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PART IV

Queer Impacts
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Shouting from the Rooftops:
Queer Digital Storytelling for Social Impact

Introduction

This chapter explores some of the practical and theoretical obstacles and opportunities for self-expression experienced by a group of Queer Digital Storytellers who primarily make and distribute their stories online. “Queer” in this chapter encompasses a diverse range of gender and sexual identities and perspectives on same, including the heterosexual children of queer parents and heterosexual parents of queer children. As such it is also used as a unifying moniker by participants in the Rainbow Family Tree case study that is examined in this chapter. The Digital Storytellers in this case study are largely motivated by a desire to have an impact on social attitudes towards gender and sexuality, both in their personal province of friends and family, and in public domains constituted of unknown or invisible audiences. The privacy and publicity dilemmas that will be considered arise out of positioning personal stories in the public domain and the quandaries that emerge from an activist desire to speak truth to power that is located across a wide cross section of audiences.

This chapter will begin with a brief overview of the current global Digital Storytelling landscape and will then explore the aforementioned theoretical problems with particular reference to Michel Foucault’s concept of parabasis. These ideas will be unpacked in more depth using examples from the Rainbow Family Tree project, a series of Digital Storytelling workshops that were facilitated by the author during 2009 and supported by SHine SA, a South Australia-based agency providing sexual health education and information. Finally, some thoughts will be offered on strategies
that may counter various obstacles to personal activist storytelling and support Queer Digital Storytellers in creating and distributing their stories for social impact.

Digital Storytelling Overview

Over the last fifteen years Digital Storytelling has grown from its Californian roots in community arts (Lambert 2002 and 2009) into a practice that has traveled around the globe precipitating both heuristic and scholarly exploration in many quarters. Digital Storytelling generally refers to a workshop-based practice in which individuals, mostly unskilled in media production, are guided through the process of creating a short (two to three minute) autobiographical video that is, more often than not, narrated in the first person. Typically, a three-day Digital Storytelling workshop will end with a group screening to which participants can invite interested friends and family members.

Workshops are often funded or facilitated by agencies or institutions for a variety of purposes including community development, personal empowerment, IT education and/or archiving social history (for a range of examples and case studies, see Hartley and McWilliam 2009). The underpinning objective of any given workshop is likely to determine both the audience and distribution strategy for the finished Digital Stories. For example, in a situation where the story making process is undertaken for individual therapeutic benefit, each story product may be shown to one or two select people. On the other hand a workshop and/or initiative that has the objective of increasing social awareness around a particular issue is likely to recruit participants who have been identified as being "in need" and/or as articulate advocates for a cause. The story products that eventuate in this case are likely to be distributed to a similarly pre-determined target community. In most Digital Storytelling initiatives there is a complex interplay between process and product with both participants and audiences being taken into strategic consideration.
Digital Storytelling for Social Impact

Digital Stories that invite mainstream audiences to “walk a mile in my shoes” offer self-identified minority groups an opportunity to communicate both personal and political beliefs to a mainstream audience. For the purposes of this chapter a clear distinction is made between Digital Stories that are created with activist intent as opposed to those created for a wide range of other reasons. While both advocates and researchers alike have noted the potential of Digital Storytelling as a mode of activist communication (e.g. Lambert 2002, 2009; and Tacchi 2006, 2009), for many minority groups, there remain significant obstacles. Digital Storytelling workshops require substantial technology and expertise (Hartley 2008: 200–203). The cost of hiring hardware and facilitators make it difficult for individuals or poorly resourced communities of common interest to initiate a workshop without the support of a funding agency or production partner. An institution is only likely to provide this kind of support if firstly, a group has been identified as marginalized and secondly, if this particular mode of community engagement (Digital Storytelling) is deemed likely to meet the group’s needs. Above and beyond the hierarchical problems implicit in this kind of top down approach there may also be individual impediments to participation. These include social and/or geographic isolation; a lack of time or physical resources necessary to attend workshops; and/or a lack of confidence in one’s creative and/or technical abilities.

