

The Story Economy: Digital Storytelling in Economic and Community Development

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Abstract: It is difficult to underestimate the importance of storytelling. In every community, local or global, physical or virtual, it is one of the fundamental building blocks of meaning. From an outsider's perspective, it may sometimes seem as if members of low-wealth, repressed, exploited, and underdeveloped communities have little besides the social connections and events that make up their own stories.

In the context of a proliferating global information economy, however, we find that the story gains a renewed place of power. Today, the digital story is a storable, retrievable and value-creating knowledge asset, a personal icon and a source of qualitative data, a currency for social capital. The authors argue that these disenfranchised communities, often relegated to an underserved economic status in industrial society, may in fact be able to leverage their unique knowledge assets for participation in the mainstream, digitally interconnected, post-industrial economy, through a bottom-up approach to economic development. Digital storytelling allows a community to learn and practice valuable media production skills that in turn provide greater economic mobility and social visibility.

Digital storytelling simultaneously offers a potential solution to problems created by technology dissemination initiatives like One Laptop Per Child. Such initiatives may focus on hardware distribution to the exclusion of culturally sensitive integration. Hardware and software can instead be incorporated into existing social structures and articulated through community values when community members use media production technologies to tell their stories, thereby introducing new technologies, developing marketable skills, and dealing with real and local issues.

Keywords: media production, digital emancipation, digital literacy, pedagogy, social entrepreneurship, third space, iconomics

Introduction

Community-based professionals are often concerned with those who are of few resources. We work with communities that have lost resources they once had – or perhaps those assets were taken away. Maybe political, economic, and social forces combine to deny a community access to the tools of development. Or maybe our political schemas, our economic systems, and our cultural constructs do not even allow us to *recognize* certain community activities and assets as resources. There are surely other failures of our ideological imaginations that prevent a more inclusive and holistic approach to community empowerment. One such example is the unrealized potential of the story.

It is hard to underestimate the importance of the story to humanity, because it is both a means and an end. We weave together cause and effect in an effort to uncover truth, and so narrative is our fundamental building block of meaning and understanding. Our best definition of 'truth' may simply be "a story to which we can all agree."

Storytelling is both simple and powerful, and these two characteristics make it a valuable tool in the struggle for social justice: everyone understands stories and everyone has a story. Indeed, there is a macabre inverse correlation between abject circumstances and narrative. Absolute poverty, for example, can only be the result of a tragic narrative. Such stories have

an undeniable quality that enables them to be persuasive arguments for change. The civil rights movement of the 1960s proved that when narratives of injustice gain traction in the minds of policy makers, those stories can result in progress. A woman too tired to relinquish her bus seat to a white passenger, a small group of black men who refused to leave a lunch counter – these and other actions were catalysts for change that ruptured the fabric of the status quo, and were turning points in the narrative of white privilege. Stories, therefore, can be a resource for people when other resources are scarce.

Yet we know that stories alone do not change anything. Narrative evidence abounds of political, social, and economic injustices that continue to be perpetuated around the globe. When misused, the stories of the disadvantaged can even result in exploitation rather than empowerment. Stories are a resource, but we must still investigate the mechanisms through which they can be reliably and effectively used in community development.

We are fortunate, then, to find ourselves at a moment in history where narrative and technology can combine to facilitate such a process. Since the adoption of the World Wide Web, information and communication technology (ICT) has radically impacted the world, ushering in an era of globalization. Because of its expense and complexity, ICT has largely benefited traditional nodes of social, economic, and political power. The proliferation of ICT has even resulted in the creation of a booming high-tech information economy that did not exist twenty years ago. Very recently, however, there have been trends in ICT that hold immense promise for community development; neither capital nor technical expertise present the same barriers to participation as they once did. As these barriers continue to shrink, the time is ripe for communities to leverage their stories in the digital realm for social, economic, and community development. Digital storytelling provides an unprecedented opportunity, through a “story economy,” for disadvantaged communities to participate in the information economy and to simultaneously work towards the goals of social and political empowerment. Different media types can be produced and distributed by local actors as a means to activate intangible assets such as memory, collective will and solidarity, such as:

- Images, pictures, and animations (wallpapers for computers and cell phones),
- Audio narratives, products and services (ringtones, community radio, podcasts),
- Short documentary, narrative, and promotional videos (IPTV, mobile TV),
- Branding strategies using micropayment solutions (local culture m-wallet).

