters that produce enthusiasm and joy and not waste valuable time fabricating doubts about all things great and small.

Digital storytelling offers a space where emotional resonance and intellectual inquiry can co-exist. In this way it deviates from traditional academic outputs by inviting an audience not only to understand, but to feel and to empathise. This shift challenges researchers to consider how knowledge is shared and received. What does it mean to make research emotionally accessible? How do we balance vulnerability with the ethics of representation?

These questions become more complex when digital storytelling unfolds on remote platforms where collaborators acting as senders of stories respond from the comfort of their own space, with minimal guidance and interference from the researcher as the receiver of stories. A positive aspect of remote formats is the self-paced engagement, enabling collaborators to take their own time, to reflect and to decide how and when to share. This asynchronous and self-directed nature can help fostering deeper authenticity. It may, however, also risk detachment, leaving stories fragmented and unanchored. It poses the challenge of whether the absence of guidance and contextualising leads to more creative freedom and open-ended meaning through the collaborator's interpretation with enriching ambiguities – or makes meaning more vulnerable to misinterpretation, taken out of context or fail to convey the depth intended by the storyteller.



The remote format can thus provide a sense of 'letting go of control' in the research process and offers the opportunity for unexpected insights



The remote format can thus provide a sense of 'letting go of control' in the research process and offers the opportunity for unexpected insights; yet it can also usher in discomfort concerning the uncertainty of research outcomes. A reflection on **where this discomfort may stem from**, provides an opportunity to shift the focus in academic research from outcome to process, a stance shared by **Antonia Liguori**, as a form of re-centring the principle 'for whom': who shapes knowledge, for who it is created, shared, and ultimately made meaningful.

Due to their multi-faceted nature (text, audio, film, photo), using digital storytelling in research also poses different requirements for ethical consent. This may include breaking down consent into

different components: general participation, consent concerning shared visual material, or preferences concerning being credited versus full anonymisation, such as through voice overs or masking.

A crucial starting point that may shape individuals' preferences here is being upfront and precise about target audiences: where and how are digital stories shared. A good practice can be to propose different outlets and let participants choose which ones they are comfortable with. This matters as how one moderates the content and conveys meaning in stories is influenced by **the audience one has in mind**. The research process should also invite collaborators to become active participants in the process of editing or reviewing; for example, when building a story of stories in the form of a short documentary.

When engaging with a method that centres emotions in both, telling and knowing, researchers then often hold a dual role: curators of narratives and facilitators of spaces where collaborators feel empowered to shape their own stories. It requires rethinking conventional approaches to authorship, agency, and interpretation. A consequence of digital storytelling is therefore not merely a logistical shift; it can also be an epistemological one, challenging the ways we understand participation, presence, and the act of storytelling itself.

Centring emotions in research as an act of care

At a time when **public trust in expertise is increasingly contested**, digital storytelling presents an opportunity for researchers to engage in a different kind of knowledge exchange: one that is conversational and co-created from the start to the end. It may fundamentally transform spaces of 'robust results' towards embracing more ambiguity, nuance, thereby enabling audiences to see themselves in 'research' rather than being told what 'research' has found. It may guide research to look for stories over answers, building shared movements over authority.



Reclaiming the role of emotions in academic research as an explicit practice rather than as a subject of inquiry can be an act of courage.



Bringing personal stories into research dissemination is not without its challenges. When moving from private to public spaces, a careful and caring navigation of positionality, ownership of

narratives, and the careful reception of emotionally charged work is necessary. The discomfort that may arise in this process is a space where transformation can happen: when coming from a place of expanding 'ways of knowing' and accepting them as equally 'valid', digital stories hold the potential for building spaces where alternative forms of knowledges are visible and legitimised.

Lastly, reclaiming the role of emotions in academic research as an explicit practice rather than as a subject of inquiry can be an act of courage. It requires a willingness to be seen, to step beyond the constraints of traditional academic formats, and to engage with audiences in ways that might feel unfamiliar but deeply necessary. By utilising prominent ways in which information is consumed and produced, be it film, multimedia, or narrative writing, digital storytelling offers a way to reconnect research with one of its fundamental purposes: driving change through collective care and connection.

This blog post is inspired by ongoing work exploring (re-)imaginings of success and senses of belonging in Brazil in South Africa through digital storytelling.

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Annalena Oppel is a Research Fellow at the LSE International Inequalities Institute. Her research involves interdisciplinary approaches to inequality, blending creative inquiry and fiction with theory and empirical, mixed-method work. She is also interested in initiatives that rethink development research and practice and holds a DPhil in Development Studies from the University of Sussex.

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