If individual stories are to have a collective impact on a social stage it needs to be possible for a large number of individual storytellers to make stories, and for these stories to be circulated and viewed by a corresponding large number of audiences.

Limited access to storytelling processes (the means of story production) and/or limited distribution of the story products reduces their likely social impact.

In recent years there has been an explosion in participatory media practices that utilize available digital technologies in both physical and online spaces. The web has become a virtual repository for a wide range of personal digital documents ranging from direct-to-camera talking head vlogs on YouTube through to the more scripted Digital Story genres in
purpose-built web spaces like *Capture Wales* (BBC Wales 2009) and *Stories for Change* (2010). While individual storytellers now have access to potential worldwide distribution networks it can still be difficult to make one’s voice heard in the clamor (Jenkins 2009: 125). Additionally, creating a story in the privacy of one’s bedroom lacks an important dimension – that of creative collaboration and mutual support. Digital Storytelling workshops offer an atmosphere of camaraderie that helps individual participants overcome personal, creative and technical obstacles. The *Rainbow Family Tree* project attempted to create similar camaraderie in an online workshop and its qualified successes and failures, alongside comparable online Digital Storytelling initiatives, constitute one of the aspects of the author’s ongoing research. Of greater relevance to this chapter was the effect of online distribution on individual storytellers. Levels of personal exposure and concerns around maintaining privacy inevitably increase in proportion to the size of potential audiences, especially when combining the viral possibilities of online social networks and the activist motivation to circulate stories widely.

**Digital Storyteller as Parrhesiaste**

The conflict between personal vulnerability and the desire to communicate to a wide audience is not one that is experienced exclusively by Queer Digital Storytellers. It is a theoretical problem that Foucault explored in a series of six lectures delivered at University of California, Berkeley in 1983, in which he investigates the concept of *parrhesia* or “fearless speech” as it was originally used in Greek literature. He characterizes parrhesia as “a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)” (Foucault 2001: 19). He goes on to outline several critical qualities present in the *parrhesiaste*. The message must constitute the speaker’s own opinion and be expressed in a fashion that makes no rhetorical effort to veil what he thinks. There must be an alignment between “belief” and “truth.” Foucault distinguishes between the Greek measure of “truth” as a verbal activity guaranteed by the moral qualities and courage of the speaker, and the more modern Cartesian notion in which truth can only
be verified by some kind of mental evidential experience. While Foucault does not dwell upon this issue of “what is truth?” he imputes that the partheiasist, in speaking his personal (subjective?) truth in order to criticize someone or something more powerful than himself, takes a considerable personal risk and does so voluntarily, out of a sense of duty:

when a philosopher addresses himself to a sovereign, to a tyrant, and tells him that his tyranny is disturbing and unpleasant because tyranny is incompatible with justice, then the philosopher speaks the truth, believes he is speaking the truth and, more than that, also takes a risk ... In parthesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence; the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy. (Foucault 2001: 16–19)

Viewed in this framework, many Queer Digital Storytellers can be recognized as parthesiases. The risk undertaken by Queer Digital Storytellers is amplified beyond that which might be experienced by a “non-queer participant” because they are speaking from below to power that is situated above (regardless of whether that power resides in an individual or institution; a family member or a law-maker) that they know to be heterosexist, if not overtly homophobic. By articulating personal truths that are critical of majority (or at least mainstream) beliefs they put themselves in danger and in some cases risk punitive ramifications for friends and family members (who are often represented in snapshots within the Digital Story or simply linked to the storyteller by general association). Danger in this case does not necessarily mean “death” but often vilification, ostracism, marginalization and/or simply being ignored; being made silent and invisible.