Theoretical Basis of the Digital Story Economy

The idea of the story economy is informed by the theories of alternative development, community informatics and conscientization as set out by John Friedmann, Michael Gurstein, and Paulo Freire respectively. Friedmann’s theories are most helpful in defining the central problems of “traditional” development. Through the practice of community informatics (CI), Gurstein outlines an approach to community development through ICT that can be viewed in relation to Friedmann’s alternative development. Finally, Freire’s approach to traditional literacy through conscientization serves as a model for media literacy: community storytelling provides a mechanism that alleviates some of the pedagogical problems created by hardware distribution campaigns in the developing world. These theories/authors will be discussed further in the next sections.

Alternative Development

John Friedmann argues that efforts to cultivate development have failed because of the inadequate underlying structures and assumptions of our economies. However, the alternative development argument, he says, “is that households, not individuals, are ‘poor,’ and that poverty itself can be redefined as a state of disempowerment” (1992, p. 54). Traditional notions of development fail because they are overly focused on building *economic* power without addressing the root causes of poverty at a social level, hence the need for an

“alternative” development model that focuses on *social* empowerment:

No matter how dynamic, an economic system that has little or no use for better than half of the world's population can and must be radically transformed. Broadly speaking, the objective of an alternative development is to humanize a system that has shut them out, and to accomplish this through forms of everyday resistance and political struggle that insist on the rights of the excluded population as human beings, as citizens, and as persons intent on realizing their loving and creative powers within. Its central objective is their inclusion in a restructured system that does not make them redundant. (1992, p. 13)

Alternative development, therefore, is “centered on people and their environment rather than [mass] production and profits.” In his revised “whole-economy” model, Friedmann recognizes that the poor are actively engaged in the production of their lives and the betterment of their livelihoods, activities that usually suffer from “invisibility to official eyes” (*ibid*, p. 43). This invisibility, then, is not for lack of visible activity, but because traditional economic metrics such as the gross domestic product lack the ability to recognize such activity. In traditional economies, that activity which is visible often falls on selectively myopic official eyes in the form of exploitation through low wages and poor working conditions.

Friedmann goes on to show that increasing household access to eight distinct but interdependent bases of social power results in the improvement of living conditions, a “measure of genuine development” (*ibid*, p. 69):

- Defensible life space
- Surplus time
- Knowledge and skills
- Appropriate information
- Social organization
- Social networks
- Instruments of work and livelihood
- Financial resources

This re-thinking of development is useful in that it places the household at the center of a “whole-economy” model and it forces us to recognize modes of production that our neoclassical economic systems do not value. However, the advent of the information economy - or mediatic capitalism - requires that we revisit Friedmann’s model to determine its role in a whole-economy model, and whether new creative industries might even provide an opportunity for the previously excluded to participate in more mainstream economic spaces. Friedmann says an alternative development is necessary partly because the activities of the poor are often incapable of being “traded for money” (*ibid*, p. 52) in a production economy. But in an *information* or *knowledge* economy, we find that the production of livelihood has an enormously valuable byproduct: the story.

The story as a source of qualitative data provides an entry point for the excluded majority to participate in the information sector of the mainstream economy. This can be accomplished by the production of digital artifacts through which the disadvantaged tell their stories, i.e.

through websites, videos, slideshows, blogs, audio documentaries, ringtones, etc. With utmost attention to community ownership and privacy, and to the problems and challenges of digital distribution and control, these digital stories can then be monetized through various methods¹. Additionally, the technical skills used in the production of digital stories are highly sought after in the information economy. The learning and application of these skills provide for even greater economic mobilization.

