

## **Co-creative Media: Theorising Digital Storytelling as a platform for researching and developing participatory culture**

Christina Spurgeon

Queensland University of Technology

[c.spurgeon@qut.edu.au](mailto:c.spurgeon@qut.edu.au)

Christina Spurgeon lectures in Journalism, Media and Communication in the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT. She is presently assisting with Faculty-based capacity-building project in the development of co-creative media research and continuing professional education services. She is also a Chief Investigator on and ARC Discovery project, New Media voices in the Australian Values Debate, and author of *Advertising and New Media* (Routledge 2008).

Jean Burgess

Queensland University of Technology

[je.burgess@qut.edu.au](mailto:je.burgess@qut.edu.au)

Helen Klaebe

Queensland University of Technology

[h.klaebe@qut.edu.au](mailto:h.klaebe@qut.edu.au)

Kelly McWilliam

University of Southern Queensland

[mcwillia@usq.edu.au](mailto:mcwillia@usq.edu.au)

Jo Tacchi

Queensland University of Technology

[j.tacchi@qut.edu.au](mailto:j.tacchi@qut.edu.au)

Mimi Tsai

Queensland University of Technology

[Yihsin.tsai@qut.edu.au](mailto:Yihsin.tsai@qut.edu.au)

## **Abstract**

*This paper considers the question, “what is co-creative media, and why is it a useful idea in social media research”? The term “co-creative media” is now used by Creative Industries researchers at QUT to theoretically frame their use of digital storytelling as an action research platform for investigating participatory new media culture. Digital storytelling is a set of collaborative digital media production techniques that have been used to facilitate social participation in numerous Australian and international contexts. Digital storytelling has been adapted by Creative Industries researchers at QUT as a platform for researching the potential of vernacular creativity in a variety of contexts, including social inclusion of marginalized and disadvantaged groups; inclusion in public histories of narratives that might be overlooked; and articulation of voices that otherwise remain silent in the formulation of social and economic development strategies. The adaption of digital storytelling to different contexts has been shaped by the reflexive, recursive, and pragmatic requirements of action research. Amongst other things, this activity draws attention to the agency of researchers in facilitating these kinds of participatory media processes and outcomes. This discussion serves to problematise concepts of participatory media by introducing the term “co-creative media” and differentiating these from other social media production practices.*

## **Keywords**

*co-creative media, digital storytelling, participatory culture*

### **What is “co-creative media”?**

This paper introduces the concept of co-creative media and outlines its origins in action research into the social uses of digital media. It offers a speculative definition of co-creative media and considers the utility of the concept for this kind of action research. In short, co-creative media provides a tool for describing the ways in which participatory media are facilitated by people and organizations, not just technology. The concept provides an important alternative to the normative assumption circulating in new media studies that participatory culture organically arises from naturally skilled “digital natives” (Prensky 2001) who have access to the necessary equipment. It seeks to remind us that participatory new media culture is socially produced, and to acknowledge the difficulties that can be associated with achieving participatory culture. For example, “build-it-and-they-will-come” approaches to developing participatory media are problematic (Hearn et. al. 2009, 160 - check). The idea of co-creative media also calls attention to the hierarchy of value which assumes participatory media to be better, or somehow more socially beneficial or worthy than less participatory forms.

A very broad range of media practices, in which media consumers can also be producers, are swept up in the category of participatory media. Participatory media, as exemplified by highly popular platforms like YouTube, expand the opportunities for direct rather than indirect representation. Participatory media are the keystone of digitally mediated “participatory culture” (Jenkins 2006, 3, 257) and are associated with bottom-up and lateral flows of networked communication and information as distinct from the top-down, panoptic control architectures of broadcast media. Used in this context, the idea of participatory media is highly suggestive of the natural and spontaneous characteristics associated with older forms of participatory culture, including community media.. However, we agree with Henry Jenkins (2006, 3) that participation is not the same as equality, and that the ability to participate is socially shaped and constrained. We also agree that it is more useful to conceive of the problems of equity in participation culture as a “participation gap” than as a digital divide (Jenkins 2006, 23). Framed in this way, it becomes clear that while technology is important, it alone cannot bridge participation gaps. Furthermore, the voices of excluded and marginalized people must first find expression in order to enter into a dialogue with each other as well as those seeking to bridge participation gaps (Tacchi and Kiran, 2008). The idea of co-creative media therefore seeks to differentiate from the “spontaneous” model of participatory media a subset of planned, intentional participatory media engagements that rely upon professional facilitators to lead collaborative projects with explicit purposes and aims. In the case of digital storytelling these projects are often organized around goals of “voice” and inclusion.