Sometimes this is enough to cause the storyteller to rephrase or reframe the personal truth they wish to convey. How can activist storytellers, wishing to retain privacy for themselves and in some cases for family and friends, maintain a strong visible and audible identity while challenging the homophobic and heteronormative social forces that mean non-disclosure of identity may seem like a good (safe) idea in the first place? Are personal revelations more difficult and/or different for Queer Digital Storytellers who are endeavoring to strike a balance between their disparate social worlds, ranging from supportive (where they are more likely to be out) to homophobic (where they may choose to remain invisible)?
The Rainbow Family Tree Case Study

In 2008 SHine SA commissioned the production of a DVD compilation of Digital Stories for use in a variety of training and educational settings, ranging from senior primary school to training police recruits. SHine SA hoped that the stories would represent a diverse range of voices from the queer community and that the stories would help raise awareness and acceptance of gender and sexual diversity in the wider community.

A call was put out through a range of queer networks for storytellers. Many were drawn to the *Rainbow Family Tree* project out of a desire to challenge the social norms that surround them. Some were quite specifically recruited because they represented a “marginalized” or rarely heard voice (e.g. the accepting parents of a young trans child, an out lesbian church minister, disabled queers, Indigenous queers etc.). Participants in the first round of workshops attended several face-to-face training and creative brainstorming days over a six-week period. In between sessions they worked on their stories using free editing software (either MovieMaker or iMovie) on their home or work computers. They received additional technical and creative support via a custom-built Yahoo! group. These storytellers then mentored a second round workshop that took place entirely online, via a customized “Ning” social network. All the stories were eventually uploaded to the *Rainbow Family Tree* website where the storytellers were free to comment on one another’s stories and invite their friends and family to view them. The website and the educational DVD compilation were also launched during FEAST, an annual Adelaide queer cultural festival.

Methodology

The methodological approach to the *Rainbow Family Tree* project was essentially a variation upon embedded ethnographic research combined with textual analysis of the Digital Story products and using some processes derived from Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is a framework that aims to increase understanding of how change in one’s actions
or practices can mutually benefit a community of practitioners (Hearn, Tacchi, Foth and Lennie 2009: 15). In particular, the work of Greg Hearn, Jo Tacchi, Marcus Foth and June Lennie (2009) in *Action Research and New Media* offers a variety of case studies and approaches for engaging disenfranchised communities in both Digital Storytelling and ICT (Information and Communication Technology). The continuous action research cycle of Plan > Act > Observe > Reflect (Hearn, Tacchi, Foth and Lennie 2009: 52) offers a model that was adapted for this case study. Practically speaking, PAR offers a structural template that bridges the multiple roles of participant/facilitator/researcher. Planning and facilitation of a workshop can be undertaken from a relatively "objective" position, then reflection and de-briefing with participants can be undertaken from a "subjective" position that reflects a personal engagement in Digital Storytelling practice. While the complex mechanisms by which embedded ethnographic research straddles subjective/objective binaries is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth acknowledging the useful processes PAR brings to facilitating community engagement over an extended research cycle. Insights gathered from focus groups, interviews with participants, facilitators and institutional representatives combined with detailed journal notes from various phases of the project are analyzed and applied to planning the next cycle. The organic evolution of the *Rainbow Family Tree* project over an extended timeframe (from an online workshop interface to a Storytelling community and archive of Digital Stories) is thus shaped by participants and informed by observations of some of the obstacles and opportunities presented throughout the story creation and distribution processes. Participants carefully considered the complexities of self-representation and the risks of positioning personal stories in public spaces throughout the project, and actively discussed the problems and possibilities of using Digital Stories as vehicles for catalyzing social change.

*Queer Storytelling Challenges*

One of the recurring challenges that was articulated by participants in the *Rainbow Family Tree* workshops was how best to convey some of the subtle nuances of homophobia (ranging from feeling excluded and invisible,
through to choosing silence in order to maintain safety) to a mainstream audience, without adopting the position of “other;” a marginalized identity outside of social norms. While each storyteller involved in this project recognized that they had a unique perspective to offer (that is, different from mainstream) few of them regarded themselves as victims of overt discrimination. Many participants wished to tell fundamentally positive stories about acceptance, but implicit in these narratives there was an unstated concomitant theme of rejection. The conundrum emerged when, while choosing to speak from an empowered position, many storytellers were forced to make compromises in how they told their stories because friends and family members (in explicit acknowledgment of homophobic repercussions) did not wish to be named or visually identifiable in their stories. The conflict some Queer Digital Storytellers experience in attempting to strike a balance between privacy and publicity is fleshed out in the following example.