This does not preclude a continued emphasis on the activities of the household economy and social empowerment as described by Friedmann. In fact, we argue that the growth of mediatic capitalism presents a unique possibility: a “story economy” that combines Friedmann’s social empowerment tenets with the inherently social nature of the information economy. The ideology behind Friedmann’s alternative development is still very useful if we are to attempt to provide communities with entry points to the information economy: valuable work is done simply through the production of livelihood. It remains essential to continue the struggle to increase access for communities to various bases of social power for the improvement of quality of life. Access to some of these social power bases (and then to economic and political power) can be greatly facilitated by collective, digital, community-based storytelling efforts:

- Social organization – Formal or informal groups can be formed to collect and disseminate digital stories. Better yet, existing groups (churches, sports clubs, school organizations, etc.) can be strengthened through the collective telling of their narrative histories.
- Instruments of work and livelihood – Digital production skills are extremely valuable in our economy, but freelance producers often need to have access to their own “instruments of work,” i.e. microphones, cameras, computers, lighting equipment, etc. While the quality of these technologies is rising relative to their costs, they can still be prohibitively expensive. These tools could be purchased collectively by new or existing social organizations.
- Knowledge and skills – The production of digital stories presents opportunities for teaching marketable, media-related job skills within an already familiar social setting.
- Appropriate information – The story is a highly efficient container for important information. A compelling digital story has the potential to expand virally among stakeholders and interested parties. Friedmann’s examples of appropriate information include “improved sanitation practices, proven methods of infant care,

¹ The threat of “digital colonialism” of indigenous and underserved populations by the irresponsible digitization of community knowledge is very real, and must be solved through a process more fully discussed later in this paper. Brian Sturm (2006) warns that reducing stories to commodities threatens the “gift” nature of storytelling, a fundamental characteristic of the relationship between storyteller and story receiver. An excellent treatment of these issues with regard to indigenous stories can also be found in “Living Cultural Storybases: Self-empowering narratives for minority cultures” by Packer, Rankin, and Hansteen-Izora, who remind us that “Those in possession of stories should be the ones who determine how, when, and where they are communicated.” It seems evident, however, that such endeavors – if they are not to be exploitive - require new, complex business models that both redefine and elevate the market beyond one-way notions of consumption and also feature a *dual bottom line* that incorporates a social *and* financial return on investment.

standard health practices, available public services, changing political configurations, and opportunities for wage-paying work” (*ibid*, p. 68), all of which would be wonderful starting points for community story-telling projects.

- Defensible life space – Friedmann says that “gaining a secure and permanent foothold in a friendly and supportive urban neighborhood is the most highly prized social power of all” (*ibid*). Such footholds would undoubtedly be strengthened by a critical examination (through digital storytelling, of course) of the factors that impede and facilitate a community’s pursuit of defensible life space.

The mechanisms for any of this to happen – for digital storytelling to become a viable community development tool – are generally not yet in place. Even in technically developed countries like the United States, the market is mostly content to bring technology into communities to better facilitate traditional top-down entertainment, information, and product consumption. Communities cannot digitally produce and/or monetize their stories without training and training can be difficult to implement for a variety of reasons. For solutions to these problems, we can turn to the practice and theory of community informatics.

Community Informatics and the Role of Media Production

“Community Informatics (CI) is the application of information and communications technology to enable and empower community processes” (Gurstein, 2007, p. 11). It is an emerging field that represents a convergence of information science, social activism, systems management, technology, policy study, and community practice. One of the most important tenants of CI is the exhortation to rethink the “digital divide.” This phrase has gained considerable traction among academics, politicians, and community advocates who recognize the importance of equitable access to ICT. Lohmann and McNutt summarize the argument this way:

One of the key information issues that community practitioners must confront is the emerging digital divide between the information ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’ In a knowledge-based economy, the lack of access to information may prove to be even more critical than limited financial resources in defining real poverty. (2005, p. 644)

The potential for ICT to “become a power tool for class domination or a simple reinforcement of existing and future inequalities” (*ibid*, p. 636) is real, but typical efforts to eradicate the digital divide are too often framed exclusively in terms of access to the Internet. The problems created by the proliferation of ICT are in fact much more complicated than the simple provision of technical infrastructure.

Rather, access to ICT is embedded in a complex array of factors encompassing physical, digital, human, and social resources and relationships. Content and language, literacy and education, and community and institutional structures must all be taken into account if meaningful access to new technologies is to be provided.” (Warschauer, 2002)

While it is true that many communities still do not have Internet access and that computers are still too expensive for many poor families, providing Internet access and hardware does nothing to ensure “effective use” of those technologies.