### **Digital Storytelling as a co-creative media practice**

The particular participatory media practice from which the concept of co-creative media emerges is “digital storytelling”. The underlying purpose of digital storytelling is to facilitate social participation in the process of building community-based capacity for end-user engagement in digital media production. It has also been variously defined as a format for “training in content creation” (Hearn et. al. 2009, 158); “a workshop-based practice in which people are taught to use digital media to create short audio-visual stories, usually about their own lives” (Hartley & McWilliam 2009, 3); and as an aesthetic form and social practice that is “explicitly concerned with cultural participation through the remediation of ordinary expression, or ‘vernacular creativity’“ (Klaebe & Burgess 2007, 34). Developed in California in the mid-1990s, its main innovation is “an exportable workshop-based approach to teach “ordinary” people – from school students to the elderly with or (usually without) knowledge of computers of media production – how to produce their own personal videos” (McWilliam & Hartley 2009, 3). It is also a social movement which is part of, and enabled by, broader

changes in the production and consumption of media. These changes are most pronounced in the proliferation of social media that are populated by user-generated content.

Digital storytelling is a globally diffused practice but is far more widely used in North America, Europe and Australasia than Africa, Asia and South America (McWilliam 2009, 37). This reflects various impediments to diffusion including the role of the West's "firstplayer advantage in the development of a consumer market for digital technologies" (McWilliam & Hartley 2009, 7). The movement's low profile (relative to Internet-based social media like YouTube and MySpace) is explained by a variety of factors, the most significant being that the distribution of stories is not always the primary goal of digital storytelling applications (McWilliam op. cit.). Many stories are produced for personal or very limited consumption. In her international survey of digital storytelling Kelly McWilliam (2009) found that in the last decade four types of institutions were most likely to host digital storytelling programs. They were educational, community, cultural and miscellaneous others (including public broadcasters, companies, and consultancies). Applications with the goal of "collecting public histories of people and/or place" (53) were "the overwhelmingly most popular focus of digital storytelling programs around the world" (69). Other well-represented categories of applications were those directed at achieving included educational, aspirational (which aimed to empower storytellers), and recuperative (which aimed to help storytellers overcome adversity) goals and outcomes form groups and individuals (53). While the form of digital storytelling broadly remains the same from location to location, McWilliam's analysis draws attention to the ways in which the institutional context of production shapes the content, purpose and outcomes. This is one of a number of factors that can be understated in a participatory media frame of analysis.

Another is the role that "experts" and expert knowledge play in negotiating the participation gap. In this paper we pay particular attention to the role of researcher-facilitators in digital storytelling. John Hartley (2009, 32ff) argues that the role of "professional" storytellers in our contemporary media and cultural institutions is open to change as participatory culture continues to develop and expand. As storytelling increasingly becomes something that everyone does, important new opportunities open up for exploring the implications of "the population-wide extension of semiotic productivity" (34). This interest is also shared by the authors of this paper. In this paper we use the term "co-creative" media to account for, and open up for further investigation, some of the ways in which digital storytelling researcher-facilitators are implicated in the propagation of participatory culture. We do this by considering some of the ways that we have adapted the form and methods of digital storytelling. We outline the ways in which these adaptations articulate the balance that is

struck in each instance between the demands of institutional contexts of production and the interests of storyteller participants.

The concept of co-creative media as we use it here has evolved from years of research experience using digital storytelling as a platform for researching participatory media and culture and the questions of how participation gaps might be effectively addressed. It is a point at which the authors have arrived and around which we are consolidating. In this paper we show how the term co-creative media is operationalized by considering a selection of findings from our research projects. We work through these findings thematically to show why digital storytelling is usefully understood as a co-creative form of participatory media practice. We show how digital storytelling has been adapted to meet the demands of different contexts and shaped by the reflexive, recursive, and pragmatic requirements of action research. This includes enabling and constraining factors such as institutional realities, project goals, participant expectations, and the availability of resources for producing and distributing digital stories..