Max (a pseudonym) was seventeen years old and openly gay in both his high school and home contexts. “I’m popular because I’m good at sport,” he notes with some cynicism. Max wanted to make a story to thank his family for their love and support. He also wanted to address his peers in an effort to explain how it hurt when they joked “That’s so gay!” around him. In the process of negotiating with his family about including particular family photos in his story, Max recollects his grandfather telling him: “I don’t mind you being gay but I don’t want you to shout from the rooftops about it.” His family denied Max permission to use images of themselves in his story and he did not want to blur them out of the photos, because he thought that implied shame. He was so upset by the unexpected reaction of several family members that he withdrew from the workshop. Ironically it was his peers that offered him support in the ensuing personal crisis. In his debriefing session with myself and other Rainbow Family Tree group members Max was able to put an optimistic spin on the whole experience: he hoped that one day he might make a Digital Story about his accepting group of school buddies.

Max’s repositioning of himself in relation to his family harks back to Foucault’s observation that truth telling is a risky activity. In the case of Digital Stories that are destined for the public domain, it is the actual
process of negotiating consent from all individuals who appear in the story that exposes the skeletons in the family closet and the larger, even more unpalatable, social truth. However, it may also be argued that, alongside the risks of making and sharing Digital Stories, there are also in many cases unforeseen benefits, including impetus for ongoing therapeutic conversations with the friends and/or family members who, as a direct consequence of the storytelling process, have been confronted with issues that may have previously been ignored.

The fact that these risks and benefits emerged as typical yet unexpected quandaries in the Rainbow Family Tree workshops allowed the Storytellers to offer one another support, which in itself proved to be an affirming and empowering experience for many participants.

Social Convergence and Networked Publics

Beyond making the realization that his family were not quite the advocates that he had believed, Max (and several other storytellers) struggled with the issue of how to represent themselves truthfully for a wide range of viewers that would not normally overlap. danah boyd speaks of this concept as social convergence:

Social convergence occurs when disparate social contexts are collapsed into one. Even in public settings, people are accustomed to maintaining discrete social contexts separated by space. How one behaves in a pub differs from how one behaves in a family park, even though both are ostensibly public. Social convergence requires people to handle disparate audiences simultaneously without a social script. While social convergence allows information to be spread more efficiently, this is not always what people desire. (boyd 2008: 18)

boyd’s commentary is on the “privacy train wreck” of Facebook – a phenomenon that has in some way been experienced by all Facebook users, gay or straight. Unlike daily physical reality it is a peculiarly digital experience, whereby one is caught out articulating one personal version of truth without opportunity to tweak that representation for different audiences. boyd refers elsewhere to these mediated social network interfaces as “networked
“publics” that are defined by four distinct properties of persistence, searchability, replicability and invisible audiences (boyd 2008a: 125). It can be argued that Digital Stories circulated in online spaces share these properties. Unlike stories that are shared (and tweaked) in a variety of face-to-face contexts, Digital Stories have longevity beyond the time frame in which they were originally created and they can be tracked down via numerous search mechanisms. In the case of viral distribution, stories may actually reach audiences who have not sought them out (and who are potentially unsympathetic or even hostile to the content) and they may be viewed (cut and pasted or linked to from various sites) well outside the original context in which they were shared. Obviously one’s Facebook and/or Myspace profile page offers considerable insight into one’s identity as constituted through likes, interests, beliefs and photographic records of social antics, but on top of these self revelatory qualities, Digital Stories also frequently offer narrative constructions of “the big picture.” In three minutes many storytellers attempt to summarize and make meaning of a range of lived anecdotes and their rendition of these real life dramas may well be contested by the other actors in the play. As an intimate and crafted mode of self-expression, the genre is inevitably loaded with the risk of causing offense to individuals who are obliquely referenced in the narrative.