Warschauer eschews the term digital divide for an alternate framework: technology for social inclusion (Warschauer, 2002). In the face of particularly oppressive circumstances such as the unfair distribution of knowledge, voice and income, even the notions of “inclusion” and “divide” can seem inadequate. Since 2005, the “City of Knowledge” action-research project at the University of São Paulo has favored the term “Digital Emancipation.” Emancipation requires active participation in research, development and innovation processes so

characteristic of present day models of digital production, sharing and distribution of knowledge applied to socio-economic and cultural problem-solving.

While the semiotic differences between terms like divide, inclusion, and emancipation are important, they collectively illustrate the significant challenges of useful technology initiatives for community development. Many of those challenges arise from the fact that simply accessing ICT allows only for consumption. To realize the promise of networked technology, a community must also be engaged in media production. We would not call a person literate who could read (consume) but could not also write (produce). Similarly, if one is to become media literate, one must not only have access to ICT, but must be capable of the production of one's own media. Digital storytelling provides a doorway to "enable and empower community processes" by focusing digital literacy efforts through an experiential, collective, community-contextualized lens.

The information economy shows promise of sustainability and the opportunity for widespread economic development because every individual and community has access to information resources that are unique to their experiences. Digital stories and artifacts are the units upon which the economically excluded can begin to climb into the mainstream economy.

Conscientização and One Pedagogy Per Child

The so-called "digital inclusion" projects in underserved communities in Brazil and Latin America have been oftentimes biased in favor of hardware-centered approaches in face of pressing social, educational and political divides. The One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) project is a good example. It is certainly visionary and such initiatives will become more frequently discussed and implemented all over the developing world. Some developed countries already seem to make it possible under their telecommunications infrastructure and wealthy population.

The OLPC effort has its philosophical base in the idea that children with laptops will be able to explore qualitatively superior learning experiences. Making such machines available at subsidized low prices should allow developing countries to bridge the 'digital divide' and leapfrog as learning societies. According to this liberal approach, giving hardware and access to the internet, children would be stimulated and some innate creativity would be enhanced as a result of curiosity and entrepreneurial attitude. This self-regulated learning experience would be in itself revolutionary for educational as well as for other societal and economic purposes.

This approach can also be interpreted as a strategy to intelligently prospect emerging consumer markets and behaviors with respect to new products and services, as new distribution channels are beneficial for competition, effective demand and profitability.

This framework may not be consistent with the interests of various stakeholders in developing countries. It is equivalent to efforts such as granting local communities Microsoft or other (open source) tools during the consolidation of new "iconomics" in large Third World societies such as Brazil and India.

Besides connection, it is important for children to increase their software management skills and last, but not least, their symbolic and cognitive tools such as to promote the evolution of the standards of living and social relationships. As such, the "dumping" of ICT hardware into communities recalls the "banking" model of education described by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Instead of depositing knowledge into a student's empty "bank account", such programs may be overzealous in their attempts to deposit access to ICT into students' lives. As we have already illustrated, such access may not be enough to truly empower a community or its constituents to operate and thrive in a newly networked environment. "Rather, it must entail the engagement of a range of resources, all developed and promoted with an eye toward enhancing the social, economic, and political power of the target clients and communities" (Warschauer, 2002).

There should be a clear educational (and community development) project behind such programs. A truly progressive approach would rather suggest "one pedagogy per child" (OPPC). Integrated hardware, software and knowledge would be articulated to the child's environment in order to develop her potential abilities and help her get ready to take responsibility for life, dealing with real and local issues. Individual and collective identities would be part of a broad cultural recognition process, both global and local, seen as a fundamental tool for effective citizenship and civilized life. Freire again provides a useful paradigm for such pedagogy in the concept of conscientização². Translator Myra Bergman Ramos says conscientização "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, p. 17, 1970). In our view, such action includes the assertion of knowledge and the critical engagement with the self and society that is afforded by autobiographical media production.

Underserved communities can thus not only have access to information, but must identify and build skills and knowledge production tools (software, hardware and know-wares) which put individuals and groups in control of digital processes (absolutely essential for value creation in a society dominated by these knowledge-wares and intangible assets, entertainment and audiovisual arts). A know-ware is a skill or any other intangible asset which favors an intelligent and sustainable evolution of any individual or organization. Storytelling is one fundamental know-ware we as humans must count on in order to make progress.