### **Engaging young people**

The Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN) was an experiment in local content creation and participation that tested the creative potential of new media to promote local voices (Hearn et al. 2009, 157). The project involved young people from different ethnic, geographic and socio-economic backgrounds in locations across Queensland in digital storytelling content creation workshops. It was concerned with the following question: “what are the local conditions and technological, cultural, social, economic and political contexts that facilitate (or restrict) creative engagement with—rather than simply access to—digital technologies in low infrastructure areas or among marginalised groups?” (158). Methods for researching and developing participatory culture in this project included digital storytelling and participatory action research. The process of creating personal digital stories through workshops also opened up ethnographic methods of analysis and thick description in the interpretation of the resulting cultural texts (digital stories) (163). The project also had a web development component which anticipated, and was largely overtaken by, Web 2.0 in the course of the project. The content creation component was therefore the source of the more significant findings. It helped researchers to understand some of the ways in which young people might engage with new media, and how new media can be creatively employed by young people to reveal something of their lives and to generate discussion around the themes of concern to them.

The process of creating content as well as the end product (digital stories) helped researchers to understand how young people see themselves and the world around them. This is because the process required young people to “speak” about themselves. During the workshops researchers attempted to “engage” with the participants. The workshops showed researchers that young people are not a homogeneous group of “digital natives”, *contra* the assumptions in some new media rhetoric. They don’t all innately know how to be creative with these tools. The stories ultimately produced by the young participants also generated very different discourses of and by young people to those in wider circulation, including those that underpinned the project. Part of the purpose of this project was to connect in a meaningful way with potentially “at risk” youth, or at least to occupy their time with a set of arguably more worthy digital literacy activities than other alternatives that the young participants might have taken up if they had been left to their own devices. Thematic patterns to emerge from the YIRN stories included accounts of geographic, cultural and social affiliation, aspirations and ambitions.

The workshops provided a process for the dialogic production of knowledge, involving a collaboration of participants and facilitators (163). In a number of the workshops researchers found that by engaging young people in new media technologies, in ways that go beyond the simple transfer of technical skills to a critical engagement with ideas, concepts, experiences and storytelling, dialogues were initiated that often surprised stakeholders. In this case, teachers and youth workers were provided with new opportunities to engage with young people on issues that mattered to all these groups (165).

### **Making public history**

The second project considered here was a participatory public history project that involved older residents of an inner city Brisbane location in recording histories of the area as part of an urban re-development program. These participants in the *Sharing Stories* project were very interested in the history of the area but were not interested in the structured workshop approach for a variety of reasons. They were generally time-poor and found the insistence on learning computer applications a hindrance rather than a help to storytelling. It quickly became apparent that unless this problem was addressed the would deliver of tangible project outcomes (including digital stories). To address this constraint upon participation students from local schools with an interest in developing digital media production skills, as well as sharing stories with older residents were recruited to the project to provide technical support. These adaptations ultimately did succeed, and had the unintended consequence of facilitating intergenerational communication and collaboration

In a second round of workshops the workshop model was adapted even further in response to these constraints. Older participants were brought together to share their stories of the area and to develop scripts, but technical production was done outside the workshop context by facilitators. Production was nonetheless a highly consultative and participatory process. For example, final storyboarding was often done in participants' homes at times that suited them. Some technical production also occurred in participants' homes. For example, photos were taken or scanned and some stories were also recorded in people's homes. These participants were actively involved in directing the production process without actually having to learn computers and computer applications. At the conclusion of the workshop facilitators unanimously agreed that, in many respects, the one story that was developed entirely outside of the workshop context was the most successful, and enjoyable story of all to produce (see [www.kgurbanvillage.com.au/sharing/digital/teresa/shtm](http://www.kgurbanvillage.com.au/sharing/digital/teresa/shtm)). Furthermore, the fact that some participants were prevented by ill-health from participating in workshop-based script and story development processes had advantages. For example, these participants were not drawn into debates about competing accounts or details of local history, or felt obliged to align their stories with others in the group. Participants also reported a preference for the use of personal "sound bite" accounts, edited directly from oral history interviews, which they (and their subsequent audiences) found a more poignant and authentic storytelling model than using a prepared script.