Additionally, from a Storytellor’s perspective, the idea of amplifying such personal statements beyond an immediate audience of friends and family can seem quite overwhelming. If one manages to conquer the personal (both internal and familial) critics that challenge simplistic summaries of complex identity and events in order to narrate a satisfactory version of self, there is the secondary question of who one is making the story for: which audience or audiences of the many accessible in a networked public? Is it principally addressed to one individual or a wider audience, taking the opportunity to “shout from the rooftops” as Max’s Granddad put it?

Some storytellers adopt a particular mode of address or storytelling voice with the intent of bridging the gap between personal (intimate) and public (unknown, invisible) audiences. In several of the following examples the storyteller addresses their story to an individual who stands in for a whole sector of society or a grand social problem.
Consider Sally, who is the biological mother of twins to whom she addresses her Digital Story, titled: _Where did we come from?_ She made the story with the express intent of circulating it widely to everyone from childcare workers through to independent MPs. At the time of making the story in 2009 Sally was heavily involved in the Queensland law reform campaign that (amongst other things) addressed the legal rights of non-biological parents. She believed her story might help “open their eyes to our reality.” In my many conversations with Sally she often referred to how effective “visit your MP” campaigns have been for the queer community and the fact that she hoped her Digital Story would be similarly potent. Sally’s greatest concern in narrating her own story was that its kid-friendly tone may in fact be “too saccharine” for adult ears, thereby reducing its emotional impact.

While none of the aforementioned issues are exclusive to Queer Digital Storytellers, they are all fundamentally linked to questions of minority identity and self-representation in a less than hospitable environment. In the kind of utopian future that the _Rainbow Family Tree_ participants hope and campaign for, the stakes around what to conceal and what to reveal about oneself might be somewhat lower.

_Digital Storytelling Strategies_

Some of the Queer Digital Storytellers involved in the _Rainbow Family Tree_ project employed strategies that specifically addressed the issues of privacy and publicity and speaking one truth to power that is located across many audiences.

_Blue for Boys? Pink for Girls?_ was made by the parents of a nine-year-old trans child under the adopted pseudonyms “Molly and Brendon.” It describes their journey as parents from the birth of their baby boy through their growing realization that their child identifies as female, and on to their eventual acceptance of, and pride in, their daughter.

There are several things that are immediately noticeable about this story. It has been made by a mother, for her daughter – she speaks to her 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.

In this story both visible and invisible aspects of the text (e.g. the decision to blur the identity of the child and the fact that the story is not actually voiced by the mother) can be linked back to the theoretical problems outlined earlier. The “powerful people” in this case could be constituted as the Family Court judges who are entitled to decide whether or not their child can access hormone blockers at puberty; the populist journalists who regularly ring, requesting a quote on the subject of their unusual child; and the teachers/parents/students at their daughter’s school who may or may not approve of their child’s use of the female toilets. Some aspects of the Digital Storytelling process, while not evident in the text, are supplied in contextual information in the DVDs accompanying booklet and on the *Rainbow Family Tree* website:

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. 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 honoring our brave and unique little girl. However, we were also concerned about how she would feel about the story as an adult.

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. While the child knew about the Digital Story her parents were laboring over, at age nine she was not able to provide legal consent. The storytellers in this case consulted with their friend and family lawyer who, as a trans activist engaged in lobbying the Family Court for the rights of trans children, is well versed in the complexities of such issues:
“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.”

Regardless, the storytellers have found a series of strategies that enable them to bridge the gap between pride for their child and concern for the child’s privacy both now and in the future. They consciously chose images of the child that focus on her joyful spirit rather than her particular facial features. They elected a family friend to voice their carefully worded script, rather than risk the mother’s voice being identified. Her empathy and insight into their journey is reflected in the tremors and cracks in her voice which in turn evoke audience empathy. Most importantly, throughout the process of creating their story, they swapped insights and ideas with other Digital Storytellers on the Rainbow Family Tree website, an experience that enabled them to feel supported and empowered as parents and storytellers.