In the new, emancipatory perspective of the Story Economy, citizens may then be able to empower themselves, to act and make decisions both at the individual and collective levels as a requisite for human development, emphasizing project-based action-learning agendas that favor income generation, entrepreneurship and civic protagonism. In such an economy, new ways of thinking about stories and new community business models will emerge. The City of Knowledge in Brazil is one such example.

From the Field: City of Knowledge and Icon Creation for Local Development

In 2003, the Brazilian government organized the "Know Global" conference focusing on the impact of the knowledge society in center-periphery relations. The "Pipa Know" project was then presented as a pilot-project for the local development of a telecenter in the Northeast of Brazil (Pipa Beach, Rio Grande do Norte), initiated by the City of Knowledge research group at the Institute of Advanced Studies of the University of São Paulo. Political turmoil,

² Through the process of conscientização, Freire calls for the identification of particular oppressors. In his case study, *Making Media as a Tool of Conscientizacão in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (2004), David Jay Steiner makes the point that conscientização "that leads to an identification and subjectification of the so-called 'oppressor' can lead to, for me, the unacceptable 'praxis' many Palestinians and Israelis are engaged in." Indeed, the very act of media production sometimes requires engagement with the technology products and services of multinational corporations that some would label oppressive. It may be more useful to identify the oppressive factors in the quest for digital emancipation, and engage such corporations and entities in a media dialog that fosters their awareness of oppression. After all, "Faith in people is an a priori requirement for dialogue" (Freire, p. 71, 1970).

local grievances, discontinuity of funding and excessive bureaucracy at all levels (from the University to the Presidency) could not detain local youth from pursuing their dream of becoming media literate, resulting in the creation of the Pipa TV. Implementation has been hazardous and sustainability is at stake as local community leaders strive to keep this project alive. From a conceptual perspective, this experience led to the criticism of "digital inclusion" as a public policy, in favor of a "digital emancipation" paradigm in order to resist the industry-led lobbies, the bureaucratic hurdles of public policy and the populist bias of local elites.

Ethnographic approaches reveal the dialectics of learning and playing in a country marked since colonial times by a highly unfair distribution of knowledge, voice and income. Four years after the installation of the local telecenter, academic production and reports about this pilot project are still in the making while local artists start their own video production and other local groups everywhere in Brazil embark on intense storytelling strategies via digital devices. Gilberto Gil, the Minister of Culture and acclaimed global musician, has fostered local content production while championing in favor of a decentralized, open and diverse digital culture in Brazil. A new public television project has been announced and will hopefully create opportunities for local expression in an overwhelmingly US-centered media environment in Brazil.

Many public policies and corporate initiatives focus on the promotion of access, especially access to services and citizenship building. Telecenters, infocenters and other similar initiatives offer free or public environments for students and communities to access the internet while trained local residents help with basic educational formation for the adequate use of basic tools.

A fundamental technological innovation pioneered in Brazil by the City of Knowledge research group in its community-based, social and cultural network incubation programs has been the focus on mobility, particularly the incubation of local projects for the creation and distribution of cell phone content ("mobile content").

This project was officially launched in September, 2005, at the Collège de France, Paris, by the then Rector of the University of São Paulo, Prof. Adolpho José Melphi and by Prof. Gilson Schwartz as they visited Claude Lévi-Strauss (at 96!), the founding father of the university 75 years ago. A cell phone with content created by xavante Indians (from Mato Grosso, the same region where he did pioneering ethnographic work in the 30s) was presented as a prototype and celebrated by Lévi-Strauss as a technological translation of his own, original research and action spirit.

Since its inception, this research program led to the creation of 3 pilot-projects which resulted in ringtones and wallpapers for cell phones captured and produced in partnerships with the communities of the Pipa Beach, in Tibau do Sul, Rio Grande do Norte (with Ministry of Science and Technology's FINEP funding); in the Amazon region with documentary-maker and digital emancipation activist Jorge Bodanzky ("Navegar Amazônia", a "Ponto de Cultura" sponsored by the Ministry of Culture) and a new set from the xavantes at the "Aldeia São Pedro".