Researcher-facilitators of the *Sharing Stories* workshops found it necessary to adapt the workshop-based digital storytelling process in order to address impediments to participation. Another innovation occurred with the shift away from the digital storytelling orthodoxy that the voiceover for a digital story must be fully scripted and rehearsed, and only then recorded. Instead, a semi-structured interview technique derived from oral history practice was adopted in some cases, in order to overcome the difficulties some participants had with the workshop-based script development process. Where participants preferred, they simply related stories to the facilitator instead of writing scripts. These were then recorded and edited down by the facilitators and were used as the soundtracks to the stories. One participant who didn't have sufficient formal literacy skills to write and read a script but who was gifted in telling stories in an engaging and entertaining way was interviewed instead. This adaptation required facilitators to get to know individual participants well enough to be familiar with a broad cross section of storytellers' repertoires of stories, and then to work with storytellers to identify those stories that were best suited to the digital story form. Facilitators also welcomed the decision to incorporate the semi-structured oral history interview into the digital storytelling toolkit because developing a natural-sounding script is one of the biggest

challenges of the form. It requires the professional expertise of dramaturge, screenwriter and acting coach (as in the BBC Capture Wales workshop model) (Meadows 2003) to achieve an unstilted professional standard and still retain an authentic voice. This is extremely hard to achieve in many digital storytelling contexts where time and resources constraints impinge upon this potential of vernacular creativity. This adaptation showed that it is also possible to achieve good results if people can tell unscripted stories. It is particularly appropriate where older participants are concerned, because they have often perfected the stories they tell over years.

### **Finding new voices**

*Finding a Voice* was the title of multi-country project, led by Australian university-based researchers, funded by the Australian Research Council, UNESCO and UNDP, and undertaken between 2005 and 2008. It explored the ways in which the aims of international social and economic development programs which see ICT as a necessary pre-condition to development “can be supported by creative strategies for inclusion and engagement” (Watkins and Tacchi 2008a, 2). The project aimed to encourage participation in the creation of local media content by people who don’t normally do this or have this access or opportunity. The project was undertaken in three main phases. In the first phase local researcher-facilitators mostly drawn from 15 sites across South Asia were brought together to be trained in a variety of research methods including digital storytelling. Lead researchers found it necessary to adapt the digital storytelling form to accommodate a more journalistic style of storytelling in order to address the development agenda of key funding institutions as well as the interests of trainees in social change (Watkins and Tacchi 2008b, 16). A professional, audience-focused style of communication was also emphasized. As a consequence, many of the scores of digital stories produced as a result of this project take the form of microdocumentaries (17).

The digital storytelling training process and form was further adapted in the second phase of the project when the researcher-facilitators returned to the field to investigate ways of embedding participatory content creation into local community media and information sites. The selection of sites was informed by four broad strategic principles associated with successful ICT for development initiatives (Josiah 2008, viii). These are community ownership of the initiative; functional usability in the local context of associated ICT; the use of local languages and content to facilitate cultural relevance and integration; and sustainability through convergence with existing communication projects. The participatory design approach that informed further changes to the digital storytelling method required all



stakeholders to collaborate to develop approaches and applications that were appropriate to the local context (18). These local variations also anticipated the constraints and opportunities specific to each location of the third phase of the project, which aimed to stimulate distribution and propagation of participatory culture. For those set in radio stations this meant thinking about ways in which audiovisual content might be screened and distributed locally and beyond, as well as how the processes developed by the participants might be related to their audio productions. For those projects located in telecentres this meant thinking about both local community screenings and distribution through networks of telecentres. For other projects which took place in community libraries it meant something different altogether. For example, how could these organizations help to stimulate increased participation in the creation of a local newspaper produced for the wall of the library? Using the same kinds of ideas that are applied in making digital stories the researcher-facilitators were able to workshop ideas about who could be approached to participate, and how participatory media production could be facilitated in ways that would work for host organizations and their wider communities of interest.

Further research is being planned that will consider how the idea of digital storytelling now resonates in the *Finding a Voice* workshop sites, and whether and how the techniques developed in the course of project have been further adapted and integrated into local contexts. One of the key findings of *Finding a Voice* was that because participatory content creation is dialogic, it is a very good mechanism for facilitating participatory approaches to social and economic development agendas, an outcome in which participation is actually very hard to achieve and which often eludes development agencies and projects (Watkins and Tacchi 2008a, 2). Digital storytelling, when appropriately adapted, is a mechanism that can compel stakeholders to listen to concerns expressed by marginal groups and to act on the matters they identify. This is the empowering dimension of operating in the public sphere that participatory content creation opens up. In this respect digital storytelling helps to address one of the key limits of many top-down ICT for development initiatives, and which many agencies are looking to remedy. In seeking to ascertain whether communication media can be used by economically and socially marginalized groups to exercise influence over decisions that impact upon their lives the project developed a toolbox of methods for assessing the impact of communication for social change. It also produced a number of important resources for practitioners in the development communication field (see <http://findingavoice.org> and <http://ear.findingavoice.org>).