As part of my role as facilitator of the Rainbow Family Tree workshops, I screened my own, highly personal digital story, called Dear Sister. I used it as an opportunity to discuss the potential impact of Digital Stories on friends and family (and, in my case, my daughter’s school community). Originally, I was hopeful that the story would aid in engaging my sister in ongoing discussion about how to talk to our kids about our polar opposite perspectives on spirituality and sexuality. It describes several conversations I had overheard between our kids (about God’s creation of the earth and gay marriage) and unfolds into the perplexing problem of how the kids would talk about my plans to have a second donor-conceived child without some kind of guidance from their parents. While my story is addressed specifically to my sister, in writing it I was aware that I also wished to address a range of other “powerful people.” These included my family members (who are well-positioned to take sides in any discussion that may take place between my sister and I) and members of our wider overlapping social communities (who are able to speak independently to my child on the subject of our family structure and my sexual preferences).
One of the immediately noticeable aspects in the piece is the use of blurring to obscure individuals in family photos, although this technique is employed for quite different reasons to those described in the previous story. The original version of the story contained both my sister and her son’s real names and I did not blur their photographs. After showing her the story (and quite a lot of ensuing tearful discussion) I sought her permission to upload the story to my blog. She agreed on the condition that I obscure her and her children’s identities.

The theme of visibility/invisibility is woven throughout the piece both in images and narration—“me and my pink parents community were made silent and invisible”—and the point is explicitly made: “invisible” equals “powerless” or even “wrong.” Rendering my sister and her child as blurry images effectively inverts the marginalizing power of heterosexism and homophobia by diminishing their prominence in the family photos. Additionally themes of silence versus voice resonate throughout the piece. The story is narrated as if it were a letter to my sister:

Dear Sister,

*Image of handwritten text: “Dear”... (with the name that follows scribbled out so as to be illegible)*

We’ve been through a lot together even though we don’t always see eye to eye. Now there are some things I need to say to you.

*Photo of my sister and I both pregnant (her face is blurred so as to be unidentifiable)*

You know back when the chooks were chickens? One day I heard your son and my daughter playing.

*Montage of still photos – a close up of a child’s hands holding two model farmyard chickens; one brown, one white*

“Yours is the girl, and mine’s the boy and they’re married OK?” he says.

“Did you know two girls can get married too?” says she.

*The chickens move up and down in a series of images, as if they are arguing*

“No they can’t” “Yes they can” “No they can’t”

Hmm, I thought. Interesting. But I didn’t say anything.

*Fade to black*

*Kids drawing of Noah’s Ark with rainbow*

Another conversation. On Christmas day, your son says “Rosie did you know, some people ACTUALLY believe that God made the world by accident?”

I didn’t say anything.
In this story, my response to the conversations I overhear is silence. Later I refer directly to the consequences of my sister’s decision to not speak to her kids (silence) about “rainbow families” or, more specifically, our family structure, as “making me and my pink parents community silent and invisible.” However, within the text of the story, by recounting anecdotes from my perspective rather than inviting my sister to contribute her point of view directly, I am also denying her voice; making her silent.

Elisabeth Soep and Vivian Chavez, writing about their involvement in youth media production, use Bakhtian ideas of “reported speech” and “double voiced speech” as tools in their analysis of how youth voices “speak back” to those (mostly powerful adults) that critique their work or identity. Reported speech is the inclusion of other people’s words “through quotes, indirect references and paraphrases, accents and allusions” (Soep and Chavez 2006: 198). It is a particularly interesting concept when exploring semiotic strategies undertaken by marginalized people to critique the ideas and attitudes of those they consider to be more powerful than themselves. Reported speech is a common trope in many Digital Stories, and clearly, while it was not a storytelling tool I consciously employed at the time that I was conceiving my story, it was nevertheless a device that enabled me to articulate my subjective experiences of nuanced familial homophobia.

