

Drowning in social media: does real engagement happen offline?

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2016/11/30/drowning-in-social-media-does-real-engagement-happen-offline/

2016-11-30

LSE MsC student *Jill Russo* reflects on a visit from *Carine Valleau*, founder of *Stories for Humanity*

Gone are the days of the “Letter to the Editor”, of audience participation relegated to a few heavily-curated inches of print. Today it’s possible to consume content online and immediately comment on it, to engage in constructive dialogue (or bitter barb-swapping) with writers, editors, and other readers, all total strangers. Barriers to access to the tools of production and distribution are lower than ever before in many parts of the world; user-generated content abounds.

However, civic participation offline doesn’t always reflect all of this online engagement, and it can sometimes feel like the virtual chatter is just bouncing off of itself, echoing in each individual’s separate virtual space. How do we encourage “genuine” engagement? What is the optimal point at which opinion becomes discussion and discussion, engagement? How often does online engagement transform into concrete action and change?



These are the types of questions *Stories for Humanity* aims to address. The organisation leads biannual public discussions linked to an online platform, a printed magazine, and live events united around a common, timely theme. *Carine Valleau*, founder of *Stories for Humanity*, visited the LSE’s Media and Communications department at the end of October to talk about the organisation’s origins and future.

In 2012, *Valleau* seized on what she calls a “hyper-communication moment,” the citizen education protests in Quebec, to experiment with a media model she hoped would facilitate networking and organic connection. She and

collaborators ran the pilot project that would eventually become Stories for Humanity, calling for submissions depicting personal experiences and opinions on the theme of this “Quebec Spring.” The project used a social media hashtag, but the discussion also lived and breathed in the physical world through a printed color publication and a launch featuring music, readings, and public figures.

This fluidity of real-world/virtual-world interaction is central to Stories for Humanity. Each discussion theme is announced at a public launch event. Participants then have several months to submit their themed stories and opinions through an online portal. Theme-related public events, as well as online dialogue around the theme hashtag, continue throughout the submission period. Once submissions are closed, the Stories for Humanity team arranges but does not substantially edit the content before revealing the finished magazine at a public closing event.

Valleau thinks that the increased interaction now offered by many traditional media outlets is mostly retroactive. She says that very few of them offer people the ability to “be the first voice,” and that valuable content can sometimes “drown” on social media. Wanting to create a more inclusive space for “news that matters told by those involved,” Valleau and her team run the organisation with four values in mind: storytelling, empathy, connectivity, and empowerment.



The goal is to facilitate productive connection: perhaps an interaction online or at one of the live events will inspire someone to vote, or connect an idea with the resources it needs to flourish, or simply allow participants to experience new points of view and feel heard. The project was born of a desire to get beyond “likes” as a measure of engagement— to supplement the dominant forms of online interaction with face-to-face and unique multimedia opportunities.

During her visit to LSE, Valleau showcased the first official edition of the Stories magazine, #FrontièresWalls, which is focused on the ongoing refugee crisis. It’s a full-color, 192-page assembly of personal stories, essays, letters, photographs, quotes, poetry, and illustration. Embedded in the magazine are QR codes enabling discovery of additional multimedia content online, where readers can also contribute to the ongoing conversation.

In response to a question about whether controversial viewpoints were welcome in the magazine, Valleau

emphasized that all are welcome. Ideally, she would like the publication to showcase “opposing opinions in one collective effort”.

There is clearly a belief, here, in the continued value of printed content. Valleau says the high level of print quality is meant to “honor people’s voices” because “there’s a sense of justice in beauty.” There might be something special about holding a physical representation of your experience and ideas in your hands, just as there might be something special about walking into a room and exploring ideas communally, watching the expression on another person’s face as they tell you that they agree or disagree with you. It’s easy for the person to get lost online.

Stories for Humanity launched a [Kickstarter campaign](#) to increase its reach that runs until 9 December 2016. The two themes for 2017 are the environment and women.

Check out Stories for Humanity on [Medium](#) and [Facebook](#)

By Jill Russo

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