The digital storytelling method developed in *Finding A Voice* departed from European and North American approaches in key ways. It trained people to work in teams rather than

simply facilitating individuals in groups; and it moved away from the idea that stories were made by individuals to place a greater emphasis on how groups make stories. The shift to group-produced content was informed by the different disciplinary perspectives of the two of the lead researchers in the project (design and anthropology). First, was the professional design understanding that audiovisual content creation is indeed a collaborative effort of skilled specialists. Second, was the anthropological recognition of the personal and political difficulties confronted by marginalized people: it is extremely difficult for these people to start articulating concerns in an individualized way. Marginalized women, for example, were more able to build the confidence they needed to tell a story when they worked collaboratively in groups to develop a shared story. Stories remained personal but not necessarily individual accounts. Adaptation also arose from the pragmatic necessity to articulate researcher-facilitators to their local organizational contexts. This in turn meant that project leaders and host organizations had to develop strategies for embedding participation culture more generally into the organizations.

Finally, journalistic techniques of storytelling (who, what, why, when, where) were also introduced as structuring devices for narratives. This drew attention to the importance of content as communication (for example, the question, “who is this story for?”) It helped trainee researcher-facilitators to think about how they could help other people make stories. It also exponentially expanded possibilities of story subjects. The journalistic approach to digital storytelling has since been used in other workshop contexts and researcher-facilitators report that participants find it very useful for deciding quickly what their story will be about. It is a very helpful story development strategy when time is limited. Digital storytelling has also been used to support convergence of co-creative approaches to non-digital media used in ICT for development initiatives. For example, one Northern Indian community media centre produces programs in an audio cassette format. Producers then travel to outlying locations and play the programs to groups of people who gather to listen to them. Responses are then recorded and incorporated into subsequent programs, which also take up issues raised by participants. People don’t make their own radio features (as they might in other locations). Nonetheless, this example can be located on a spectrum of facilitated participatory media production practices. The extent to which it might qualify for consideration as a co-creative media practice remains an open question.

### **From participatory to co-creative media**

Digital storytelling is a participatory media form, but one which involves multiple interventions with technology and end-users on the part of expert facilitators and stakeholder

organizations. In our experience we have found the influence of these external interventions in facilitating the process and outcomes of digital storytelling to be so intensive and extensive as to warrant a more precise descriptor for these social relations. The term “co-creative media” has proven to be a very useful tool for thinking about these dynamics. It offers an important corrective to the present “tsunami” of hype about DIY media and the democratization of cultural production (for example, Grossman 2006). Co-creative media complicates the idea that participatory culture is the product of an autonomous relationship between the individual creator and the magic of technology. It allows us to get under the hood of participatory culture as a facilitated social process which involves the articulation of expertise and enthusiasm. It provides a tool for considering the agency of experts, organizations and technology.

This paper has demonstrated that participatory culture can be driven from the top down, or centre out, and not just from the bottom up. Indeed, we suggest that participatory culture is almost impossible to achieve in the absence of pre-determined stakeholder agendas in developments and investments in it, even if these goals are rarely achieved in anticipated ways. By taking a more systemic rather than individualistic look at participatory culture, we can also see a certain hierarchy of value associated with discourses of and about participatory media: that bottom-up is inherently better than top-down. One of the tensions to emerge from this insight concerns how the interests and expectations of all involved in co-creative media processes are balanced, and how co-creative media practices can simultaneously help to create spaces in which new knowledge and culture can emerge. Paramount here is the challenge of embedding participation in the design of the organization, since participation is far easier to achieve in less hierarchical structures (Tacchi & Kiran 2008). Ellie Rennie (2007) has described this challenge as the need to develop strategies of open source organizations, not just networks and applications.

Many questions about the role and potential of co-creative media in facilitating participatory culture have yet to be explored. These include how the assemblages of co-creative media (including digital storytelling) work (Tacchi and Grubb 2007; Grubb and Tacchi 2008); as well as best practices and processes for managing, coordinating and evaluating co-creative media applications in different contexts. We have also opened up important questions about digital storytelling and its effectiveness as a technique for remediating social participation gaps. All of these questions require further research. But one thing is clear. By thinking of digital storytelling as a co-creative media technique it becomes possible to focus explicitly on how a range of different agents are, and can be, involved in bridging participation gaps. It becomes possible to consider how co-creative media practices, including digital storytelling,

might be adapted and negotiated to meet specific needs in different contexts, whether they be educational, cultural, community or commercial applications.

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