In terms of storytelling process it is worth noting that, were it not for the support of my fellow workshop participants (one of whom was my father) I would not have been so direct in addressing my “letter.” I was very concerned that I was being too critical of my sister and that, by using this very public and permanent form, I had effectively shut down any right to reply. It was my dad who pointed out that, regardless of how I chose to phrase the story, the end effect would be to provoke a conversation (and he hoped forgiveness) that my sister and I had not yet been able to negotiate in the everyday course of our busy lives as working parents. I was also inspired by the courage demonstrated by other participants in narrating their own, sometimes painful, stories and I felt reassured in speaking my own personal “truth to power.”
Understanding Queer Digital Storytelling for Social Impact

Now, with these illustrative examples in mind, it is worth pondering again – what is at stake for Queer Digital Storytellers undertaking the role of Foucault’s parhasiaste and what tactics do they employ to counter risk? Queer Digital Storytellers use a range of communicative strategies to speak to a divergent range of powerful audiences, spanning from sympathetic to hostile, straddling both intimate and unknown publics. They play with the tone of their narratives in order to surreptitiously address one audience while appearing to address another. They use visual and aural text based humor, both explicit and subtle, sometimes ironic, sometimes sincere. They paraphrase and parody words and idiomatic expressions that are spoken to them or about them. They blur and/or silhouette and/or obscure representations of themselves and others. In formulating their narratives, they undertake protracted conversations with friends, family members and complete strangers and in so doing some achieve a degree of “closure”; others open a veritable “can of worms.” For some storytellers, with arguably less “fixed” more “fluid” identities, there may be substantial concerns about how their simplified current iteration of identity may endure the passage of time; how “truthful” it might appear in some future time and place when the parameters of identity may have shifted. For others, concerns about the ramifications their story may have for third parties, now and in the future, may encourage them to undertake technical and creative obfuscations to protect privacy while still soliciting the publicity deemed necessary to have a social impact.

In some instances, the additional information offered by a storyteller (in this case the DVD booklet and Rainbow Family Tree website) provides sufficient contextual complexity to somewhat “future-proof” and complicate the story. It is an acknowledgement by the storyteller that “this is where I’m at right now and it’s only part of the story.” In both of the aforementioned Digital Story examples, the storyteller reflects upon a series of creative decisions about visibility and voice that were made well after the first draft of the narration – in fact in both cases revisions were made after the storyteller had ostensibly “locked off” their story.
Additionally, the workshop or community environments in which the stories are created frequently afford storytellers the support they need to “tell the truth to a person or people who do not welcome the news.” In the case of the Rainbow Family Tree online social network, this support is not limited to the production period but may be ongoing. People are able to post comments (that, of course, can also be critical) at any time, potentially well down the track.

Conclusion

The problems faced by Queer Digital Storytellers who wish to use this very personal form to have an impact on mainstream social values around gender and sexuality illuminate a number of theoretical issues. Some of these are common to many activist-oriented Digital Storytellers and others are amplified by identifying as queer, in particular, issues around privacy and publicity. Observation and analysis of dilemmas experienced by select participants in both physical and online Digital Storytelling workshops, combined with textual analysis of two stories, offers insight into some creative strategies for speaking truthfully about complex identities to powerful people who do not welcome the news. While some ideas are put forth that may assist Queer Digital Storytellers in finding the strength and resilience to tell their truths, the issue of quantifying social impact (and corresponding social change) is a topic requiring further consideration.

There are substantial risks for Queer Digital Storytellers who share their stories in public spaces, however many of the participants in the Rainbow Family Tree case study spoke of an overwhelming sense of self-empowerment derived from articulating their life stories on their own terms in addition to the positive responses they received from audience members. In most cases, participants felt that the small social changes they witnessed “rippling out” from their stories justified the risks they took in “shouting from the rooftops.”
References