The key aspect was to stress the importance of local, traditional culture forms such as singing, painting and other artistic expressions. The content is also published at <http://www.cidade.usp.br/cidademovel/>.

The "City" links these communities to the market via content aggregators, thus making it possible for them to generate revenue through all cell phone operators in Brazil. Exports are in the planning stage as French partners continue to support our efforts. In short, this is not only (or not as much) a technological breakthrough as it is innovation in favor of new forms of civil society organization and local development.

The mission of this social networking play-learn strategy is to promote skills and competence building among young cultural entrepreneurs in localities, not only for the production of digital narratives but also aiming at the design of new cultural services with digital interfaces, especially those geared by new cell phone usage patterns among local schools, telecenters and NGOs.

The main results of pilot-projects conducted so far indicate that in a very short term new opportunities arise for occupation, income and investments in local development projects with child/teen activism, focusing on actual or potential community leaders capable of becoming “multiplication agents” for the promotion of viral spreading of new concepts and technical skills as well as having an impact in the resident and tourist population at large.

In the long run, we expect to monitor professional or quasi-professional activities promoted by the initial workshops and design groups, as well as the commercial results of the experiment so as to propose new strategic directives for local social action.

Professionalization at the local level may also become an important result of new opportunities collectively evaluated, once the cultural explorations of mobility and portability contribute to networking for professional needs, especially in the market for cultural production and related services such as a mobile cultural market.

Numerous professional certification possibilities can be associated to storytelling for the digital media such as journalism, service design and support, events, distance education, m-commerce, marketing and tourism, via the deployment of specific projects imagined and initiated in the first stage of the project with the support of the School of Communication and Arts of the University of São Paulo (ECA-USP).

Digital storytelling seems to actively promote the socio-economic and cultural emancipation of individuals and communities, strengthening the entrepreneurial spirit of the local youth as they realize the potential for wealth creation based on the values of technological and social mobility in the context of the economics of knowledge and digital entertainment.

Our roadmap for action in the field proceeds in 3 stages:

1. sensibilization and mobilization,
2. capacity and skills building of local agents,
3. deployment of specific projects by age groups and media forms (image, audio, community journalism and so on).

Our ambition is to create and validate the needed infra-structure in order to support a local network of cultural entrepreneurs, via workshops and laboratory activities for the creation of blogs, photoblogs and other collaborative lists and tools, digital processing of images, audio and e-commerce.

The design and promotion of local events such as workshops, content distribution and participation of local celebrities from academic and business areas reinforces the collective storymaking process that results from storytelling.

The impressive mobilization of local talent however has been the main political and educational outcome of these initiatives. Five years after its inception, the "Pipa Sabe" thrives and has become a pioneering local TV production base, airing its weekly stories at the local Main Square while maintaining a local telecenter plus library next to the village's school and health center (see pictures).

Conclusion

While much research needs to be done to validate digital storytelling and digital icon creation as a community development tool, it is, at the very least, a promising option for practitioners in the field of community informatics. It represents an opportunity for communities to use their unique knowledge and experiences as a doorway into the information economy while simultaneously increasing individual, household, and community access to social bases of power that enable empowerment and higher quality of life. Such online endeavors require the navigation of risks particular to ICT use, and so will require careful planning and well-trained mentors to avoid the exploitation of already vulnerable

populations. When dealing with populations that have had limited exposure to ICT, a collaborative, hands-on, experiential, and autobiographical approach allows community members to have an active role in the production of their learning experience and their stories.

The authors of this paper hope that we have laid out a convincing argument for the possibilities of a digital story economy. We also hope that the City of Knowledge serves as an inspirational example of how these ideas can be put into practice, for it is only through action that any of these ideas might actually achieve some level of real economic development and social empowerment. To that end, we direct your attention one final time to the primacy of the story. We believe that personal stories are a source of power available to even severely disadvantaged populations, whether through more “traditional” digital narratives or new forms of digital iconography. Barriers to technology access continue to fall, but it remains to be seen whether technology initiatives can be deployed in a culturally relevant and responsible manner, with an eye towards true community and economic development. The end of that story is waiting to be written.

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